Into the Great Unknown

by MakoGT

Summary

In 2185, 100,000 people from most species from the Milky Way underwent a great journey to a new galaxy, for a new home. When they woke up 600 years later, the plan went to hell. Follow the path of Scott Ryder, as he leads his team across the Heleus Cluster to find a home and who he confides in when the odds seem against them. Vetra Nyx. Rated M for Violence, Swearing, Adult Content. But that last part ain't till way later.
Alright, Alright, Alright. Name's Mako and this here is Into the Great Unknown! A full novelization of Mass Effect Andromeda. But with my own twists and turns. Well, my own, and those that my friends and editors, River and Pal also come up with. But I'm not looking to give too much away in the foreword, am I? So, there are some things I do need to say here before we actually get started. Some you'll see in my profile, but, I know some of you won't want to be redirected to go read all that. I'll try to make it fast. All of you have the benefit of the fact that I've already completed and posted this story on Fanfiction.net. I've decided to expand here. This means that whenever I have time, I will post as many chapters as I can, with some touch ups, of course. (With the exception of the first fifteen or so. Personally, I'm not all that terribly happy with them, but they are in fact my very first chapters. As in, my first attempts in writing. Still, I did gain quite the following from my story, even in the early days, so, can't be THAT bad. I know, that's not exactly a reassuring first impression, but for what it's worth, I'm including this because there are still pieces in most of the chapters that I'm proud of.) So much so that some of my readers have not only comissioned artwork from Palavenmoons based off scenes from my story, (and the woman herself likes my work) but also to comission me for an additional story arc chapter for my one-shots. (I'll have the few one-shots I have after this story. After that, my trilogy stories. Tali x MShep. I have a thing for dextros.

Moving on, I've got a grand total of 81 chapters coming this way that add up to over 600k words. This is no light read. Onto the story itself, I gotta explain something about myself that will explain something about Scott. Again, this was my first ever story after all. So, you know that Ryder can be a snarky jackass with a good heart. So can I. I was born in Florida, and hate the cold. I saw an oppurtunity for some comedy with that when they got to Voeld. So, I included that. There wasn't much backstory to go off of either of the twins before they lived on the Citadel after all. Otherwise it doesn't change all that much.

So, details of format and such. This is first person, largely from Scott's POV, but not at all explicitly only him. It changes from time to time. I also expand on other things. Like the Sara in the coma. The relationship between Vetra and Sid. The crew, so on, so forth. I keep everything realistic. Explained to the best I can. I research the codex thoroughly, and fill in gaps with logic. The occasional translator confusion too. I also keep language realistic. As in, Scott's thoughts, both in how they're formed and what words are used feel natural, and the actual words used. By everyone. If you don't like the fuck word, this story ain't for you. You don't like contractions like that, same thing. Sure not every word is a curse or contraction, of course not, but my characters will talk and act like real people. Not like the actors in a Ubisoft multiplayer gameplay trailer.

I also include plenty of combat. Those scenes are plenty fun to write, and I keep those realistic too. As in, the HUD isn't showing a health bar or shield bar. It may detect if they have shields, but can't tell you their strength. It won't take ten headshots to off an enemy, but you will see during my first few chapters I was a bit too generous on the strength of Kett bone.

Additionally, I do want to say that I entirely embrace criticism. I would prefer for it to be
constructive, which I hope goes without saying. HOWEVER, I would request that you ignore criticisms on the first fifteen or so chapters precisely because of what I explained earlier. I already know they have some problems.

Alright, alright. I don't want to bore you. You won't need to deal with many author's notes for a little while, not early on, or, well, later, thinking about it. So, I'll wrap this up. Just have to plug two links to you.

1st, my discord server! Talk to me, my editor friends, and other readers!
https://discord.gg/Nqm2ZqQ

2nd: My patreon! Head over there for details on rewards, including even commissions!
https://www.patreon.com/MakoGT

Now, I hope you enjoy! And welcome, to Into the Great Unknown!
This is it, today is the day. The day we set out to go where no man has ever gone before. A mass migration of 100,000 people from the milky way. Human, Asari, Turian, Salarian, Krogan, Quarian, Volus, Hanar, Drell, and Elcor all setting out together to explore a new galaxy, leaving everything and everyone they know behind. Well, unless the people they know are coming along that is. It was my Dad, the once famous and revered N7 operative Alec Ryder bringing me and my Sister along. He was with Admiral Jon Grissom when they first went through the Mass Relay in our home system of Sol. Then he fought the Turians during the first contact war at Shanxi. Funny, it seems his life has been full of firsts. Now he’s bringing my sister Sarah and I with him to be the first people to explore a whole new galaxy, Andromeda. As I finish packing my bags, an easy task as we can’t really bring too much anyway, I stare outside the window at my hometown of Orlando in that wonderful sunshine state of crazy people Florida. It’s another beautiful sunny day without a cloud in the sky and a perfect 80 degrees Fahrenheit. As I look out into the cities’ skyline, I can’t help but think about how I’ll nev-

“SCOTT! Come on snap out of it, dad just called to meet him outside for the shuttle! It’s time to go!”

“Shit, already!? Ah fuck it, alright I’m good, let’s go.” I finished zipping up my suitcase and raced out of the room with my Sister, heading for the Hotel’s elevators.

“Crazy to think we’re never going to see any of this again huh Scott?”

“Funny that you mention that sis, that was exactly what I was thinking about before you oh so rudely interrupted my peaceful thoughts.” I said with a smirk so she knew I was just being a snarky asshole as I always am. She chuckled, not even needing to see the smirk to see through my blatant sarcasm.

“Well you could always stay here where our family name is so tainted you can never get a job better than fry cook if you really want to, while Dad and I go out and adventure in a new galaxy.”

“Ha, without your pain in the ass of a brother to keep you in line? In your dreams sis!” We entered the elevator and mashed the button for the lobby as if it would make the doors shut faster.

“That’s BIG sister to you, little brother.” Oh come on Sarah that again? Really?

“Oh come on give me a break, you didn’t exactly beat me by much!” I groaned.

“Keyword: Beat you.” she teasingly pointed out.

“Oh shut up” I chuckled. As our mandatory round of sibling banter finished the elevator doors opened and we raced out of the lobby to the shuttle pad outside. Dad was standing outside of the shuttle waiting for us, his skin looking quite tan with the time we’ve spent home preparing to leave, with his hair and beard still bearing that salt and pepper look he’s had since he began working on his… little project, SAM, an AI he made which is why our family name is now worth less than a pile of Elcor shit, and just as dirty.

“What took you kids so long? Your mother would be pissed if I had to leave you behind. Can’t have the Human Pathfinder missing boarding for the Human ark can we?” Right, Dad was brought onto the Andromeda Initiative as the Human Pathfinder, tasked with finding us a home in the
Heleus cluster and managing any first contact with any new species we come across. One helluva job.

“Yeah that might look bad on a report.” I said to him, earning a slight grunt in reply. May seem a bit unfriendly but that’s his way of chuckling. We were quiet for a moment as the shuttle door opened when Sarah almost whispered,

“I wish mom was still here to join us.” A pained look crossed both my face and dad’s, but I could see it in dad’s eyes, it hurt him far more than he would ever show. Hell, it hurts me more than I want to show. It’s still raw, happening only around a month ago. And yet, I swear that for a moment, there was a hopeful look in his eyes. I let the thought slide as I try to focus on the new life waiting for us, not the one we’re leaving behind. Dad was the first to speak,

“Me too kid. Me too. But we need to get to Ark Hyperion, come on.” I was relieved to see that it wouldn’t be just the three of us in the shuttle, as dad, being the military man he is, can get rather awkward when it comes to talk. Sarah and I only recognized one person, Cora Harper, a friend of Dad’s for a while. Can’t say I know her too well though. Seems she was the only one who hadn’t put on her helmet yet, leaving her slightly pale face and white-blonde hair open to see. Her hair was shaved on the lower right side of her head with the rest going over the left side. When I first met her I had later whispered to Sarah of how much it made her look like she wanted to speak to my manager. I glanced over at Sarah with an ever so slight grin to let her know what I was thinking and I could see her struggle to keep on a straight face, giving me a slight glare in return. I however didn’t try to suppress the chuckle I felt at my sister’s difficulty. That just earned a raised eyebrow from Dad and Cora. I innocently shrugged in reply, though they didn’t exactly buy my bullshit, they let it be.

We sat down in our seats and strapped in for the ride. We could feel the shuttle’s inertial dampeners kick in as we began to take off, meaning we wouldn’t feel nearly as much of the shuttles movements as we would without them. I didn’t look around to see, but I could feel everyone just staring out the window with me at the city as we flew higher and higher towards the edge of the atmosphere. The last thing we’d ever see of Earth. The birthplace of our entire species. And more importantly, the last we’d ever see of home. As we left atmo I glanced around at the space around our beautiful little ball of blue and dirt to see plenty of 5th Fleet ships in orbit. Stationed there by Admiral Hackett himself, possibly the greatest Admiral the Alliance had ever known. As we flew by Luna shortly after I glanced out at the Lunar base we had there.

Of all the things, I could have chosen to remember about it I remembered the rumors I heard about how the freak accident that happened there two years ago killing several squads of Marines was actually a VI gone rogue, and that Hackett himself had personally called upon Commander Shepard, the first human spectre and his crew to take that thing out. That was just a rumor sure, but “freak accident” isn’t exactly a convincing official story. These thoughts didn’t last long though, as now we were heading straight for Ark Hyperion.

“Hard to believe that 20,000 people are about to be frozen for 600 years on that tub. Even harder to believe we’re gonna be among them.” That got a little chuckle out of dad, felt surprising but good to see that even he felt some awe at all this. Sarah brought up the next question I had on my mind,

“How the hell is that even going to be powered for that long?” Dad looked at her with a smile, always happy to see his kids asking questions, wanting to understand. It was an important part of what makes him, well, MADE him an N7.

“It’s the new and State of the Art ODSY Drive core. Everything it puts out is captured back into capacitors and heatsinks, it essentially generates its own power. With a little kick to start it off that
is. It may not be able to capture every single volt and put it back into the system but with the amount of power we’re feeding it to begin with, we will have more than enough to make it to Heleus.” Sarah and I both nodded in understanding.

“Well shit, that's more than a little impressive” I remarked. The rest of the short trip was spent in silence contemplating what we were getting ourselves in for. Turns out we were one of the last shuttles they were waiting for and the ark started heading out not too long after we landed. As Sarah and I were part of Dad’s pathfinder team, he saw fit to introduce us to Captain Dunn. She seemed like a good woman, but the meeting was kept short as she had an ark to captain. Dad told us to head down to Cryo to get ready without him as he had a few last-minute things to check out and headed off in the direction of his quarters. Sarah and I headed back to the tram that would lead us to cryo bay.

“Hard to believe we’re really doing this huh Scott?”

“I'll say, can't say I'm looking forward to the freeze though.” Sarah chuckled, agreeing with me as the tram doors closed. Neither of us were fans of the cold. Sarah’s face then lit up like she had an idea,

“What?” I asked.

“How about we make a bet? She asked, turning to me, which of us is going to wake up first?” I nodded with a smile on my face,

“Sounds like a good idea, ease the tension a bit. Let's say, I bet a hundred credits I'll wake up first, and you bet a hundred that you wake up first? Deal?” The tram had just arrived at cryo and we shook on it as the doors opened.

“Glad you agreed so easily, that’s gonna be an easy hundred credits for me!” With a confused look on my face I asked her why. I immediately regretted that decision. Ok fine, I didn't. At all. I love puns. She got this evil grin on her face and looked at me saying

“Well, for starters, you never really were an early… Ryder.” As she broke into laughter, drawing a few odd looks as we walked into the cryo bay.

(Of Fuck off Sarah!” I said, nearly laughing my ass off myself, “gah you are never going to let me live that down. Ever. I hate you for that but at the same time I love you just because of the pun.” Two doctors, one an olive-skinned man with short black hair, Dr. Caryle, and, to my surprise, an Asari walked up to the two of us, gesturing to follow them for the last checks. I went with the Asari. We exchanged names, hers being Dr. Lexi T'Perro and I must be crazy because her accent sounded… English, somehow. She drew a bit of blood, scanned me with her omni-tool, and injected me with what I assumed were chemicals to help with cryo and sent me off to my pod. I waited for Sarah before heading to mine.

“All good?” I asked.

“Yes and no” she said. “Everything medical checks out but i'm still damn nervous about this.”

“You’re not the only one” I chuckled. My face changed into a look of concern as I stared at her, wrapped my arms around her, and said “You better wake up without any problem Sis. I better see you there in Andromeda with me. You better fucking make it there with me. I can't lose anyone else” I silently, almost cried, into her ear. I heard her sniffle

“You too Scott, you too. You’re the only brother I have.” We let each other go, gave one last
goodbye, and headed to our pods. A few doctors helped me ease into mine and made sure everything was set up well and proper. I was sealed in, and the cryo process began.

“Ok, Andromeda here I co- HOLY FUCKING SHIT IT'S COLD! COLD CO-” and then nothing.
Wake Up Call

“OLD, COLD, CO- oh thanks FUCK it’s warming up. Fucking hell what was… oh, right, cryo sleep. Wait, if I’m warming up, if I’m waking up, does that mean…” Before I could finish the thought my pod doors opened. I must’ve still had some kind of anesthetic in me as I couldn’t move yet. I felt myself lifted onto a table and a doctor grab a hold of me and administer something. A few seconds later I sat up straight; gasping as I gained control of myself again. “We made it,” I gasped.

“Relax, take it easy,” one of the doctors helping me said.

“I’ve been taking it easy for 600 years,” I chuckled. The other doctor, a woman ran over my profile, likely just ensuring I was who I should be.

“Pathfinder team eh? The ones finding us a home,” the male doctor said.

“Can you make it somewhere tropical? Nice warm ocean… summer year-round…” the woman asked, the whole convo likely just being trying to help wake me up.

“Believe me I’d love nothing more than that,” I joked back.

“Come on, let’s go get you situated and a cup of coffee,” I’m not much of a coffee drinker, have done fine without it. Don’t ask how, even I’m not quite sure, but right now, yeah, I’ll gladly take a cup. They got me sat down in the med bay and it was Dr. T’Perro who came over to get me checked out. The man across from me, dark skin, dark hair standing up and to the back waved at me with a huge grin on his face, clearly excited to be here. I nodded back with a smile as Lexi began the checkup. The vidscreen in the background giving the good ol’ brochure style inspiration. Lexi looked over at it with more than a bit of cynicism:

“Makes it sound so easy, doesn’t it?” Well then, it’s no fun, I thought.

“I hoped not. I signed up for at least a little adventure before we settle down,” She gave a slight smirk and roll of the eyes.

“Well, buckle up. Sounds like you’ll get your wish,” I looked at her questioningly. As she continued the checkup she explained, “The Pathfinder wants you all on your feet right away. He said, ‘mission-ready within the hour.’” Not surprising that Dad was already awake. We may be the pathfinder team but he’s the actual pathfinder. It was also not surprising that he wasn’t here to greet Sarah and I for the wakeup call. However, doesn’t mean I didn’t wish he was there though... but he does have around 20,000 human lives counting on him.

Wait a second... our bet... Sarah hasn’t been woken up yet! I won! As I repressed my glee at my new clip of bragging ammo against my sister, I asked why my dad wanted his team mission ready.

“No idea, but I’m guessing that’s where your ‘adventure’ comes in. Ok, everything checks out. Just to check on your SAM implant.” Alongside the pathfinder himself, the pathfinder teams had come equipped with SAM implants. This allows SAM to monitor their vitals and keep the squad connected with both each other and their ships via QEC.

“SAM?” Lexi asked again after SAM failed to respond, “…SAM are you online?” Then I heard that familiar, calm, synthetic, slightly English sounding voice.

“Yes, Dr. T’Perro. Good morning Ryder. Are you feeling well?” How WAS I feeling? Though I still felt the chills of cryo, I felt eager. Excited… and a little frozen. I took a sip of the coffee,
grimacing at the bitter taste but embracing the warmth and caffeine.

“Ready to get to it SAM!”

“Readings confirmed. I detect an increased level of adrenaline in your system. The neural implant is functioning properly,” I still couldn't help but feel at least a bit creeped out by how he was able to monitor me at all times like that. I really hope that there's off switch for that somewhere. During more… private times. Or If I just so happen to find that special someone. Wouldn’t really enjoy someone monitoring my vitals then.

“Caffeine always did make me jumpy,” I gave a slight joke. Lexi stood me up, letting me know I was all good to go, but suggested I might want to stay as they revived Sarah. No way in hell am I missing that. What kind of brother would I be if I didn’t hang this victory over my sister’s head? A bad one, that’s what. Lexi began to speak again:

“It always helps to see a familiar fa-” it felt like the entire ship had just begun shaking itself apart as if we had just collided with something. Whatever the hell we just hit has now become the scourge of my day. Great. As everyone in the bay fell over, a pod began sliding at Lexi and I--and juuust before it hit us the artificial gravity went offline. It passed harmlessly above us. While most people in the bay and their things were just floating there, I noticed that the man who waved at me earlier was stuck flipping in the air. I chuckled at his expense and he raised his middle finger at me, but not without a grin of his own.

Over the loudspeaker, I could hear Dunn and various tech teams communicating, trying to solve whatever the hell was going on as others in the bay tried to steady themselves. Then I heard a familiar voice informing us they were on their way. At that moment, the door opened and Cora floated in, holding on to the door to maintain control of herself. She floated over to a control panel and told us all to brace as she reset the gravity.

“What happened? Feels like we hit something,” I asked.

“Not sure, sensors are scrambled. But it’s good to see you’re up. Feels like centuries since we spoke,” She said, trying to add some humor to her voice. Trying, being the keyword. Immediately Dad’s voice popped up on the loudspeaker.

“This is the pathfinder. Mission teams, continue preparations. Cora, Ryders, report to the bridge,” Ok... Ah shit, Sarah! I hope she’s ok, every thought of the teasing from earlier was gone, replaced by nothing but brotherly concern for my sister. One of the techs spoke up:

“Uh, we have a problem over here. It’s Sarah Ryder,” Oh fuck, oh no, fuck fuck fuck shit fuck no no no no. I began to panic, but kept it internal for now. I raced over to her pod, followed by Lexi and Cora. Sarah’s pod was sparking, that couldn’t be a good sign.

“What the hell happened? Is she Alive? Is my sister ok?” I asked, barely keeping the fear out of my voice. The technician told us to wait a second for the processor to sync. I nearly began biting my fingernails out of anxiety for her safety. Lexi and the tech discussed the integrity of Sarah’s pod, saying it seemed fully intact.

“Is Sarah ok?” I asked Lexi.

In a calming voice, Lexi responded. “Sarah is fine. Her vitals and are strong, but the revival procedure was interrupted.”

Fuck I actually felt reassured until that last part, damnit.
“I don’t like the sound of that,” I said, staring at her pod. Lexi tried to reassure me.

“Don’t worry. It just means the process could take a bit longer than usual. SAM?” The AI gave a status update:

“My connection to Sarah’s implant was suspended. However, her pulse, respiration, and brain activity are all normal.” I let out a sigh as the built-up tension released itself.

“To be on the safe side, we’ll need to keep her in a low-level coma for a while, then let her body regain consciousness naturally,” Lexi said calmly, placing a hand on my shoulder to help.

“Ok, just as long as she’s ok… she’s fine… ok… whew…” I said largely to myself more than anyone else. I let out another sigh. "Ok Cora, come on. Let’s go see dad."

Well what a fucking day this has turned out to be. The moment we stepped out of cryo bay, some power systems exploded that I had to help fix or everyone in cryo could have died, Habitat 7 appears to have been warped by whatever the hell that weird… whatever the fuck it is out in space, looking nothing like it did in the Milky Way, and when we were preparing to head down to the planet, dad said we should arm ourselves with sidearm.

Over the comms I had asked if we should bring rifles. He paused for just a moment, the ex N7 having no doubt been thinking about it already, told us we might as well. Though reliable and standard issue, a Predator isn’t the greatest pistol of all time. He told me to grab an Avenger, he’d see if he couldn’t nab one of my favorites. At the very least a Mattock, at best, a Valkyrie.

Heh, still, nothing will beat the days when all our guns ran off a cooldown system rather than the goddamn thermal clips. Whoever thought of that deserves to be shot. With a gun that runs on cooldowns. Poetic justice right there.

Cora and I walked into the shuttle bay, and were surprised to see Dr. Caryle packing crates into a shuttle. Cora was the first to speak up:

“Dr. Caryle, with everything going on, I’d think the ark needs you more than we do?” the doc began to stand up:

“Pathfinder wants a medic on hand. And if that is home down there, I’m happy to knock on the door,” he said this with surprising enthusiasm given the situation. Surprising... but not unwelcome. I felt a bit concerned for his wellbeing but he seemed confident enough. Not cocky, just confident. And if dad felt he couldn't handle himself on the mission, then there was no doubt he wouldn’t be accompanying us. So, I tried to lighten the mood as we started to walk to the shuttles.

“If it is, it’ll be one for the history books. You got a quote ready? ‘One small step…?’”

“I’m pretty sure your dad will handle that honor,” Dr. Caryle chuckled as he went to pick up another crate. As if on cue dad chose that moment to step out of one of the two shuttles prepared for us. In his hands, he had a Mattock rifle folded up.

“Unfortunately, as we didn’t bring many Valkyries, the few we do have on board would take too long to get out. I know those are your favorite, but a Mattock was still easy to grab.” he said as he handed my second favorite rifle into my hands.

“Don’t worry about it dad, I may love the burst but a semi-auto still works wonders. Thanks dad,”
He nodded and made his way back up to the shuttle to face his team. I made a mental self-bet that it was time for a motivational speech.

“All right team, button it up. We leave in five.” Before he could actually get to the speech Cora piped up asking if there was anything we didn’t know to explain why we had the weapons. Seems I had to wait for the speech.

“Seemed prudent given the situation, we’ll be shorthanded with Sarah out.” He must have seen me as I looked down, once more filled with concern for my twin. A look of concern crossed his own face as he walked over to me and placed a hand on my shoulder, “I heard what happened. Your sister’s strong. She’ll make it.” If nothing else I appreciated him trying to help. She better, I thought. It was then I remembered the bet and saw a way I could at least mask my fears in a way I knew dad would still understand.

“We bet on who’s boots would hit the ground first. This isn’t how I wanted to win,” Dad let out a short chuckle.

“Heh, well knowing Sarah, she’ll want to go double or nothing on who climbs the tallest mountain. Don’t let it get you down. I need you sharp,” he stressed, pointing at my chest, “Your mom would have been proud, of both of you,” We nodded in understanding in each other and he stepped back on the shuttle with the team watching him, listening.

“Ok team listen up. I chose each of you for the Pathfinder team, not just because you’re talented and passionate. But because you’re dreamers, like me. We dream of exploring the unknown, of finding the edge of the map-and then discovering what lies beyond. When people look back on this-and they will-they’ll remember we didn’t give up. We kept dreaming. That our first few faltering steps in Andromeda were the beginning of everything they know. We only get one chance to be first. So, let’s go make history.” Gotta say, I felt inspired. It was at that moment that I noticed the man from cryo who went out for a spin, so to speak, was here too as he piped up,

“Been waiting 600 years for this.” Heh, all that talk about dreaming from dad made this old song from back home pop into my head. “You may saaaaaay, I’m a dreamer… but I’m not the only one…” Heh, hope the nexus has a bar, maybe I could try out some Karaoke. It may make everyone in the bar go deaf, but eh, that’s a sacrifice I’d be willing to make. I chuckled to myself, and stepped on board one of the shuttles. Let’s go find home.
Wrong Neighborhood

The shuttles had lifted off and we were on our way to the planet’s surface. I was staring out the window, with the guy who went spinning earlier, I think his name was Kosta, standing next to me. We were both staring at the mass of... whatever the hell it was that the ark had run into. There were tendrils of it in shades of black, seemingly lighting up everywhere in bulbs of orange. It looked beautiful, in its own way, as we flew away from the Hyperion. I asked SAM what we were looking at.

“It appears to be an unstable mass of Dark Energy.”

“So, in other words, we don’t know,” Over the comms dad ordered us all to stay clear of it. Then the shuttle started vibrating. While we were in space. That’s always so comforting. SAM explained it was gravitational anomalies. Great, so this shit fucks with gravity too, of course it fucking does, I thought. We got clear of its immediate vicinity and could really speed up. Closing the distance to habitat 7 in no time. It was then that Kosta saw fit to introduce himself.

“Ryder, we didn’t have a chance to meet back in the Milky Way. Name’s Liam Kosta, security and crisis response specialist,” I chuckled to myself when I noticed yet another English sounding voice among us. First SAM, then an Asari somehow, and now Liam. Call Paul Revere, ask him what we should do if the British are coming from another galaxy. 3 lamps maybe? I put the joking thoughts aside for a simpler reply.

“Good to meet you Liam. And it’s just Scott, by the way. If you’re going to call anyone Ryder you should just call Dad that,” He chuckled.

“Sure, sure…” He looked back out the window. “Hard to believe we’re finally doing this,” He spoke up again.

“Sure beats reading the brochures,” I was trying to keep the situation light. I knew everyone was nervous. The Pilot’s called out that we were beginning to decelerate and enter atmo, so I tightened my grip on the handle I was grabbing. The windows became engulfed in flame as the friction of the atmosphere against our entry began to generate so much heat as to create fire, obscuring our first look at the surface of Habitat 7. It certainly made me feel incredibly safe when one pilot informed us all that his flight controls were scrambled. Regardless that the other pilot said it would pass. Really wasn’t hoping for a crash landing. Then he had problems with controls. Perfect. Good thing we had SAM as he gave the pilot the proper course corrections. And then came the disappointment.

The fires dissipated as our descent slowed and we evened ourselves out to find an LZ. The clouds were grey and full of clouds, a kind of fog blanketing the surface blocking it from view with many grey, gloomy, jagged mountains reaching out above the fog.

“Shuttle 2, are you seeing this?” Harper asked over the comms. It was soldier time so I kept my response objective for now.

“Copy that, doesn’t look like a golden world from here,” SAM piped up with the final nail in the coffin for this planet.

“Oxygen levels are below minimum human requirements,” Shit, there’s no way we can live here, sure hope dad has some ideas. Fisher, one of the pilots asked:
“Is this the right planet? I thought we had this all worked out,”

“Yeah Fisher, all seems rather… fishy, wouldn’t you think?” Liam let out a good laugh while Fisher didn’t even bother looking back, just revealing his middle finger for all to see. I chuckled to myself, the joke seeming to have done its job, relaxing everyone a bit. And then I saw something I never thought I’d ever see in my life. Huge shards of rock, just… floating, in the air. How the fuck does that happen?! Liam and I both stared at it, then just looked at each other, dumbfounded.

Then, came the second surprise. Out in the distance were structures, and they sure as hell weren’t natural. And they were impressive. No doubt the product of advanced Engineering. Dad went on the comms to inform the ark. So far, we seemed to have gone undetected by the locals. Just hope they’re friendly, I thought. Liam decided to speak up at the other end of the spectrum:

“What if they’re not friendly?” Dad reminded him of the protocol. Sure as hell don’t want to treat the locals like Columbus did, or just step into war with an advanced alien civilization. We don’t have the numbers or ships to fight a war like that.

“We stick to first contact protocol: No use of deadly force unless hostile intent is clear,” And then, of all things, we were struck by lightning.Repeatedly. First few strikes seemed to have little effect other than scrambling readings.

Until the shuttle door flew off. Liam was flung outside and just barely managed to grab on. I reached out to take his hand and pull him back on. We yelled out each other’s names, and then we were struck. Again. Fucking hell give us a break. It shook the shuttle out of Liam’s grip and he went shooting away. Damn it, seems we’ve already got casualties. Fuck.

Oh, but we weren’t done yet! An explosion rocked the shuttle again, tearing it in half, and flinging me out. Fucking perfect, not only am I plummeting to certain death, but now our ride is trashed. What a fucking day. I may or may not have begun screaming. A lot. And loudly. And I may or may not have begun pissing myself. Just so happened my fall was taking me down the middle of a floating pillar of rocks that had more lightning jumping through them. Shocking, I know. SAM decided to be captain obvious:

“Acceleration increasing,”

“NO KIDDING!”

“Your jump-jet is malfunctioning.” I could see the ground. It was getting close. Just a bit too fast for my liking. And here I was without a parachute.

“WELL, GET IT WORKING SAM! AND FAST FOR THE LOVE OF FUCK, PLEASE!”

“Approaching terminal velocity.” Really don’t need to know that SAM

“SAAAAM!” I closed my eyes and braced for what seemed like a very hard landing. Only to be launched upwards leading to a not as hard landing at the top of the mountain. That I began rolling off. Ouch. And then glass broke. Fuck you too world. Fuck you too.

“Ah shit shit shit shit shit…” I hurriedly keyed my omni-tool to emit a spray of omni-gel onto my visor, fixing the leak, keeping that precious air supply where it belongs. I sprawled out on the mountain side and relaxed for a moment, catching my breath. After that moment, I turned my head outwards and stood up facing out away from the mountain. Several pillars of floating rock darted the skies, attracting lightning and conducting it through its several massive floating parts.

“This is Scott, come in, anyone… please…? Pretty please? Hyperion? SAM? Anyone?” No
response, comms were dead. Fantastic. Somehow, Kosta ran out to me telling me to save my breath for just that reason. Guess SAM must have helped him like he helped me before the comms went out.

“Did we really do that? Or are we dead and don’t know it?” I asked Kosta, once again trying to lighten the mood.

“Well, we found hell, I can tell you that much,” As we continued to look out on the planet’s surface, I couldn’t help but agree.

“Yeah, no way this is home.” Seems Liam had an idea.

“Looks like we gotta find some high ground. See if anyone else is alive. Come on.”

“Ah yes, the ever-powerful high ground. Once you have it, it’s over. Don’t try and take it away,” Liam let out a good laugh at that. Surprising as it seems few people get that reference these days, those old classics being forgotten.

“Sure, whatever you say, Kenobi,” both of us chuckled as we set out to find the others.

“Scott, how’s your survival training?” Seems it was back to business.

“Good but, nothing crazy,” Dad had seen fit to give both Sarah and I a few tips and tricks from his N7 training on top of our Alliance training. I saw what looked like our shuttle’s QEC so the two of us started walking towards it to see if we couldn’t get comms online.

“Well crazy just found us. Those rocks are floating!” Not even going to begin to try and explain that. We made it over to the comm device. I bent down to examine it and used my Omni-tool to run a diagnostic.

“Yeah comms are fucked, this thing got busted to hell on impact. That means no help from SAM either. Great.” Seemed my cynicism was finding many an opportunity to show itself this mission. I’m sure that’s a great sign.

“Well it could be worse, right? We could be dead,” I wasn’t sure if he was just being an optimist or sarcastic.

“Safety tip for ya Kosta, don’t breathe the air. Found that out the hard way.” Debris from our shuttle dotted the path up, all of it on fire too. Guess Liam didn’t like the silence too much as he spoke up again. Can’t blame him though, the quiet was a bit unsettling.

“Think that energy cloud could cause all this?”

“Fucked if I know. SAM said it’s dark energy, but, well, that’s in space,” Liam chuckled before he replied.

“One helluva cloud...”

“Heh, yeah, a cloud that makes goddamn rocks float,” I swear it’s as if the entire planet is deliberately trying to fuck with us. The moment I finished that sentence we came across quite a… shocking sight. For about twenty or thirty yards the path was fully open and being repeatedly struck by lightning. Scorching the ground and making rocks and other debris float about a foot off the ground. I groaned again as I yelled out, “Seriously? The fuck is going on here? Ah damn it. Alright Liam. Time yourself and use your jump jets to dash through as fast as you can. See that cave like area at the other end? Run like hell, dash, jump, whatever the fuck to get over there as
fast as you can without getting fried. Alright?” He nodded in reply and readied himself. “Alright… 3, 2, 1… and GO!” We both ran like hell. Fortunately, the ground was scorched where the lightning hit the most often, like a pattern so it was simple to avoid that much. Somehow, we were able to make it across without much trouble. “Welcome to beautiful habitat 7” I said as we stopped just under our new shelter, taking a quick breather before we moved on again.

“I dunno about you Ryder, but I don’t think I’ll be getting a summer home here… or any home at all.”

“Yeah, fuck this place,” As we walked to the other end of the cave Liam suggested I make sure my weapons were still in order. Fortunately, both were still clipped to my armor. Mattock to my left shoulder and Predator to my right thigh. I took out the mattock first and aimed it at a canister that fell from our shuttle. The canister exploded into a small little ball of blue electricity. Guess most of the fuel had already left it. I clipped the mattock onto my back and unholstered the predator. This time I took aim at one of the weird curved and glowy plants nearby. I pulled the trigger and it spewed out a weird orange liquid and shriveled up. Just before I holstered my gun I saw something in the sky, moving. It was some kind of animal, massive with fleshy looking wings segmented into several parts like a giant Manta-ray in the sky. “Here be dragons, Cora will love it,” I said, remembering a small convo I had with her when we were suiting up. Around the bend, we saw a cliff face that almost resembled a giant staircase that looked like it led to more open ground.

“Look! We get up that cliff, we find higher ground,” Liam was sounding more hopeful again.

“Not sure we wanna be the tallest things around here.” To emphasize my point, lightning struck just in front of us. Regardless, I knew it was the only option we had so we moved on. The first “step” we climbed was just behind a small cave with an odd orange glow and making an odd noise. Curious, I stepped inside and in a small crevice was… something. Maybe machinery, maybe part of an older structure like we saw on our way in, it had a strange orange glow to it as well. I scanned it and the energy readings were off the charts, and yet I still had no clue what it was. Maybe SAM would have an idea when we re-established contact. I stepped out of the cave to continue as needed. Using my jump jets whenever I couldn't simply climb a wall.

“So, how’d my dad find you?” I asked Liam.

“I was a cop, then crisis response.” Well that didn't answer my question

“And?”

“Tell you over a beer sometime,” Ok so now he wasn’t as willing to talk? Odd. I shrugged to no one and just kept moving. Ahead of me was a large gap separating us and the rest of the path, so I did both a jump with the jump-jet and dashed forward just to make sure. I didn’t even need to dash and landed well on the other end of the gap. There was one last jump even shorter than the last but still I dashed. Better safe than sorry falling down a mountain side. Again. We made it to the top and I offered Liam a hand up. He nodded his thanks and then we were both awestruck yet again. Liam spoke up first.

“What… The hell… is that?” We were looking at a large tower, clearly artificial, emitting an odd blue vortex into the sky. A pulse of a lighter blue glow traveled up the vortex and when it reached the top it seemed to shake the very sky.

“It’s not a hotel, that’s for sure,” I sighed once more, “Nothing around here makes any sense.”

“New Galaxy, new ways to die,” such a pleasant thought Kosta.
“Just not today Kosta,” We walked down a hill and saw what was left of our shuttle. On fire, of course. Then we saw Fisher, one of the Pilots and another member of the pathfinder team on the ground leaning against what was left of one of the thrusters. He looked hurt and… like he was hiding from something? Liam and I both started walking down to help him. Before we got even remotely close I saw something that made me tackle Liam to the ground behind a rock, taking cover immediately. Fisher wasn’t alone. Down in the crash site were two aliens, and they were armed. They wore a green looking armor and their lower legs bent backwards then forwards like a Turian or a Krogan. On their arms and head were some kind of white bone-like growth, natural armor perhaps? Where there wasn’t armor or bone their skin seemed to be a kind of gray color. They were searching the crash site, but clearly not scavenging. Kicking aside boxes and debris without inspecting them.

“Ah shit, what was first contact protocol again?” Liam asked.

“No deadly force unless fired upon,” I recanted.

“Heh, yeah, said no one in the field ever. How do we handle it?” I restrained a glare at Liam’s response. As if we were suggesting the first thing we should do when meeting the locals is have our guns out, let alone shoot at them.

“Take it easy. We only get one shot at ‘hello’ with these guys. Be ready, but hope for the best,” I ordered.

“Yeah, and Fisher gets shot in the head if we’re wrong.” This time I didn’t restrain the glare but I still understood. Thing is, he’d likely get the bullet anyway. Just gotta hope we can do this fast. I kept my gun holstered and raised my hands near my shoulders. We walked down the path towards them. One of the aliens saw us and called out to his buddy.

“Niad Shurid!” One of them called out. Figures the translators didn’t do shit. We hadn’t gotten their language translated in it yet. Would make things tricky, but not impossible. They grouped up and raised their weapons at us. But they weren’t shooting. Not yet at least.

“He sees us!” Liam whispered to me, No shit Kosta.

“We can’t understand you,” I called out to them. I knew they wouldn’t know what we were saying either but I hoped it would convey some kind of message that we don’t speak the same language. We kept walking towards them.

“We’re not here to fight,” I said. They didn’t seem to notice Fisher yet so I kept quiet about him. And then Fisher yelled out in pain. One started walking over to him and the other tightened his grip on his gun. Shit. The alien started to raise his foot over Fisher’s head as if to curb stomp him so I drew my pistol out and shot him straight in the head. Hoping Liam would react quickly enough to keep the other one from taking out my shields. Thing is, my shot didn’t kill the alien, it’s bony head seeming to protect it, though it did knock him away from Fisher.

“TOLERAAD!” the one closest to me yelled out. When the bullet didn’t work, I decided to try something different. At least it would get me out of the way of the other guy. Quickly, I built up a surge of dark energy around my body, using it to lower my mass significantly and then launching myself at the alien furthest from me almost instantaneously. Damn I love being a biotic. That clearly took the alien off guard as this mass of human showed up in his face and likely breaking a few ribs. Or whatever their equivalent is. Before he could recover I activated my Omni-blade and stabbed him through the neck the heat burning through him and frying globes of a dark green blood. I could hear the alien choking on his own blood and beginning to suffocate. I deactivated my omni-blade and looked to face the alien I left Liam to deal with. I already heard him fire two
rounds at the alien, I’d assume into the head given their close proximity and yet the alien was still standing. He had just readied his gun when Liam fired one final round into his head. This one went through the bone and caused the alien’s head to explode in a dark green and white mass of blood, bone, and brains. Whoever these guys were, they weren’t friendly. Seems we came to the wrong neighborhood.
Recon

Chapter Summary

If anyone knows a way to just directly upload a Microsoft word file here that would be a good deal of help. A time-saver. If not, that's fine. A little more or less convenience won't kill me.

I walked over to Fisher, who was still recovering from his panic when that alien almost stomped his head in.

“It’s ok… it’s over, it’s ok,” I said, laying a hand on his shoulder to help calm him down. “You ok Fisher?” I asked.

“I’ll live. I thought I was a goner,” He gasped out, his voice still shaky. Liam looked at me:

“I’m sorry Ryder. I know you wanted to give peace a chance and all,” I couldn’t help but feel a bit of sarcasm in there as if he was accusing me of something. But maybe that was just my own cynicism and this planet getting to me.

“They weren’t going to back down. What could we do? I wasn’t going to stand there and watch them kill one of our own,” I told Liam, annoyance and anger in my voice.

“Reload, and try and put it behind us,” he suggested. Somehow, I doubted these aliens would put it behind them so easily. This time Fisher spoke up:

“We still don’t even know what they wanted,” his voice still shaking.

“Nothing good the way they were armed,” replied Liam. I felt angry and disappointed that yet again the first time we met a new people ended with violence.

“Damn it! This wasn’t how first contact was supposed to go. Or at least not how I imagined it,” I exclaimed.

“That’s on them. Can’t let it change us. Next time might go better,” Liam was right. But I could tell he didn’t really believe that last part. Likely just trying to make me feel a bit better.

“Yeah, the whole neighborhood can’t be bad,” I gave a slight joke, trying to suppress my anger and lighten the mood. If nothing else, maybe there would be other species that we could get a better reception with. “So, Fisher, any idea where the others are?”

“Gone. Kirkland and Greer went looking for help,” he explained. I grabbed Fisher’s hand to help him up when he let go and cried out in pain again.

“AHHH! My leg… motherfucker I think it’s broken! You guys push ahead and look for the others,” he let out through pained breaths. Damn it, I really hope none of those aliens decide to come looking this way for their buddies.

“You sure?” I asked. He waved me off.
“Yeah yeah, and take out a few more of them for me,” this time the pain shifted into anger. Before we moved on Liam and I scavenged for any supplies and I scanned the alien bodies. The scan confirmed that their armor was some kind of bone but… their genetics were just everywhere. Different compositions making up different percentages. Guess life took quite a different turn here huh?

"Hope the other team is doing ok,” Liam remarked.

“We may want to look around first before finding them. Especially find out where Greer and Kirkland went,” I suggested.

“You’re the recon specialist, point the way,” seems he wanted to follow my lead. I simply nodded in reply. “Looks like you knew how to handle a gun back there,” he tried to make conversation. Surprised that surprised him, given who my father is.

“Spent time with an Alliance Peacekeeping force. Guarding a Mass Effect relay from pirates and slavers. Helped fight off a few Batarian raids. Plus, Dad would sooner move to Khar’Shan and lead terrorist attacks against human colonies than not teach his kids how to handle themselves,” I joked.

“I see your point,” Liam chuckled. “You know I had no idea you were biotic,” he remarked.

“Might be a bit freaky, but I’ll be damned if it isn’t badass. Or fun. And hey, it’s better than the brain tumors most other kids get left with. You know, Sarah is biotic as well, we can make some damn good combos working together,” I explained. Once again, I feared for my comatose sister.

“Heh, I can imagine. Remind me to never piss you or your sister off,” he joked. We had two paths to choose from, over another small ridge in the direction of the tower and to the left against a wall with more smaller structures of the same kind as the tower. I decided to go over the ridge and check back down that other path later. Before we got over the hill I heard gunfire. But the sound was distinctly different than Milky Way weapons. These sounded energy based. And I heard those aliens yelling out in their language again. Liam drew a submachine gun, a Charger. We crossed the ridge and saw that three of those aliens had surrounded one of us. Looked like Kirkland. They all had their weapons trained on him while he held his hands up in surrender. They spoke again in their language.

“Please, I surrender,” Kirkland begged, clearly nervous.

“Lutrad Nyro,” one of the aliens calmly stated. As the end of his gun was engulfed in a yellow glow.

And Kirkland’s head just… melted. Small chunks of skull and brain that weren’t melted by these aliens’ energy weapons splattering out against the ground. Liam and I opened fire immediately, determined to avenge Kirkland. We had to play this smart though. Our armor was still basic and we had no idea how well our shields could hold up against energy weapons. We took cover and I aimed my Mattock at the heads of one of the aliens as they moved to cover as well. Hopefully this could take one out in more than three shots like the Predator did. I pulled the trigger twice to send two shots straight into an alien head knocking him to the ground. I went back into cover and waited for the sounds of their guns to stop so I could see where the others had gone. It was then that I heard the tell-tale sign of Liam priming a grenade as he threw it over behind the rocks the other two were hiding behind. I looked up just in time to see it detonate. One of the alien’s arms went flying and I think I saw a foot as well. I wasn’t sure if those came from the same alien or not so I kept my rifle trained to where they just were while keeping an eye out to make sure the other hadn’t rolled away to a new location. He stood up with his gun aimed straight at me right where I was hoping he would. He was covered in the green blood of his friend. I pulled the trigger twice
again sending another pair of bullets straight into his skull, exploding his head like they had done to Kirkland. Except this alien had managed to get a shot off at me. My shields managed to deflect it but just barely, my HUD reading only 20% remaining. I would not want to take more than 2 shots from those bastards. My armor might help with most of the 2nd but I was not eager to find out.

“That’s the last of them,” Liam called out.

“Can’t believe we’re doing this. Come on, let’s check on Kirkland. Least we can do is grab his tags,” I muttered. I bent down over what was left his corpse. The upper half of his head missing and the lower half a charred, melted, bubbly mess of flesh and blood. “Bastards shot him in cold blood,” I grimly stated. Liam seemed confused.

“He was trying to surrender. Why kill him?” I tried to put things in perspective. Not one I’m ok with, but one that makes sense.

“Would we treat them any different if they showed up on Earth, armed to the teeth?” I questioned. Liam let out a sigh.

“Maybe not,” He relented. I shook my head, looking at Kirkland’s corpse.

“Peace isn’t going to be an option here. Not anymore at least. Come on, let’s get moving. We’ll come back for his body after we find the others,” I told him. Before setting out, hopefully to find Greer, I scanned the weird alien architecture. The readings were like nothing I’d ever seen before, and it appeared to date back around 3 or 4 centuries ago. Not that long actually. Especially considering that Prothean ruins back in the Milky Way dated at around 50,000 years old. Given that the Arks left 600 years ago, our scans would never have picked this up. We circled back to the crash site as we planned and went down the other path. After all, we were here to explore. But we also had no idea where anyone was.

The side path was littered with crashed bits of the shuttle, one had a container with an atmospheric analyzer, intact at that. Aside from the expected ‘don’t breathe the air,’ warning, it detected no traces of atmospheric pollutants and no trace of radiation either, so no nukes. So, what the hell killed this place? I set that question, and many others I’ve gotten on this mission aside as we continued to search for the others.

Liam and I came across another opening with more of those odd and old alien structures. We were on a ridge and below us were more of the same aliens from before. I ordered Liam to crawl a few meters to the left so we could get multiple vantage points and take them by surprise. I went prone and crawled just before the edge. I signaled Liam to inch forward and take aim. I trained my Mattock on the side of an unsuspecting alien’s head, steadied my breath, and double tapped the alien for a quick kill, Liam using his pistol to quickly put three rounds in the head of another and only one remained. I got up on my knee and summoned my biotics for another charge straight at him before he even realized he was all alone, following up again with another stab to the throat with my omni-blade.

I know this kind of combo won’t work long. It’s hard to imagine that every single group we come across is going to be a squad of three, we certainly won’t have the element of surprise all the time, and I sure as hell hope to be better equipped if we fight them again after we leave this planet. Not to mention the environment certainly won’t always be in our favor as it was just now.

“Hey Ryder!” Liam was standing back on the ridge and called down to me. I stood up and looked back at him:

“What?” I asked.
“It’s over Anakin!” he yelled out, holding his arms out to his sides. “I have the High-ground!” I had a good laugh at that one.

“You underestimate my power!” I chuckled back at him.

“Don’t try it…” he continued the quote. Wait, is that son of a bitch implying I should charge him? I can’t resist. I’ll just make it a bit weaker so I don’t hurt him on accident. I positioned myself to charge and summoned up the dark energy, smiling evilly as I saw his face change to an ‘oh shit’ expression behind his visor. And just like that, I disappeared in a blue bubble of dark energy and reappeared in front of him the force just enough to knock him on the ground.

“Hello there,” I mocked.

“Damn it Ryder, I don’t think that’s how it happened in the movie,” He said through his laughter.

“You’re just lucky I weakened that charge. Heh, alright, come on, let's go find the others,” I remarked.

We climbed another ledge and got a pretty good idea of where the others were.

“Liam, up there, look. Flares. That’s gotta be where dad and the others are. We’ll find Greer or at least his trail and start heading that way,” I suggested.

“Really don’t want to leave anyone else behind. Lead the way,” remarked.

To the left was a path filled with more of the glowing blue mushrooms we had seen around already. I readied my weapon and walked in, maybe Greer had gone this way... And then we heard some kind of animal roar and then some other kind of noise that didn’t sound so natural.

“You hear that Ryder?” Liam asked.

“Wish I didn’t,” I muttered. My eyes saw something strange. Just ahead of us, the air on top of this rock seemed to be… rippling. Moving, shifting. And I thought I saw some kind of outline from it too, like that of an animal… I Immediately took aim with my Mattock and unloaded a burst of three shots center mass. The animal roared out in pain and appeared, as if it had just de-cloaked and snarled at us. Like the aliens from earlier it’s head was covered in a bony armor and more bony protrusions poked out along it’s quadruped body. And it seems those aliens had strapped a kind of armor to it as well.

It spat a kind of vile mass of liquid at us giving me a perfect view of its rows of sharp teeth and forked tongue. I dashed out of the way and watched as it sizzled over a rock, slowly dissolving it. Great, Acid. At least these bastards don’t seem to have a mouth on their tongue as well. I put another stream of three rounds straight into its head, breaking most of the bone armor with the first, the next two putting it down for good. I scanned the corpse and like the aliens from earlier it’s genetics were everywhere. What was surprising was that my scanner wasn’t picking up any kind of technology on it. Certainly not anything that could be a cloaking device. Meaning somehow whatever this thing was naturally evolved a kind of active camouflage. One helluva weird galaxy.

The cave didn’t seem to go anywhere so we backtracked out. We entered another clearing and saw the second half of our shuttle. I picked up some salvage and turned to leave but then we were the ones being ambushed. A group of three aliens and one of those cloaking bastards. So, they’re some kind of hound for them. Great. We took cover immediately and prepared for what would likely be a hard fight.

I took cover behind the shuttle with Liam on a rock across an opening from me. I didn’t try to line
up headshots like I did before, they were moving and shooting. I just aimed and pulled the trigger for a burst of three. Two struck him in the upper chest making splashes of green blood and the third hit in the throat, knocking him to the ground as he choked on his own blood, a lucky shot. I leaned back in cover just before his friends had time to aim at me, and I shouted at Liam to find and shoot their invisible friend.

And then I heard a snarl behind me. I dashed to my right so I could still be behind the rock and out of view of the aliens and turned around so Liam and I could open fire on its head. I may have shot more rounds than was necessary but that thing almost made me shit myself. The remaining two aliens had made the stupid decision of taking cover behind the same rock when plenty of other choices were available.

“Liam! Grenade in the middle of them! Now!” He didn’t respond, just followed through, his throw landing perfectly in the middle of them and cooked just right so that they didn’t have time to roll away, sending green blood splattering and chunks of bone and gray flesh around where they once were.

“Nice throw Kosta, good work,” I exclaimed.

“Thanks, how did you know that… thing, was behind you anyway?” he asked.

“It gave itself away. Snarled just as it decloaked to pounce. Hopefully they're all that stupid,” one can hope, right?

We continued on our way, down another ledge, and we saw a building. Not like the large pillar, this had a whole different architecture and style to it. Maybe this was built by these aliens. In front of the structure were crates, presumably of supplies, and tech we didn’t recognize. Upon a scan one of them seemed to be a lightning rod, but retracted. The structure looked abandoned so we investigated. The power was off leaving everything pitch black aside from our flashlights. The left side of the roof seemed to have caved in and I climbed up the rocks into another room.

Centerpiece was a large bulky piece of tech, with other weird tech around the room. I saw an interface and pushed a button, maybe it would get the lights on. After a few seconds of sounding like it might explode, the place lit up. I decided not to poke around any other pieces of tech and we went back to the entrance. Only to see a locked door would now open.

On the other side was a cave leading to another door, but this one of the old alien type. There were tables with boxes of the old tech as if they were being studied. Near the door were alien corpses and what looked like the remains of a bipedal construct. Two legs, a large, roundish, flat head. I walked closer to the door and the construct stood up and took fire at us. My shields were just about to break when I realized what was going on, so I used an ability that I couldn’t use on those other aliens as they didn’t have shields.

And they weren’t synthetic. Offensive omni-tool abilities can be activated with certain gestures so I reached out at it, grabbed a non-existent rope, and pulled back while the omni-tool itself did all the work, draining energy from the construct and feeding it to my shields. I then keyed my omni-tool to overload this construct as my shields flared back to life. Combined with just being drained, an overload fried the circuits causing a kind of EMP-like explosion around the construct, causing it to collapse to the ground.

“Killer robots too?” Liam groaned, “The Geth back home would love this place.”

“Let’s not tell them, alright? I really don’t want to tell the murderous killer robots that there’s more out here,” I replied.
“I’m just hoping that by now someone’s gone and wiped them out. After what they did on the Citadel…” he muttered, remembering watching the vids of that horrendous slaughter of innocent civilians.

“And to the Quarians. I’m sure they feel it’s been long overdue. Sure they’d love to have a home world again,” I remarked. We made our way back towards the entrance. As we began to step out I pulled Liam back inside.

“Liam, look, there, someone’s activated that lightning rod thing. You stay here, I’ll draw them out, and rush back in here. Cover me.” I slowly stepped outside rifle raised, just to be safe. The moment I stepped out on the ramp leading down to the rod I heard one of those animals roar again and booked it back to the building seeing rounds shoot past me and one impact my shields. I took cover and waited for them to recharge, asking Liam what he’s seen.

“I count two soldiers and two of those animals,” he informed.

“Ok, I’m going to blind fire down the hall to keep the animals away, if I hit one, finish it off and tell me. I’ll help with the troops when my shields recharge,” I ordered. I got on my knee and stuck my mattock out the side of the door pulling the trigger. According to Liam my little spray and pray actually killed one on its own and revealed the other one for Liam to take out. This time Liam had a plan to deal with the last two.

“Ryder, next time one pops out, charge it, I got something special for the other one, something I picked up in crisis response.”

“If you say so, but if this doesn’t work and I get shot I’m haunting your ass,” I joked. As if on cue, not just one, but both aliens stepped out of cover. I charged the right one, stabbing him in the throat with my omni-blade, and then saw just what Liam’s trick was. His Jump set activated as his dual omni-blades flickered to life, he flung himself at the last alien and slammed them both into the unsuspecting alien, plunging them both deep into the alien’s chest.

“A Havoc strike? Where’d you learn that?” It was a tactic most often used by elite Turian units back in the Milky Way.

“Turian buddy of mine, tell you the story some other time. Come on, let’s find Greer,” he called out. We walked straight out from the building under an arch of the same build as the aliens we’ve been fighting when we got a signal. No words, but it seemed like our comms were being contacted in a kind of Morse code. It was on short range comms and the signal was patchy. That meant it would clear up the closer we got. It had to be Greer as the flares were too far away for us to pick their comms up. Liam and I readied our weapons and followed the cliff side. The signal was at its strongest on the outside of a cave entrance. We checked our ammo, and saw just two aliens standing in front of Greer. We didn’t hesitate to act first.

I told Liam to charge the closest one as I readied my charge for the farthest one. We caught both off guard and killed both with our blades before they even knew were there.

“Thank god. I was tapping my mic hoping someone would notice,” Greer said, clear relief in his voice.

“You ok?” I asked as I holstered my weapon, didn’t even need it.

“Yeah, where are the others?” This is gonna hurt… decided I might as well start with the bad news.
“They killed Kirkland,” I told Greer, turning my head down. Turning it back up I gave him the good news. “But Fisher’s alive back at the crash site. Broken leg, he needs help,” a subtle suggestion that Greer should go cover him.

“I’ll check for supplies then head back. Stay safe,” he acknowledged my suggestion.

“Stay put when you get there, we’ll look for dad’s shuttle,” I ordered. Greer nodded as he started scrounging. Greer was found so Liam and I set off to find the others. Along the way, we found a crashed alien ship with survivors we had to fight. Seemed to point at them not being native to this planet. Next to the crash site was a cave with a living fully grown tree-like growth, shielded from the weather. Odd, but we pressed on. We passed up another ridge, and found the other shuttle.

They were surrounded.
“RYDER! OVER HERE! NOW!” Cora yelled at us from her position. Her, Doc Caryle, and Hayes were surrounded by alien forces. Liam and I sprinted to join them behind cover. Repairs were underway, but clearly delayed, Cora informed us. Dad was nowhere to be seen.

“I got one!” the doc called out, so much for ‘Do no harm,’ I chuckled to myself. The aliens kept popping in and out of cover so I couldn’t tell how many there were. I knew I couldn’t just charge in, that would-be suicide. So, I joined the others in suppressing fire, occasionally getting a shot or two in. It was then that I noticed one alien take something in his hand, and it started beeping as he prepared to throw it. Damn it.

“GRENADE! GET DOWN!” I yelled out, it landed right next to me and I dashed to another piece of rock as cover just before it detonated. I got back up and opened fire at the jackass who threw it, just managing to make his head pop before I needed to drop back down in cover for my shields to recharge. So, I tried something new. I keyed my omni-tool, priming an Incinerate charge, and locked onto an alien in cover. I needed that bastard out of it so I aimed it upwards, just far enough so that it would stay locked on, but arc downwards to strike him even while in cover. I launched the shot and to my pleasure it struck him, he stood up and began screaming, the incinerate burning itself into his flesh and scorching the bone but it wasn’t enough to kill him. One more bullet to the head however did the job.

So, Fireworks, that’s good. At least something does. I stood up again to open fire, lined up a shot…

And then took two shots straight on. My shields deflected the first but they didn’t fully stop the second. The round struck me right in the center of my chest plate and the force of it knocked me onto the ground. I could feel the heat as it charred my armor, but fortunately it was just thick enough to stop that round. It would not protect me from another though. My only saving grace being that my shield generator was still intact, so I could still take one hit and be fine so long as they’re up. As I moved to get up my chest flared with pain but I ignored it. It felt as if that round broke a rib, but if I didn’t help fight them off I could receive much worse. I stood back in cover, signaled the others I was fine with a thumb up, and keyed my omni-tool to dispense some Medi-gel, if nothing else it would make a good painkiller.

The others had just finished off the last of the aliens, so I leaned back against the rock for a breather.

“Cavalry to the rescue, nice to see you guys,” The doc spoke up.

“You too Harry, how is everyone?” I asked.

“Should be asking you that Scott,” he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Broken rib I think, got Medi-gel, should be fine,” I explained. Caryle nodded, knowing anything
else would need to wait until we were back on the Ark.

“Still in one piece. You got here just in time,” Cora remarked.

“Where’s my dad?” I asked.

“He went scouting ahead while we fixed the shuttle,” Cora told me. Figures, he wouldn’t just sit around and wait for someone else to swoop in to save him. “Ryder, there’s a crate of ammo at the shuttle, stock up,” she ordered/ I stood up, wincing at my rib complaining at the movement. On the crate was a hefty supply of thermal clips and Medi-gel, as well as a Katana shotgun. A nice improvement to my Predator attached to my hip. I strapped that onto the clip at the back of my waist and grabbed a fresh supply of Medi-gel just to be safe.

“These things stop and talk to you at all?” I asked Cora.

“Barely a word and then started shooting. You?” she asked in reply.

“We didn’t stop to chat,” I said angrily. Remembering what they did to Kirkland. We heard a kind of humming sound and I had a feeling I really wouldn’t like what it was, so I raced back into cover.

“Ah hell…” I heard Cora mutter. “Dropship inbound!” She then yelled out. Everyone rushing into cover as needed. It turned to its side hovering over the hill and we a row of 3 aliens standing at the edge to jump out. On the other side, I could already see some doing just that, they’re backs to us, three of them, just like those facing us.

“They got balls to try an Airdrop,” Liam remarked, remembering the other ship that we found earlier crashed. With its squad deployed, the drop ship lifted back higher into the air and turned to fly away, likely to pick up another group. At least that was its plan. Before it started flying away, lightning struck the dropship, rocking it, and as it started to fly away, it began to tilt to one side, and then it’s thrusters cut out, leading it to crash in a rather nice explosion. The Doc, Harry, seemed to take some enjoyment in the dropship being, well, dropped, with a loud quick laugh.

Unfortunately for me, the sound of his mirth kept me from hearing something much more dangerous. There was another snarl behind me and then a large weight was on my back pushing me to the ground. I realized at the last second and began to turn, grabbing my shotgun from my waist at the same time. The strange animal had just opened its jaws to clamp down around my throat when I shoved my Katana up its mouth and pulled the trigger. The animal’s head vanished in a cloud of blood, bones, and brains, also coating my nice white armor in it. That’s gonna need a wash.

I shoved the headless corpse off me and got back into cover to help finish the alien force off. Just in time for the idiots to send in ANOTHER shuttle.

“Oh, come on!? Really? How badly do these assholes want us?!” I cried out.

“Bad enough apparently,” Cora yelled back. This dropship dropped out something different. It was another one of the aliens, but he was bigger, more heavily armored. And he carried a big gun. I took aim and my HUD informed me he had shields too, wonderful. Normally a bastard like this would need focused fire, something not possible given how many friends he has right now. So, I had another idea. I focused on the other smaller aliens first, waiting for him to get closer. A few double bursts from my Mattock being able to take out two as the big guy got in position behind cover. He stood up and readied his gun, which began to glow and then spew out round after round of energy. Great, he’s basically got a mini-gun. Fucking perfect. I prepared my energy drain ability and waited until he stopped to let it cool. It would need to cool, right? Please let it need to cool…
oh thank god, I thought as it did just that. I drained his shields, buffing my own, then keyed an overload, the resulting combo frying his shields and seeming to leave him quite… shocked… literally and figuratively. He stood there, stiffened and convulsing before dropping to a knee.

I immediately primed an incinerate charge and took aim to right where his head should poke out to. He stood up immediately, screaming at the scorching heat and a quick double tap from my mattock put him out of his misery.

“Impressive work Scott, my old squad of Asari Huntresses would be impressed,” Cora complimented. Oh, fucking hell DO NOT start on that again Cora, please, I KNOW YOU WORKED WITH HUNTRESSES YOU DON’T NEED TO REMIND EVERYONE! You may think I’m over reacting but when Sarah and I first met her, I’m pretty sure every single sentence involved at least Asari, or Huntress at some point. Or those dreaded manuals. If all she said was her old squad that would be fine, but she always. ALWAYS. Mentions specifically that they were Asari Huntresses and that she trained as one. I digress. After groaning and that slight mental rant I peeked out of cover and took aim to help take care of the last few. They clearly planned for more help from their heavy weapons so his quick loss took them by surprise.

The 4 of us were able to take care of them easily enough, me just being careful to not let my shields drop. The last of the aliens fell and Liam stomped over to his corpse and just unloaded into it.

“Liam! Enough!” Cora called out.

“Right, it’s just… these assholes killed Kirkland!” Liam yelled back, gesturing at the corpse. I get his anger but there’s a time and place.

“I hear you, but this isn’t the time to lose our cool,” I told him. That’s something Dad was always sure Sarah and I knew. Emotions are good, but most don’t have a place on the battlefield. To which Liam simply aimed at the corpse again and fired more rounds into it. He looked straight at me:

“Now I feel better,” his voice furious. Where the fuck is this hostility coming from? This is hostility, right? Guy needs to chill. I just stared back at him in response. Cora sensed the tension and changed the topic. Maybe not the best topic but at least a change.

“What about the others?” she asked.

“Fisher’s wounded but sitting tight. Greer’s with him… though our shuttle’s in pieces,” I explained. Caryle carried Hayes over, her arm around his shoulder, hand over her stomach, then Doc eased her down onto the ground.

“She’s been hit,” he told us. Small rocks around them began to lift into the air, signaling another strike, right on their position. I moved to simply drag them out of position, but Cora just ran in front of them and cast a barrier over them. A bit dramatic, but it gets the job done. I thought, already knowing she was biotic. When the bolt came down I had to repress the chuckle, which was not helped by my pained rib. The bolt itself was just so… tiny. Sure, that doesn’t mean it’s less dangerous but the whole scene just looked so overdramatic.

And just like that it was over. And Hayes had some good news:

“Before they attacked, I…” she coughed “I managed to fix our comms,” Clear pain in her voice from her wounds.

“You’re a lifesaver. Now just take it easy,” Cora sighed with relief. I keyed my omni-tool, trying to contact SAM.
“QEC link established. Affirmative Scott. The Pathfinder needs to speak with you,” That familiar British synthetic voice filled my ears once more. A vid screen appeared above my left forearm with my Omni-tool’s interface just below it. My Dad’s helmeted face appeared on it as he began to speak.

“Good to see you in one piece. What’s our status?” he asked.

“Liam and I are with Cora,” I told him as Cora keyed herself into the comms.

“We have wounded crew. The good news is our shuttle’s been repaired. We can get back to the ark,” the Lieutenant informed my father.

“Not with these storms. It’s too risky to fly,” he ordered. *Well what choice do we have Dad?*

“I’ll take that chance,” I exclaimed. “It’s not any better on the ground—we’re just human lightning rods running around down here.”

“Not if we can turn the lightning off…” he said. *Of course that old bastard has a plan. He’d never suggest we just sit here with wounded if we didn’t have a way to make it easier. But… what the hell could it be?*

“I don’t follow,” I asked. Unsurprisingly, he decided to keep me in suspense.

“I have an idea. Rendezvous at my coordinates. We’ll—” He turned his head to the side “Damn it. They’ve spotted me,” he muttered. *Well, those aliens won’t be spotting him for long*

“Sir! SIR!” Really Cora? Why aren’t you as confident in him? She turned to Hayes and the doc, “Can you two manage alone?”

“I can keep her stable,” he told Cora. “For a while.”

“It will have to do,” She turned to Liam and I. “Let’s move.”

We climbed up another ridge to meet up with my dad. We had already passed several alien bodies, littered with bullet wounds from incendiary rounds. Clearly Dad’s handiwork. Impressive handiwork as well. Easy to see why he was N7. We climbed up the last ledge and saw Dad kneeling on the ground looking out on the tower and a large, shielded alien camp next to it. Cora told us he had been trying to get scans of the tower. The ground we were standing on was clearly the same metal as the old alien structures, it was in hexagonal patterns, and lines throughout them were glowing in a light green color. Dad must have heard us as he looked back hand out telling us to stay low. He jumped down one ledge and we followed, getting a better view of the clearing, shield generators, and aliens on patrol.

“Who are these guys?” Cora asked.

“Visitors, just like us. I don’t think they’re native to the planet,” Dad told her.

“They’re not. We found an abandoned lab. Like they’ve been studying the place,” I told him of our earlier findings. He looked back at me and spoke with a mix of surprise and pride.

“Good work. You actually did some scouting.”

“We came here to explore dad. What? You didn’t think I would?” I asked him. He looked back at
me again:

“You never know what people are made of, not until everything goes wrong.” More wise words from the old man. And given the tone of his voice, he was proud of what he saw I was made of. I’m sure I can expect a good talk with him about that later. He doesn’t do it much, doesn’t really know how, but it’s nice to hear that kind of thing from him. I never resented that about him, I knew he was a soldier, I knew it was hard for him.

“Plenty of that on this mission,” I chuckled. Cora came up beside dad,

“Sir, you said something about the lightning?” she asked him. Back to business mode.

“It’s the dark energy cloud the Hyperion hit. It’s affecting the whole planet, interfering with that…” he pointed at the tower again, being closer, we could see a kind of orange aura surrounding the lower part of the weird blue vortex it was spewing out.

“The tower is caught in a feedback loop with the cloud. Together, they’re disrupting the entire climate with undirected energy,” SAM explained. That made a few more pieces fit the puzzle.

“That would explain a cave we found. Plant life sheltered from the storm… from that tower,” I told dad.

“It’s a good bet. And I think if we can get in there and shut the tower down…” he let us fill in the gap, Liam just vocalized it.

“The lightning goes away…”

“And the shuttle can get us out of here. In theory. We just have to get past them…” I got the feeling he had a plan to deal with the aliens too.

“It’s a helluva gamble,” I said, “But we won’t know until we get in there and try. Not like we have much choice anyway,” I muttered.

“No illusions about this. It’ll be a nasty fight the whole way.” Earlier we weren’t storming one of their bases, and I’ve already essentially lost my armor and maybe gotten a rib broke. But not exactly another option. Dad spoke up again, “Fortunately, I’ve already done something to make it a bit easier…” he hinted. He held up his left arm and opened his omni-tool, waiting for a few of the aliens to get close to some lightning rods. He keyed his tool when he felt satisfied with enemy positions.

Detonators on the lightning rods in the area blew up, launching the rods themselves into the sky, and the shield generators completely vulnerable, and killing a few of the aliens caught in the blasts. Moments later, the shield towers were struck and overloaded, and the shield dissipated. Dad jumped right down into the fray, followed by the rest of us. We charged towards the outpost before the aliens could figure out what was going on. My dad got there before they could take positions, he used biotics to push one, a concussive round to knock one down, and an incinerate round to take down another, finishing the three off with a few short bursts from an avenger.

“SAM! Load combat profile,” he called out. Profiles? The hell are those? Should ask him about that later. His one act of carnage had already cleared a platform, allowing us a foothold. “Get into that building! We don’t want to get bogged down out here!” He ordered us. We followed suit, pushing through the complexes in the middle so that it was hard for enemies outside to take us out from a distance. Dad just rushing ahead in a whirlwind of death. Reacting faster than a normal human should, throwing out powerful biotics at rates that would make even the most powerful of
Asari be impressed, and tech attacks that would make any combat engineer swoon.

After a moment of awe as my dad kicked ass, I realized I needed to catch up and he was already up the ramp, so I charged an alien that had gotten behind him as he dealt with the other, piercing the back of his throat with my omni-blade severing his spine and windpipe. Dad nodded thanks and called out another order to SAM.

“SAM! Biotic interface mode!” Sounds like his biotics are going to get even stronger, no complaints here. His body actually glowed blue as the biotic aura around him intensified. “Keep pushing forward! Don’t let them get the drop on you!” He jumped across a gap in the bridge in between two aliens, and somehow the crazy bastard sent out two shockwaves in different directions knocking both off the platforms and plummeting to their deaths. I swear I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life. Dad opened the door and charged through, his N7 grade shotgun blasting apart alien heads left and right as he summoned an annihilation field around him, using dark energy to tear apart any enemies who get in range atom by atom.

Just as quickly as we entered, the room was cleared and we saw we’d need to use our jump jets to get to the next level. The biotic field around my dad dissipated as he told SAM to load up an Engineer profile. Replacing the biotic field was the orange glow of tech armor that glowed to life around his torso as an extra barrier to enemy fire. We began running across one last bridge to the tower entrance with around 5 aliens firing at us.

“Sir! Where are you getting these profiles from?” Cora asked dad.

“Little help from SAM!” he called out, a confident tone with slight humor. Not surprising he gave us a cryptic response. I have little doubt he’d tell us later though, so I didn’t bother asking him to elaborate. I took cover and aimed my Mattock at another alien for a quick double tap to the head. His buddy got a shot off that drained my shields. Dad must have noticed as that alien quickly found himself engulfed in fire. He must have done some heavy mods to his incinerate because in seconds there was nothing but ash left. Reinforcements arrived on the platform which gave even dad pause. He knows his limits.

He kept moving up however, cover to cover. Each time he stood up another alien met his end. Another one of the heavy aliens from earlier readied his gun so I prepared my little combo that worked earlier. I hit him with an energy drain, which dad must have noticed as he immediately hit the alien with an overload and a blast to the head from his shotgun. Hey, that was my kill! I thought. We mopped up the last of the aliens without too much hassle.

“That looks like the control center. Keep them off my back!” Dad ordered us.

“Hard to believe we made it through in one piece!” Liam spoke up.

“We haven’t yet, I need to get through that door. Just need SAM to decipher the language,” Dad told us. “Take up defensive positions. Cora, on the left, Liam, on the right, Scott, you take center and watch both!” he ordered.

“Got it,” the three of us said in unison and readied ourselves for defense. A part of me expected them to charge on one side at a time like a bunch of idiots, unfortunately for us however, they proved to have at least a few brain cells in those bony heads. What worked in our favor though was that the right-side charge pushed faster than the left, allowing me to help Liam clear his guys before Cora got overwhelmed.

“They mean business! Keep them off your dad!” Cora called out.
“Analyzing inputs, 25 percent decrypted,” SAM updated us Dad told SAM to hurry and called out for us to keep holding both sides. A heavy showed up on the right but Cora was beginning to get swarmed, so I told Liam to take cover and try to get out of his line of sight.

“What is this place anyway?” Liam asked.

“I dunno but they sure want it back,” Cora replied, taking out one of the alien animals that got close. SAM provided another update, 50 percent. Fast, but not fast enough.

“It’s an unusually complicated syntax,” He explained.

“I can see that,” Dad groaned. “Try a recursive search,” he suggested.

“I will need a moment to evaluate the pattern,” SAM explained.

“We might not have a moment SAM!” I called out to him, as a heavy trooper showed up on left side too. I took out one more alien when Liam called out that now he was getting swarmed. I hoped Cora would be able to handle it. Fortunately, SAM gave a 75 percent update.

“We’ve almost got it!” Dad called out. I reached right side and took out another alien, took cover to keep shooting…

Only to see them falling back. Likely preparing for another push sure, but just when we’re about to open the door. Perfect timing dumbasses.

“Decryption complete,” SAM informed. Damn I was eager to hear those words from SAM.

“That did it!” Dad called out. “It’s a security override. I’ll try to open the door from here.” When it didn’t budge, he moved to the door to try a more direct approach, calling me over to help open it. With the two of us it wasn’t a hard task.

“You really think we can shut this thing down?” I asked him.

“I don’t know yet. SAM’s decoded part of the language. Now we’ll see if I can have a conversation,” he remarked. Obviously he was talking metaphorically, but… I had a bad feeling about this.

“Nothing on this planet has listened so far. Just… be careful dad,” I told him, concern in my voice.

“Worried about your old man, huh?” I could tell he was smiling behind his helmet. He leaned in closer, “I won’t tell anyone,” he joked. “Come on. These are the moments that make it all worthwhile,” He sounded excited, but in a way only someone who knows his tells could figure out. We walked forward to a weird triangular holographic shape in the center of the room, what I assumed to be a holographic interface. “SAM, began translating,” he ordered.

“A moment,” the AI told him, as he began his work. “Indexing,” he continued. The colors in the center of the hologram began shifting, pulsating. “Translation complete.”

“A moment,” the AI told him, as he began his work. “Indexing,” he continued. The colors in the center of the hologram began shifting, pulsating. “Translation complete.”

“Let’s see what we have,” dad said, as he raised his right arm, palm open towards the interface as I stood there watching my father interact with alien machinery centuries old that has the power to manipulate a temperatures climate in a whole new galaxy. I felt awestruck at the lightshow I was witnessing. His omni-tool activated and points of yellow light circled his arm as several streams of orange light branched out to the hologram. Moments later the three ends of the triangle pulsed out with a green-blue light. A blue mist filled the room in front of my dad as an even larger triangle of a green-blue-white-light appeared in front of my father. It was working! He was actually doing it!
The tower pulsated with energy and outside one could see that from the top it shot out a pulse of blue energy, dissipating the vortex it once had and clearing the skies.

It was beautiful. The sun began to shine down on the platform outside and the valley beyond. My dad and I walked out into the sunlight together.

“Well I’ll be damned… It’s working!” My voice full of hope and wonder at what I was witnessing. “You did it,” I said to my father who turned to look at me. He grasped my right arm with his left hand,

“There’s hope, at least,” He smiled through his helmet, a genuine happiness I heard in his voice that I hadn’t heard since mom was diagnosed.

“That’s all anyone back on the ark is looking for: hope it’ll work out,” Hell, I don’t mind getting some hope too. We stood there for another moment before dad spoke up.

“Well not if we stand around looking at sunsets. Let’s get back to the shuttle and-” the tower made a weird noise and we looked out to see a wall of fog rushing out to meet us, electricity coursing through it. It struck us both and sent us flying back towards the end of the platform. I just caught a grip on the edge but a crate slammed into my head, knocking me back. I landed with a thud right on my back and opened my eyes as my throat began to burn. My entire visor had broken. The glass of the helmet over my entire face shattered. Omni-gel wasn’t going to fix this.

I gasped for air, getting none as the oxygen levels were still too low. I got to my knees and saw the light from my Dad’s omni-tool get closer and closer as he came to me through the mist.

“Repeat, we need an emergency extraction NOW!” He yelled into our comms. Cora answered as I continued gasping for air.

“They’re spinning up the shuttle! ETA is three, maybe four minutes!” Seriously? Why didn’t they have it powered and ready to go? Dad was grasping his leg, limping a bit but still making a beeline straight for me. I looked up at him, fear in my eyes as he looked down at me. He seemed to come to a decision.

“We don’t have that long…” He got on a knee in front of me, took what was left of my helmet off and threw it aside. He then gripped his own, taking it off and putting it on me. Air filled my lungs and I began to calm.

“Deep… Breaths!” Dad struggled to say, now he was the one suffocating. I coughed,

“What are you…” I coughed again. He looked down at his omni-tool and gave SAM one last order.

“Initiating transfer,” SAM informed. I began to feel dizzy, a kind of presence entering my head from my implant. It was too much and I began to pass out. Dad continued speaking but it was muffled, I couldn’t make it out. He continued struggling to speak and breathe as my vision blurred, and everything went black.
Scott Ryder


"What happened SAM?" I asked. Why does it sound like his voice is in my head and not my ears?

"You were clinically dead for 22 seconds," The AI informed me, the same calm and cool voice as always. Well, shit. I sure hope I never need to do that again. Wait, what about the others? I grunted in pain as I began to speak.

"Did the rest of the team make it?" I looked down next to one of SAM node's panels as Liam stirred. Guess he fell asleep there. Odd, I got the impression he wasn't that fond of me.

"Hey… You're still with us," He was clearly drowsy, just waking up. He began to stand as he activated his Omni-tool, speaking into it. "Guys, get to SAM Node! Ryder's awake!" Just Scott, Liam. Just Scott. I shifted to the end of the cot, getting my feet on the ground. Liam looked back at me, a confused look on his face. "Who were you talking to?" he asked.

"SAM, didn't you hear him?"

"No, actually, I didn't," The hell? At that moment Lexi and Cora walked in. Their faces a mix of concern and relief. Lexi began running a round of tests similar to when I first woke up. I suppose just to make sure everything was in working order. I followed her hand as ordered.

And then I saw it. Dad's helmet resting on the railing next to me. The helmet he put on my head when mine shattered. Oh no, no no no no, that can't be good. If that shit happened to me when I got a helmet on… you can't fight asphyxiation like you do aliens.

"Dad… where is he? Did… did he make it…?" I already knew the answer, but I needed to hear it. Cora looked down, and then she and Lexi shared a glance. Lexi's mouth opened and shut again, trying to find the words. Their silence said enough. Finally, Cora spoke up.

"It was your life or his. And he chose you." Damn it. I may not be surprised he did, I knew he always loved Mom, Sarah, and I more than anything, in his own way... But damn it, not being surprised doesn't help you cope with losing your father. First mom, now dad... goddamnit. I didn't even get to say goodbye. I looked down, holding back tears. Now wasn't the time. I wasn't alone to do that. "I'm sorry Scott. I know this must be a blow," Cora muttered. That's putting it mildly.

"He made the ultimate sacrifice. He got his team, his son, out of danger. We all owe him for that. Me more than anyone. He did what any good father would," I struggled to speak and looked down again.
"He once said that when his time came, he wanted to go out among stars no one had seen before," Cora remembered. Liam putting a hand on her shoulder. Well, at least he got that, I thought. After a brief pause, I looked around again.

"What are we doing in SAM Node?" I asked. This time Lexi spoke up.

"SAM is now a part of you… In a way we don't entirely understand. It played havoc with your brain," she explained. Well, that's reassuring. But, I'm alive, and still me, so it can't be that bad, right?

"SAM?" I called out. This time his voice definitely came through my ears, through the room's speakers.

"Your father authorized the transfer of Pathfinder authority to you," he informed me. Holy Fucking Shit! My eyes bulged, I didn't know what to say. Technically it should be Cora, she was designated as next in line. But if SAM… integrating with me was the only way to save me, makes sense that dad would throw that bit of protocol aside.

"Woah… Well… if that's how it has to be… I just hope I can fill his shoes. Prove that he made the right choice," I let out, awe in my voice but kept low.

"Don't sell yourself short. I think you can do it," Liam said reassuringly, arms crossed but smile on his face. You're a hard man to read Kosta.

"Cora?" I knew she expected that if anything happened she'd be Pathfinder, but I would think she'd understand that Dad was left to either make me Pathfinder or watch me die, he'd choose me. Well, maybe… could there have been another reason? Did I really need the SAM connection? Was there something he could only trust to me or Sarah? Guess SAM will tell me later.

"It's what he wanted. I won't stand in the way," She told me, hands behind her back.

"Well regardless it doesn't sound like I can exactly hand over this SAM connection huh?" I glanced at Lexi and she shook her head no. Cora saw it too and for a split second I saw her eyes drop. Not sure why she was so wrapped up in that.

"Being Pathfinder is a serious job. You sure you're ready for this?" she asked me, regaining control of whatever she was feeling. I felt like cracking a joke, my normal defense mechanism, but it just didn't feel right this time.

"It's why I'm here. Exploring the unknown." For some reason I felt vulnerable so the defense mechanism kicked in. "Guess it doesn't matter though, dad kinda decided for us," I chuckled, but I was anything but happy on the inside.

"Just like your dad huh?" Liam ignored the second part.

"It's all academic anyway. SAM's linked to your mind on a deeper level now," Lexi clarified. She began walking over to another monitor. "Trying to untangle it could kill you." Yeah, so let's not screw with the incredibly complex AI that's linked to my brain. I thought. Cora, spoke up, getting into business mode.

"Scott I know this is tough but we need to start thinking about the next step. A lot of people are counting on us," she explained.

"Cora I might be Pathfinder but I'd be a bad leader if I didn't listen to advice and suggestions from those around me. What's the Ark's situation. Is the Ark still drifting?"
"That's the thing. Whatever your dad did with that tower, it saved the day. Some sort of atmosphere scrubber," Liam explained. Well, that's impressive, I thought.

"The energy cloud thinned out. We're on our way to the rally point now. Should be at the Nexus soon." Cora informed me of the situation. Sounds like the plan is already made. Get to the Nexus, find out the situation of the Nexus and other Arks, go from there.

"He needs to rest first," Lexi stressed. Heh, doctors and soldiers never agree on rest.

"He's got two hours. We'll need our Pathfinder for this," she ordered. The three of them turned to exit of the room, but Liam stopped and turned.

"I checked on your sister-still no change," his eyes dropped as he told me that. Damn it "But if you can pull through, so can she," he looked back up with more hope in his voice. I sure hope so, she's all I have left.

"A bit of your dad in both of you," he smiled. Liam turned again to leave the room, I clasped my hands in front of me and leaned forward. SAM spoke up again, but this time it was in my head.

"Your father will be missed," He sounded… sad.

"What's going on SAM?"

"This is our private channel. I shared it with him," he explained.

"Why'd he pick me?" I asked.

"Unknown. But he never acted without reason," SAM paused. Odd he wouldn't know. "Alec wouldn't want us to lose sight of the goal. He said pain emboldens our resolve He'd insist we grow stronger from his passing," he remembered his words. Easier said than done SAM. I just sat there in thought. And now that I was alone, I cried for my father.

Cora, Liam and I walked into the docking bay from the tram connecting the Hyperion and the Nexus. Something wasn't right. From the Hyperion's bridge we could see that no other arks had arrived. What's more? The Nexus hadn't finished its construction. What didn't help matters that the greeting we got was just an automated response of docking protocol. And the docking bay itself? Dark, with crates stacked along the walls. The Avina VI kiosk was online, but I had lived on the citadel for a few years. One conversation with that damn bot was enough.

"This can't be right," I broke the silence

"It's like everything's on standby," Cora spoke with audible confusion.

"Well if it's a surprise party, they're doing an awfully good job of it," Liam joked. We walked down a ramp, following a path, when I heard a noise. Like a tool of some kind. Plants around us were still alive, so that means SOMEONE was here at least. We turned a bend around more crates and crouched next to a sparking panel was a man. An engineer by the looks of it.

"There's a guy, maybe he's got champagne," Liam joked again. Seriously, how had this guy not heard us? I walked up behind him and raised my voice so he could hear.

"Hi there!" I called out. He stopped working, stood up, and turned around to face us. He looked confused. "We're from Ark Hyperion. And wondering where everybody went…?" The man's face froze in shock, eyes wide, and he stepped back to the wall as if to steady himself.

"Did he hear you?" Liam looked at me. The worker managed a reply,
"Did you say an… ark?" He sounded hopeful.

"This is the Nexus, right? Pretty sure we parked in the right place," I joked, hoping it might help the guy relax.

"Of course, I'm sorry. It's just… we thought you were all dead!" What the hell has been going on? Cora vocalized that thought.

"What?!" She asked.

"Or captured. Or lost in dark space, or…" the man was calming down, that's good. And then his face broke out into a large grin, mirth and hope in his eyes and voice. "But you're here! You have no idea how much this means!" He explained. A new voice popped up, from the way we came. A distinctly Turian voice given the undertone-harmonics, whatever they have.

"I don't believe it…" I turned to face the man, he wore a silver colored armor with blue colony markings over his mouth and forehead. I approached him and reached out to shake his hand as he introduced himself. "I'm Tiran Kandros. I lead our militia on the Nexus."

"I'm Scott Ryder. This is Cora Harper and Liam Kosta, Pathfinder team," I introduced.

"I'm sorry for the confusion. Our sensors told us an ark had arrived, but Heleus is notorious for scrambling equipment. We thought you were just another malfunction," he explained.

"Well I've got a shipload of people that says we're here." I told him.

"Of course, it's just…" a tired, stressed look crossed his face. Figures it wouldn't be that easy.

"You're the first ark we've seen. After a year of waiting and no sign of the others, we shuttered this area and stopped looking." Shit, they gave up on ever getting help. Can't imagine feeling like that. I hope we're able to give them back some hope. A year is too long to go without any.

"Son of a bitch..." I muttered.

"I'll fill you in on the way to Ops center," Kandros turned, gesturing us to follow him. Time to figure out just what's been going on.

Vetra Nyx

Damn it, another spirits damned dreary depressing day on the nexus in the life of Vetra Nyx. Same shit, every day. Circuits overload somewhere, I get new ones. Power runs out in ops, we cut more power to more lights. Damn it, I'm sorry Sid, I'm sorry I dragged you into this with me, I thought we'd finally have a good, fresh start. But instead I dragged you into hell. I don't think I'll ever know how you keep up that positive outlook, but… without it? I think I would have given up, same as everyone else by now. I swear if someone tries again to dismantle the Tempest I will tear their throat out with my bare talons, I can't handle that today, those idiots don't know to look at it as a sign of hope. If we keep it, we keep hoping a Pathfinder shows up. If one does and we don't? The fuck are they gonna be able to do?

I walked into the office of Nakmor Kesh, Nexus superintendent, and a friend of mine. Odd for a Turian to be friends with a Krogan, but I'm not exactly an average Turian, and she's not an average Krogan.

"Hey Kesh, got those air filters you said you needed. Spender won't even know they're gone," I joked., placing the filters down on her desk. She snorted,
"Ha, I'd expect nothing less from you Vetra. Then again, it can't be that hard to sneak a few air filters by someone as brain dead as him," she growled. I chuckled, I always secretly enjoyed listening to her rant about that backstabbing prick. I tended to pick up a few new words. All of them insults. Her terminal pinged and her eyes widened for just a moment, then she sighed. I tilted my head questioningly, wondering just what kind of message she got.

"Everything alright Kesh?" I asked, expecting to need to go grab another piece of equipment. She sighed before she began.

"Yes, our sensors say they've detected an ark preparing to dock but… you know how much our sensors seem to enjoy toying with us."

At the mention of the ark my eyes widened, and then just as quickly the surge of hope deflated, realizing she was probably right. Why can't this place just stop mocking us? Kesh raised her head again, a thoughtful look in her eyes.

"Hmm… I don't recall our sensors ever telling us about an ark before, though. I'll ask Kandros to check in on it," she muttered. Kandros was a good man, his militia and APEX forces able to both protect us and scavenge for supplies. Arguably, he and Kesh were the only things standing between us all and death. Addison wasn't in charge of anything as we had no colonies to organize, and Tann was a big headed idiot. Kesh typed out a message to Tiran, receiving a reply that he'd check in on it.

I had a few more supplies I needed to grab before grabbing Sid for a lunch break, so I began to turn and walk out the door when Kesh lit up.

"Wait… how… this can't be…"

"What is it Kesh?"

"We're receiving power! And lots of it! Confirmed reports of power spikes from teams across the Nexus! Vetra, it's not fake an ark is HERE!" I could barely contain my shock and excitement, that means we got a Pathfinder! We have a chance!

"You're shitting me?!" I exclaimed. Kesh looked up at me, dead serious.

"Vetra, I promise you, I would NEVER joke about this. Go get the Tempest and her crew ready. I'll call Tann and Addison. GO!"

I raced out the door, my mandibles out into a Turian smile and I began… laughing. Something I hadn't done in a long time. I pulled up my Omni-tool and called Gil, Kallo, and Suvi.

"What's going on Vetra?" they asked.

"Guys, an ark is HERE! And that means a Pathfinder," their three faces lit up and broke into huge grins. "Get me a list of everything you need, send it to me, and get to the Tempest. I'll be there soon!" I turned off the call. Running and barely suppressing my laughter on the way to the tram. The moment I stepped inside, I keyed to go near my apartment to grab a few things to take with me. And then I called my Sister. Her face popping up as she accepted the call a few seconds later.

"What's going on Vetra?" they asked.

"Sorry sis, not today, but I know how to make it up to you…" I smiled. She was about to sigh but stopped when she noticed the look on my face, it was a look she hadn't seen in a long time.

Hope.

"An Ark is here! That means a Pathfinder. I'm going to get the Tempest ready now and join the
team!" I exclaimed. After a moment of shock, she broke out in a smile like mine and we laughed together.

"I can't believe it! Really?! You have to let me meet them!" she yelled out, as I chuckled.

"Sure thing sis, now I have a few calls I need to make, call you later?"

"Go ahead Vetra, and good luck!" I nodded my thanks and closed the comm link and dialed in to pull a few favors. *Finally, we can stop talking about shit and actually start doing it!*
A New Ryde(r)

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I had a lot of information to take in. Kandros had briefed us on those aliens we fought on Habitat 7, apparently that wasn’t first contact. They were called Kett and had been a pain in the ass for the Nexus since they first encountered them. Always where those weird alien ruins were and shooting anyone who got in range. They even attacked one of the Nexus’ outposts they tried to set up. After the meeting with the Nexus Leadership I took an hour talking to the man. Got everything we knew about the Kett and how they were classified, learned about the uprising and what happened with the Krogan, and what the militia was doing and got clearance to command the APEX squads, elite squads tasked with running the more dangerous ops.

But as for meeting with the Leadership itself? I couldn’t wait to be done. Addison was the head of colonial affairs, which at the time, meant she was the head of fuck-all. Understandably, she was skeptical of me. What I didn’t appreciate was how she didn’t even seem willing to give me a chance. Despite the rather significant lack of alternatives on the table.

Kesh on the other hand, I liked. She was both willing to give me a chance and clearly tired of the political bullshit, just glad that something had gone right and that now they had the people to go out and do something.

And then there was Tann, a Salarian. Jien Garson had died during the Scourge disaster, the Nexus’ name for that dark energy cloud fucking with Habitat 7. Apparently, the nexus ran into it and killed a large amount of leadership and others. Tann was the 8th person in line to be director. Something about him rubs me the wrong way. It seems like he wants to take credit for any victories I make so he can legitimize himself. Seems no one really listens to him as it is. And they shouldn’t, given that he hates the Krogan and that the exiles who challenged his authority, he despises and claims them to be a lost cause. The only thing he himself told me that I kept in mind was that the Quarian ark, carrying them, Volus, Elcor, Hanar, and Drell, was delayed from its departure and that it likely hadn’t even reached Andromeda yet anyways.

When I talked to Kandros I also took the chance to get to know the man. He knows his shit. Military history and military family helped him have the know how to set the militia up in the first place and keep it running. He tries to get shit done but with a lack of intel and man-power he understandably hasn’t been able to do much.

The important part was the plan. I was to head to Eos, a desert world plagued by radiation. Eos was supposed to be one of our golden worlds, but, and I’m sensing a pattern here, it didn’t pan out. The Nexus had tried to start two separate colonies there. Both of which didn’t last. My job would be to find a way to increase its viability. Combine the failed outposts, the lack of arks, and the uprisings, it’s no wonder everyone had seemed to give up, turning to cynicism. To be clear I wasn’t expecting everyone to bend the knee and put praise onto my name as some kind of savior. I was just hoping for people to not even wait and see if I succeeded or failed to begin treating me as though I had failed.

As I was getting the lay of the land for the Nexus, finding my way around, I agreed to do a few favors. The head scientists asking for various scans, one to find a missing team, a woman asking to help prove her husband’s innocence where all the murder evidence was circumstantial, though I didn’t let myself be convinced by either side, and a few other odds and ends that needed my help. Before I could leave, I needed to head for SAM node, the implant was giving me headaches and
SAM had both a fix and matters to discuss.

I walked in and interfaced with the terminal, allowing SAM to adjust his connection so that headache wouldn’t come back. But now it was time for business.

“You should know certain facts before you leave on your expedition. It seemed best we speak alone,” SAM revealed the purpose of our talk.

“SAM, if we’re going to work together, you can’t keep hiding things from me,” Wouldn’t feel too comfortable if the AI in my head was keeping secrets.

“Apolologies. I am simply following your father’s wishes,” the AI informed. That makes more sense.

“What was he keeping secret?” I asked.

“My true capabilities,” he began. Maybe the profiles he mentioned on habitat 7? “Alec overrode the implant’s safety protocols. It allows me unrestricted access to the Pathfinder’s physiology,” he explained. Wow. That explains his reaction times and throwing out biotics left and right.

“And that’s… me now,” I muttered.

“And only you. I can act as a force multiplier, dramatically enhancing your motor and neural skills when required. Alec called them ‘profiles.’ They provide unique tactical augmentation during combat. Your father preferred to keep this fact to himself,” he explained. Well, I can certainly understand why but… I get the feeling that things could go tits up if someone found out on their own.

“Keeping things like this secret just makes everyone suspicious. Like you’re up to something,” I told SAM.”

“Alec didn’t think others would understand. He viewed it as a symbiotic relationship benefiting us both,” SAM remarked.

“Oh? And what do you get out of this SAM?” I asked.

“Though I’m artificial in design, I am fully sentient. Far beyond what even the initiative understands,” he hinted.

“Well we know you’re an AI, but, what makes you different SAM?” I asked again.

“I am a new form of AI, drawing directly from the human experience. Your implant is my window into the world,” he finally elaborated.

“Well… That’s… impressive. It’s fine but… it won’t hurt, will it?” I actually approved of him experiencing the world, I just didn’t want it to hurt is all.

“The only pain is that which life provides. As I’ve discovered, this can be a lesson in itself,” he sounded quite philosophical. Alright, I gotta say, I’m impressed with what dad accomplished here. Learning from a painful experience? That’s quite organic if you ask me.

“Still one I’d rather avoid SAM. Where to from here?” I got back on track.

“I find myself in an unusual position. Though I had access to your father’s experiences, there is a gap in my understanding,” he began.
“What do you mean?”

“He placed a block on portions of my memory array,” he revealed. What was he hiding?

“Why?”

“Perhaps so when you asked me what his plan was, I wouldn’t know,” he theorized. I sighed at SAM’s hypothesis, one that was likely spot on.

“And Dad strikes again,” I muttered to myself.

“But not without recourse: the further you explore as a Pathfinder, the more blocks will be removed,” he explained. So that means I’ll learn things when I’m ready? Ok then… “Perhaps you should begin in your father’s quarters,” SAM suggested. “In the meantime, unless you have more questions, your new ship awaits,” he suggested. Oooh, I like the sound of that. But first I took some time to discuss with SAM the intricacies of our… symbiosis. In his words, the experiences he gets through my implant shape is evolution as a person, and also boosts my capabilities. He also informed me that while each pathfinder had a SAM, this one was the only one with the ability to modify physiology.

I walked to my father’s quarters, I saw his collection of weapons, including the pistol he used during the first contact war. I saw the coffee machine mom gave him while he was making SAM. And I also saw something unusual above his bed. It was the model of a ship. But not just any ship. It bore heavy similarities to the SSV Normandy, the ship used by Commander Shepard. But… this ship was different. The name of the model read that it was the Normandy SR-2. It was larger than the original. I knew the original was destroyed and the Commander killed but… I heard the rumors just before we left. That he had returned, with a new ship. Could they have been true? I grabbed the model, might as well put it on my ship.

I walked up to my father’s terminal when I got another headache. I thought SAM just fixed those! Speaking of SAM, he informed me that one of Dad’s memories was unlocked and to come to SAM node. Apparently, the memory blocks would be removed under accomplishments I’d make as pathfinder. The most surprising bit, was that I would actually see his memories, look through his eyes.

I told SAM to play the memory. From when Dad was posted as the military attaché to the citadel.

I saw through my father’s eyes, he was seated in a room, his office. With him was the human ambassador for the time, Ambassador Goyle. She was standing and holding a data pad. Looking straight at me… er… I mean Dad.

“Alec, your recommendations will never fly. Artificial intelligence?” She asked, sitting down across from dad.

“It’s our best option,” dad proclaimed. Felt weird to hear dad’s voice again, knowing he was gone.

“If the council gets wind of this it’ll set humanity’s standing back decades. You’re over-reaching,” she pointed out.

“Ambassador Goyle I am the military attaché on the Citadel. My mandate is clear: Find an edge for Earth,” he reminded her.

“And AI is your answer?” she asked incredulously.

We need to catch up,” my father stressed. “The Asari, the Salarians-they’re centuries ahead of us!”
Goyle paused, thinking it through, clearly not liking it but understanding the logic. Her advisor spoke in her place. My father’s memories identifying the man as Donnel Udina, he would later become the Human ambassador.

“But it’s illegal!” He stressed.

“Their rules, not ours. Why deny Earth an advantage?” Father replied.

“Define this advantage,” Goyle asked.

“It will set us free. We’re prisoners of our own five senses. There’s a reality greater than ours that we can’t perceive—but an AI can.” I think this is when he started to lose Goyle.

“How?” The advisor, Udina asked.

“By augmenting our own abilities, and adding a few new ones,” Dad explained.

“Well, none of that stopped those Geth from revolting” Udina brought up. I saw as my dad pointed his hand forward.

“Because they were separate from their creators!” Stressing the word separate, “But AIs and humans interfaced directly, experiencing the world together, benefits both. There’s no creator to revolt against.” Dad explained. Goyle glanced at her advisor, who shook his head no, and came to a decision.

“I’m sorry Alec. We can’t take the risk. I appreciate your work, but your request will be denied,” her apology sounding sincere from her tone.

She stood up and with her advisor left the room. Dad sighed in frustration.

And then I heard her voice again. Mom’s.

“Alec?” She called out from a vid screen to dad’s left. And then I saw her again too. Tan skin, brown hair, parting over to her left side.

“Ellen. What did the doctor say?” Dad asked. It’s her diagnosis… I remembered.

“He told me to appreciate the time I have left. There’s no cure, Alec. It’s terminal,” she revealed. It hurt to hear that again.

“Not on my watch,” dad’s voice filled with determination. The memory faded. I was back in SAM node.

“Wow, hearing Mom again… I never knew that’s how Dad found out,” I thought out loud.

“Alec was a stubborn man,” SAM recalled. Ha, too true SAM.

“I would hope so. Mom’s life was worth fighting for,” I pointed out.

“It would seem his obstinace extended to me as well,” SAM realized.

“Nobody wanted to listen. The idea of you scared people too much,” I explained. “After this Dad moved us back to Earth to care for Mom. Wonder why he wanted me to see this?”

“Perhaps it was the beginning?” SAM suggested.
“Of you?”

“Unknown, but private audio logs are available in your father’s quarters,” SAM told me. I left SAM node and walked back into his room, sitting down in his chair. I had two sets of logs available, and three still encrypted. Likely unlocked with more memories. The general logs weren’t much, but a message just before we left… part of that message stuck with me.

“I wasn’t the husband or father I should’ve been. Here’s hoping 600 years can change a man,” he sounded tired, regretful. He didn’t give himself enough credit. He tried at least. Another log was before Habitat 7, he was worried about Sarah, despite Lexi’s assurances. Just like I was. Again, he mentioned how he wished he did things differently. “It’s moments like this when you wish you’d told your children you loved them more often. Or ever.” That struck me. I always knew he did but… now that I think about it, I don’t know if I ever remember hearing him say that. The log ended mentioning we’d learn things. Things he hoped we’d understand. The last log in general messages was a collection of messages from an Asari Archaeologist studying the Protheans. Dr. Liara T’Soni. I saved the logs on my omni-tool to listen to later, with those ancient ruins out there, maybe she could provide insight into how to approach them.

I looked at the label for the first of the encrypted logs, now decrypted. Ellen’s disease. This wouldn’t be easy to hear. I heard my father’s voice again,

“Amazing how life can change in an instant. Suddenly my career doesn’t matter. This incredible woman I’ve been married to all these years… she’s facing the end. All I think about are the times I wasn’t there for her. Well, that’s going to change—it occurs to me that SAM might be more than I ever imagined,” he hinted. I wasn’t sure what dad meant, but… these profiles… could it be that he tried using SAM’s ability to influence someone’s physiology to try and cure Mom? Perhaps those logs would reveal the truth one day. I sighed, once again mourning the loss of my parents and worrying about Sarah. I decided I’d check on her before I got to my ship.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Unsurprisingly, her condition was unchanged. She was out of her pod, which helped me feel better. Dr. Caryle assured me he’d be keeping an eye on her but everything was fine.

Now I was in the tram heading to the docking bay, Cora was already in the tram waiting for me when I got on. I noticed a crowd on the railing overlooking the landing pad that I assumed I would soon see my new ship on. They really cleaned up the bay since we first got here. Most of the crates were gone and the whole area was lit up like it was day back home. Cora and I walked up to join the crowd, leaning against the railing. When we were halfway there I saw a sleek arrow like shape in the sky, the rumble of the engines easy to hear. It made a U-turn towards the pad, slowing down and descending, landing gear extending from below the thrusters and the front, where I would assume the bridge was, and a ramp extending from the back, where I would assume the cargo bay and drive core were located.

I could barely keep the grin off my face.

“They call her… The Tempest.” Cora paused for dramatic effect.

I certainly liked its design, and the paint job. Most of the underbelly was black, the shiny glass like material at the tip a reddish orange shade with a white square separating that with the black. The underside of the wings were a solid white. On the top of the ship, it was outlined in black with a red line running in the middle of the outline. In the middle of the top were two black lines, with thicker white lines to their sides and the middle. Needless to say, I was pleased. The color scheme
reminiscent of the... well if my new model hints at anything, original SSV Normandy’s color scheme. I’ve read what wasn’t classified about that ship. It might have been a favorite.

The moment the ship set down I saw people loading crates on. I hoped at least one would have some armor a bit better than my last set. I’d need it for these Kett.

“She is a beauty!” I exclaimed. I looked at Cora, gesturing for her to follow, “Come on! Let’s go see our new ship!” We made our way out to the landing pad just as a Turian woman had stepped down the ramp, seeming to order the workers around. She was wearing a small holographic visor across both eyes and wearing a white, blue, brownish color armor. Without a doubt modified. Her colony markings were purple in color, two lines on each side starting at her mandibles and crossing out diagonally over her eyes and joining together at the center of her forehead. I got the feeling we should meet her, and I walked forward.

Vetra Nyx

“Let’s pick it up a bit people! We’re fourteen months late!” I yelled out and picked up the crate to help the workers. I wanted to get the ship ready before the Pathfinder arrived. Kesh had already sent me his file, knowing I wanted on the team. Scott Ryder, human male. His Father, Alec, was the Pathfinder but died on Habitat 7. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was still in mourning. But at least he didn’t seem to be wasting time. The part that made me nervous was that his father fought during the first contact war. Personally, I didn’t care if he did, I had no one who fought in it that I knew of and it was stupid to put blame on anyone in all honesty. I just hoped he wouldn’t have any hard feelings.

I glanced behind me and saw him walking up with a human woman behind him. I knew it was the Pathfinder as Kesh made sure to include a picture in the file. Brown hair, light blue eyes, a stubble on his cheeks, chin, and upper lip in the outline of a beard he kept at least partially shaved. I always wondered if that hair on their face ever bothered them at all. Did it itch? As for the rest of him he was well built. Fit. No rippling muscles yet certainly not scrawny. He was wearing a standard initiative shirt. White with blue on the sides and the logo on the right of his chest and white pants. I set the crate down in the cargo hold and turned back to walk down the ramp.

“So, you’re the one who’s making everything happen,” I began to introduce myself. “Vetra. Vetra Nyx. Initiative wrangler, provisioner, gunner, and everything in between,” I said proudly. He reached out his hand and smiled,

“Scott, Scott Ryder. Human, person, and… oh, right, Pathfinder,” he joked. I shook his hand, glad to see a friendly joke and not hostility.

“Are we ready? The sooner we get out of here, the better,” I suggested. I really did not want any of Addison’s goons holding us up.

“You’re coming with us?” He asked. I hope that’s not an objection...

“Yes. Otherwise, there’s no way they’re letting this ship off the station,” I nodded. He paused for a moment, likely wondering what I meant. He raised his head, looking at me with an eager smile on his face.

“Yeah, let’s go see the rest of Heleus,” he sounded eager too. *Glad he wants to get shit done, you and I are gonna get along great Ryder.* I turned and began walking up the ramp, glancing his way as I began. And then came one of the goons.
“Hold it! Hold it! You’re not going anywhere!” said goon called out. *We haven’t gone anywhere for a year dammit, just let us go!* I sighed, stopping in my tracks, Ryder and the woman doing the same, both looking confused,

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath.

“Whatever happened, it wasn’t me-I just got here,” Ryder exclaimed. *Heh, jackass.* I repressed a chuckle to myself as the newest pain in my ass stepped forward.

“Director Addison wants to see a complete report of the Tempest’s supplies, munitions, and crew,” he ordered. Like hell am I wasting that kind of time… and letting them find my hidden goodies. Ryder spoke up, clearly annoyed.

“Director Tann overruled Addison…” he began. Glad he wasn’t enjoying the bureaucratic bullshit either. This guy wasn’t giving up.

“The ship’s loaded out with equipment for outpost discovery-squarely under Director Addison’s purview.” Of all the things to follow us to Andromeda why did Bureaucracy have to be one of them? We have a helluva lot of bigger concerns Addison! I swear that woman is part Turian with the pole up her ass. I held a hand in front of Ryder as I began to walk down and deal with this problem.

“Seen you around. Ben, right?” I gestured for him to follow me and placed a hand on his shoulder, pulling him along with me as I began to make him an offer. “Came here with a family, didn’t you? Son still in cryo? I could pull some strings… get him to the front of the line…” No way would he turn this down. His eyes grew wide at the prospect of seeing his son again. I really hated that the Initiative was keeping families apart for so long. I understood why, but I also know exactly how I’d feel if Sid was still on ice.

“Really?” he asked, a stunned look on his face.


“They told me he wasn’t essential. But I miss him,” he looked down. I patted him on the shoulder,

“I know. I got family too, Ben,” once again my mind drifted to Sid. He raised his data pad and pressed a few keys,

“It’s done,” he sighed. Good man ben. “Addison is going to kill me,” believe me Ben, it’s worth it. He began to walk away as I turned to face Ryder again.

“Thank goodness. For a sec there I thought I was going to have to deal with Addison again,” Scott joked. Glad to see he wasn’t pleased with leadership either. I knew he would get influence, if this worked out, and it needed to be an opinion that wasn’t from current leadership. I let out a small chuckle as I began walking back to the ramp,

“And no one wants that,” he smirked at my response. “All things considered, it was an easy ask.” I walked past them but turned, walking backwards, “And right now, you need people tearing down obstacles, not putting up more.” I explained. Again, Ryder seemed pleased with that. I heard the woman whisper to Ryder, and I couldn’t help but laugh at what I heard,

“Finally, someone who cares about doing stuff, and not just talking about it!”
I was impressed with the way Nyx handled that little roadblock. She must know the right people and have the right kind of pull. I can see value in that. She could likely use some of those favors to keep us better equipped. Heh, and anyone who can help me stay away from Addison gets points in my book. Cora and I followed her onto the Tempest. Before we set off I’ll probably ask if she can nab a few choice weapons or armor. No doubt I’m going to need it.

We entered the cargo bay first, seeing a large room with catwalks on the sides, plenty of space for cargo, maybe a land vehicle of some kind if that maintenance lift is any sign. I could see the drive core through a window in the back. Vetra began giving details of the ship as the lift to the catwalks descended… with Lexi T’Perro on her way down. Guess I’d already know the ship’s doctor.

“Everything’s state of the art. Labs, sensors, exploration gear… Plus her crew, of course. The best in their field,” Vetra explained. At that moment, the lift had fully descended and we traded places with Lexi,

“Glad to see you’re doing so well, Scott,” she greeted. Cora must have gone to investigate something else on board as the lift raised with only Vetra and I on board. And just like that the quick ride was over. Vetra continued:

“The engine cores based on the ark’s ODSY drive,” before she could continue, a man, the engineer I’d assume, tan skin, brown hair slicked up, red jumpsuit with a white kind of over-all thing and black gloves, commented on the core.

“But runs a hell of a lot quieter,” the man remarked.

“That’s Gil Brodie. Engineer, mechanic, all-round wrench jockey,” so I guessed right, don’t think I’ll win a prize though. We continued walking through the catwalks into another room, a holo-table with a hologram of the nexus in the center. The room had two ramps on either side leading to another floor above where we came in, and outwards were two doors to adjacent rooms and a glass walkway to where I assume the bridge was located.

“We call this the research room. There’s space for upgrading equipment, gathering intel…” she let me fill in the blanks.

“Router engaged. Securing connection to Tempest,” SAM’s voice filled the room’s speakers. I suppose that means he’s settled. Now I noticed a woman walk down in a white and red scientists outfit. Her skin was of a lighter kind of tan than Gil’s, and her hair was short, orange, and a bit of a mess. Can’t say I care about that last part though, I don’t exactly do anything with my own hair myself. The woman spoke up, not quite sure where her accent was from, but it wasn’t an American one. Or an English one like SAM or Liam. Couldn’t pin Gil’s either matter of fact.

“Welcome aboard, SAM. And Ryder, of course!” I chuckled, nodded back but not before telling her to just call me Scott.

“All run by Suvi Anwar, our science officer,” Vetra continued the room’s explanation. We walked up the ramp to the third level, a large round table in the center with seating on the outline of the room.

“Your quarters are below. Plenty of space up here to get everyone together,” she continued, as we walked up to the railing overlooking the research room and out a window into the light shining in from the Nexus. “She’s all yours. She’s light, stealthy, and the fastest ship in her class.” I think I’m going to like this ship. Vetra sounded quite enthusiastic with her explanation. I could feel the same
kind of enthusiasm building up in me too. I couldn’t wait to get started on what was sure to be quite the adventure. I let out a breath as I took it all in, staring out the window with an ever-growing grin on my face:

“It’s really gonna be something, ain’t it?” I turned to her, still holding that grin. Vetra was still looking out the window when she responded.

“I haven’t even shown you the best part…” I like the sound of that. “When you’re ready to fly, head over to the bridge. Our pilot should have everything good to go,” she began to turn away, likely to take care of some last-minute business.

“OH! Hold on a sec Vetra!” I called back, turning around to face her. She raised her… brow plate… I guess… inquisitively, “Any chance you could get a Valkyrie for me before we head out? And maybe some new armor? On habi-” she cut me off with a laugh,

“Ha, come on Ryder, you don’t take me for an amateur, do you? I do my homework. I read your file and the reports from Habitat 7, I knew your favorite was a Valkyrie, so not only did I secure you that, but I might have thrown in a few mods as well… As for the armor, you’ve got two choices. I secured you some stronger Initiative Spear point armor, but… if you want someone came by with another option if you want,” Her voice lowered for that last part, why? I wondered. She almost turned away again when it seems this time she remembered something.

“Oh, and by the way, Professor Herik brought something onto the ship for you, thought you would enjoy it and it could apparently help him with some research. Careful though, little bastard might have gotten loose already,” she chuckled. Gotten loose? The hell did that Salarian give me? Eh, I suppose I’ll find out later. Should probably take the tour first. I let out another breath, and chuckled to myself.

I guess we’re just getting started.
Introductions

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I decided I’d begin my tour in the armory, just to see what other goodies Vetra had brought along. I loved the Valkyrie, and ARs as a whole, but Dad ensured that Sarah and I both were proficient with all weapon types. I was not displeased with the collection. The first piece that caught my eye was a shotgun. An N7 grade shotgun. The Piranha. When we left these babies were a pure proof of concept prototype, still not quite sure what the initiative did to get their hands on them. Seems this shotgun was capable of full auto. I decided I’d try it out on Eos.

The gun I saw next was quite a surprise. A Widow. There was a note attached, from Vetra.

“Scott, if you’re reading this than this little beauty must have caught your eye. Don’t worry, it’s been modified so that unlike the original, it won’t blow your arm off when you fire. Also, if you like this, know that out there is something even better. I wasn’t able to secure one, as they are damn rare, but it’s called the Black Widow. Where the Widow only holds one shot, the Black Widow holds three. Even if you don’t want it, if you see one, TAKE IT! You would not believe the amount of favors or credits I could secure from just ONE. -Vetra” Oh dear lord I think I’m getting a gun boner. Just from the sound of that beautiful weapon. I chuckled at those thoughts and looked for a pistol. Normally the weight of those weapons would make it harder to use my biotics, but SAM assured me he’d be able to compensate by boosting just the right parts.

It came down to a choice between an ol’ reliable, and something unfamiliar to me, but interesting. The tried and true Carnifex, a powerful pistol, or a Scorpion. Salarian developed. It fired what was essentially a small sticky grenade that detonated shortly after impact. Though tempting to stick to what was familiar, the whole act of coming here was embracing the unfamiliar. So, I took the Scorpion.

I stepped out of the armory back into the cargo bay, seeing Vetra running a few final checks on her omni-tool at a desk. I stopped to thank her for the absolutely beautiful selection and then proceeded to walk along the lower deck. I went around the loading ramp doors to two smaller ones that led to the rest of the ship. There was a small hallway. Above me was the glass walkway to the bridge, to the right was the med-bay, and the left crew quarters. Knowing Lexi likely didn’t wish to be disturbed as she made final checks, I looked at the crew quarters.

To the left was a small relaxing area with a few chairs and small tables with a bookshelf. In front of me was a wall of four bunks. No doubt designed for rotations. A terminal was in the wall between two sets that looked like a message board. Leaving notes for others who bunk there. Seems Liam was moving a couch. Yeah, that’s all you. Wait, what the hell? One bunk had two plushies. A kind of angry looking… plant? And a… zombie scientist? The hell? That must be Liam. To the right of the bunks was a coffee machine, and on the other side of the room from that a small alcove of two chairs and terminals. Next to the crew quarters were the bathrooms.

The bathrooms contained a sink, a few lockers, only one toilet, and a small shower area with two showerheads. Luckily it had a sliding door, no doubt we have rotations for those so none of the men walks in on the women or vice versa on accident. Across the hall from the bathrooms was the mess. A small kitchen with all the appliances and a small dining area.

Ah but at the far end of where I began in this hallway? My quarters, the door flanked by two ladders up to the next floor. Guess that means no chance of an incredibly slow elevator. I opened the doors and took in the view. The entirety of the far wall was completely see through, allowing
me a 180-degree view of the outside. My bed was to the left, a double bed, so that means I’d have plenty of room. On the wall left of the entrance was a wardrobe, and to the right, a workspace. At the far center of the room was a simple viewing area, to just look out at whatever view I had. To the right of that was a small sofa with a coffee table, a private dining area, or just to sit and relax.

I had to do a double take when I noticed the couch had an occupant. A monkey like figure, paws, a tail, and large feet all covered by a purple fur with a black lined and dotted pattern. The eyes were large and bug-like, the ears like tubes, and the mouth like a straw. That must have been Herik’s gift. It was a Pyjak, a monkey like rodent from Tuchanka, the Krogan home world. It looked at me, chittering. I walked over slowly, and pet it, it seemed to enjoy the touch. I chuckled at my new pet, guess I’d need to come up with a name, and continued looking around the room.

The workspace was a large desk with both a private terminal and a hologram of SAM, likely where he connected to the Tempest. Behind the desk, left and right sides, were walls for a display. Like the model ship I found earlier. I gave the Normandy a nice spot on the left. Perhaps I’d dedicate the left wall for anything from the Milky Way and the Right for anything we got in Andromeda. To the right of the desk was a small bookshelf and vidscreen.

Before I left for the bridge I was curious as to just what was in my wardrobe. I didn’t exactly want to wear the standard initiative shirt the whole time. I saw a leather jacket I could place over an initiative shirt like what I have now, but the shirt was black, the trim of the jacket was shite, and the rest was black. Next to that was a nice black Hoodie with the initiative logo on the chest and the pathfinder logo on the left shoulder and a blue trim over the center pocket. What I saw next to that however, almost was the death of me. A Blasto Tank Top. The image of that Hanar holding a Carnifex with a crappy explosion effect behind him. I wasn’t sure whether to torch it, or to keep it for laughs. I thought I’d throw on the hoodie. Always liked those.

I left my room, and climbed the ladder up to the bridge and opened the door. To my right was another door, to the escape pod, and to my left, the way to an airlock. In case something or someone ever needs to be tossed out of one. Before one would reach the airlock however was a room to gear up in case we needed to use that path instead of the cargo ramp. But front and center was the bridge. Another 180-degree viewport like down in my cabin, front and center being a glass spot, likely where I’d give Nav orders and what not. To the right and left were seats with full pilot and scanning consoles. The right console was occupied by a Salarian with a brighter orange skin tone. I stood in the middle, looking out, as I once again reminded myself that this... This is MY ship... still didn’t feel real.

Followed by a flash of sadness. I remembered that this should have been Dad’s ship. He should have been leading people for decades, inspiring them. Me? What have I done? All I ever did was guard a Mass Effect relay. I haven’t proven myself. I’m no hero. I’m just me. Just Scott. And I don’t know if that is going to be enough. But these people need a Pathfinder. And I’m going to damn well try to be exactly what they need. The Salarian looked back and noticed me standing in the room.

“Ah, time for introductions!” He stood up with a smile, walking over to me. “You must be Ryder,” he held out his hand, I grasped it and shook to return the greetings. “Kallo Jath. A pleasure to be here-and to meet you, of course.”

“Good to meet you too Kallo, and its just Scott, by the way,” still didn’t feel right to be called Ryder or Pathfinder. That was dad.

“Of course. Anyways, I’ll be piloting the Tempest at your word. Quite the ship! But it’ll take a Pathfinder’s guidance to see us through Heleus,” he explained. Ever since I got onboard the weight
of my new standing had been starting to sink in more and more. Wasn’t sure I was ready.

“I’m still new to this. Being a Pathfinder, running a ship…”

“You’ll be fiine. As for the ship, I can help: I knew the Tempest when she was a blueprint,” I wasn’t quite sure what he meant so I simply tilted my head. “I was test pilot for the Tempest’s early prototypes. I admit, I’m itching to see how she performs out here,” he answered. Would certainly be handy to have someone who knew the ship like the back of their hand. We walked out onto the small glass walkway in the center and a console raised up from the floor. I wasn’t exactly sure how to use it.

“So how do I…?” I glanced behind me and noticed the crew had walked into the bridge as Kallo explained.

“The console syncs to your implant. Just swipe, touch a destination here, and the nav system calculates everything. Very efficient!” He explained.

“It was optimized for a Pathfinder,” I heard Cora speak up from behind me. She sounded sad. Hopefully just because it would have been Dad. I turned to face the crew, noticing Suvi had taken a seat at the left console.

“Everything’s secure, if you’re ready…” Vetra said with a hint of excitement sneaking through.

“Is anyone ready for something this big?” Liam asked, sounding unsure. Guess it was my turn to be Mr. Inspirational. I sure hope I picked up on a few things from dad.

“We signed on for the big stuff when we came to Andromeda,” I reminded Liam. Kallo seemed to sense a speech and returned to his console, politely passing through the crowd.

“Command access is transferring successfully,” Cora informed me. Seems it was the final status checks.

“Science and monitoring stations look fine. Lexi is reporting in…” Suvi reported.

“Helm is green. Gil reports the drive core is online,” Kallo confirmed.

“This is it Ryder,” Damn it Cora, it’s just Scott! “The Tempest is yours. Unless you’ve got something to say, for the log?” She not so subtly hinted. Did seem like a good idea. I felt I should say something that would both hide my own doubts, help dispel the doubts of the others, and generally inspire them all in one fell swoop. I turned to look back outwards, speaking loudly and clearly to still be heard,

“We were all expecting a golden world. Guess life had other plans. Now there’s just a long road ahead. But hold on to that dream. It might just see us through. And hey, things may look bad sure,” I turned to face the crew, they seemed to be responding well at least. “But we’ve already beaten the odds-and we’ll beat them again. You know it, I know it,” except I don’t, “So let’s show them what we’ve got.”

I noticed that my crew stood a little taller at that, determined looks on their faces. It was even feeling a bit contagious. Kallo command flight control, and off we went, the sunlit docking and habitation deck of the nexus leaving us as we left through an airlock into space. The thrusters charged for FTL, and we were off to Eos. Kallo said we should arrive in around two hours. He didn’t want to push the Tempest as this was her first real flight in a long time and just wanted to make absolutely sure everything was running smoothly.
Vetra Nyx

So far, I like what I’ve seen of Ryder. Seems confident, but not cocky, and not uptight about protocol and other bullshit. Friendly guy, and he seems passionate if that speech on the bridge is anything to go by. I was still concerned if he was unsure of me being on the ship, after all I basically forced myself onto it. I sent him a quick message asking to talk with me in the armory, which I had claimed, when he had a moment. My omni-tool pinged with a message, a call from Sid. I figured that Scott would have had a few things to look into, so I accepted.

“Something wrong Sid?” I asked.

“Hi Vetra, now that you’re off on the Tempest, Kesh has been trying to get me a job,” Sid began. I was about to chastise her for being lazy, something so unlike her but she continued quickly stressing the next part “Which I’m NOT complaining about. What I don’t like is that right now it seems like I might be helping out with… clean-up…”


“Not quite. I was just hoping you might be able to give me something both cleaner and more important,” she asked.

“Oh, but Sid,” I teased. “Janitorial is important! Keeping everything nice and clean so others don’t get sick or dirty!” The sarcasm in my voice so thick you could feel it. Sid groaned and I laughed. I decided it was time to let her off the hook. “I’ll talk to someone. Maybe they could use you on comms.”

“So, you get to be with the Pathfinder, and I have to watch a radio?” Really Sid? Don’t try to push your luck. I learned that the hard way. Luckily your sister loves you and you won’t have to.

“The radio, or help Kesh with clean up,” I gave her my ultimatum. She groaned, I didn’t try to suppress the chuckle. At that moment, Ryder walked in. Guess he didn’t have much to do anyway. I glanced at him, “Oh, hey Ryder,” then looked back at my terminal to Sid. I heard her gasp, “The Pathfinder’s there? Let me say hi!” She asked. Seems Ryder already had a fanbase. Might as well humor her. Ryder casually leaned against a weapons locker.

“Fine, but don’t embarrass me,” I turned to face him. “Ryder, this is Sid, my sister. Sid, Ryder,” he chuckled, and had a friendly grin as he responded,

“Come on Vetra, I told you earlier, it’s just Scott. Same goes for you too Sid, nice to meet you. So, lemme guess, little sister?” He asked me, keeping that grin on his face. Sid responded first,

“Who you calling little?” She joked. Yep, you’re getting cut off. Besides, need to talk to him anyway.

“Look, kiddo, gotta go,” I told her. Seems she wasn’t done yet.

“Wait! Ryder-uh, sorry Scott, I just wanted to know if-” I ended the call before she could finish. She’ll try to chew me out for that later but she’ll get over it. I spun the chair around to look right at… Scott. Going to need to remember to call him by that. Unless I want to poke him with a stick that is… My voice became serious as I began to explain.

“I know it feels like I just jumped aboard your ship without explanation…” I began, he looked as if
he was a mix of confused, and amused by where this was going. Did he really not even give it a second thought? He let out a small laugh,

“Come on Vetra, you and the Nexus had been sitting on your asses for over a year as things kept deteriorating, I’d have done the exact same thing, if nothing else for a change of scenery,” it seemed like he was giving his full approval but that wasn’t why I was here and he deserves an explanation.

“That’s not why I came. Sure, I want to explore the galaxy, but I’m really here to work,” I stood up and began pacing in front of him, explaining why this ship needs me. “I know everyone on the crew, and everything they need and like. Even the actuators Gil prefers for the ship. Better, I know how to get my hands on them. With me around, your crew’s going to be at their best. You’ve already seen what weapons and mods I can procure, there’s more I can do given the time. We’ve been failing for months Ryder…” he gave me a look but not without a smirk, I knew what my mistake was, letting out a small huff of air as a sign of amusement. “Scott. Now that we have you, we have a chance out there,” I finished. More importantly that means Sid has a chance. And like hell am I gonna sit around and just hope that someone else is able to make things good enough for her, I need to make sure. Ryder smiled again, as he began his reply:

“Vetra you didn’t need to explain yourself, I appreciate you did but I thought it was quite obvious that you’d be an asset. So long as you can handle yourself in a fight…” I nodded, “then we’re all set. Your sister? I take it you’re out here for her?” I nodded again, “And why do you think I’m out here Vetra? You read the reports, you know my sister is comatose and our dad is dead,” he looked down, sad. I felt for him, I knew what it was like to lose a father. He looked back up, energy returning to his voice, “As for you, you got some laser focus…” he chuckled, leaning off the weapons locker. Interesting insight to the man I’ll be working for/with. It felt more natural to go on with the oncoming banter I sensed.

“Hm, Yeah? Was it too much? Some people get intimidated…” I joked. Scott took a few steps forward,

“We need that sort of drive. I just hope I can keep up,” he smirked, lifting his head to look at me. Even Turian women are taller than most humans. Scott included.

“You’ll keep up. And I promise I won’t tell if you don’t,” I tease. It was then that I noticed the conversation was just beginning to feel… weird. Not bad, just… different. So, I made an exit plan, “I should track down a lead for Gil’s actuators. Back channels, you know?” I sat back down, “Talk later?” He nodded and I turned back to my desk. Scott walked out of the room, his thoughts echoing her own.

Were we just… flirting? No… we couldn’t have been...

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

After the talk with Vetra, one I still was confused by my actions in, I enjoyed talking with her, it just felt… different… than most conversations do. Anyways, after that talk I decided I might as well check in on everyone else. Get to know the new faces as well. I walked into the room Liam had claimed, opposite side of the drive core as Vetra, just as Liam was moving his couch. And I had gotten stuck helping him. We talked over the beer he offered for his story during habitat 7. He had gotten several suspensions, but must have still done well as the solution was to essentially promote him out of the force. That landed him in a program called HUSTL, a multi-species crisis response force. We talked about the old days, if I still missed them, which I did. Talked about why we left. Me about wanting to explore the Milky Way but hinting at why we couldn’t, which Liam
seemed to appreciate. Liam was apparently just an average guy back home. Good family, friends, he just bought the pitch, said goodbye, and here he was, still believing in the dream.

I made my way up via the cargo lift to engineering, get to know Gil. I opened the doors, stepping in. He stepped away from the console and greeted me,

“Pathfinder making the rounds!” he remarked jokingly. I smiled, reaching my hand out for a shake, which he accepted.

“Just Scott Gil,” I chuckled.

“Slumming it, huh? Want to see how the riffraff are making out?” Smartass huh? I like smartass.

“Hey, it’s a dirty job… Are you the riffraff spokesman?” I asked. Gil smirked, glad to see I was playing along,

“King actually. Might want to bow. Otherwise, things might start falling off the Tempest at the most inopportune times,” he joked. No way am I giving him that kind of ammo.

“I’ll take my chances,” I joked. “Just want to see how things are going with the ship.” He went to a more business mode. I use that term loosely however…

“I can coax more out of this baby than some might think, but we shouldn’t go too far or push too hard between Nexus stops. For now,” he explained. “It just feels good to stretch our wings, you know? Locked in idle too long, you start to drift. People same as ship. Stuck on the Nexus, gotta say I was regretting joining the Initiative,” given the uprisings he was hardly the only one. Wonder what made him stay though…

“Seems like life back there was pretty bleak,” I remarked.

“Not gonna lie, it sucked,” he claimed. “I tend to live the way I work: kinda ‘feel it, do it.’ Not a lot of close ties, no real sense of purpose,” he explained. Been there done that Gil. He continued, “Figured maybe I’d find my calling in Andromeda. Then I got here and, oops, I just made a decision there’s no turning back from. I was going nuts on that station. You can’t know how jazzed I was when you showed up.”

“We’re exploring this cluster. Eventually the galaxy. If your purpose is here, we’ll find it,” I reassured. He seemed to appreciate that.

“Then the question will be, what will I do with it?” He chuckled. “In the meantime… You just keep pointing this ship wherever you want her to go, and I’ll make sure she can get there. Deal?”

“Deal,” I confirmed. We nodded and I left the room, heading to see Cora in the Biolab. I entered and saw her rummaging through a crate in the far side of the room.

“Nice place you’ve found here,” I remarked. Trying to start a conversation.

“Clean air. Plants. Helps me think,” she explained. She seemed agitated. I had an idea why, might as well bite the bullet, see if I’m right.

“Something on your mind?” I asked. She stood up, sighing.

“Maybe,” then she kicked the crate, using her biotics to boost her strength. A bit hard I might add.

“Woah, hold on there Cora, don’t need to risk accidentally putting too much power into those,” an
unhinged biotic could be dangerous to both themselves, their surroundings, and those around them. Not to say Cora is unhinged no, but even one flash of anger, has the potential to result in an overkill of biotics if not careful.

“Sorry Ryder,” again she won’t call me Scott, why? “I don’t normally lose it like that. A huntress should have better control,” she explained. *Ah damn it no, not this again, please…* I grimaced internally, staying polite on the outside. She continued, “But some things stick, though. Like losing the old man.” Believe me Cora, I know very well. You lost a friend, yes, I lost a father. And my sister is comatose. I knew it wouldn’t be a great idea to voice those thoughts:

“There’s a lot of loss going around. Dad,” I emphasized the word, “the golden worlds…” I reminded her.

“A friend and mentor who trained you to be a Pathfinder…” Cora continued my sentence. In a way that sounded quite passive aggressive, an oh so slight emphasis on Pathfinder. I almost countered, to say, ‘a father who gave his life so you could live, a sister stuck in a coma’ but she continued before I could. “I said I wouldn’t get in the way. I meant it. But… I prepped for years as your father’s second, then he chooses you. An untrained Pathfinder and all this mess to fix? The hell was he thinking?”

“He was thinking about saving the life of his son Cora. Not trying to spite you. Don’t take it personally. And besides, it’s not like I’m as untrained as you’re seeming to say. I’m a recon specialist, which should help, I’m proficient in all weapon categories, thanks to dad, my biotics are strong, I’m good with tech, I have SAM, and all the tips and tricks dad passed on over the years. Am I at the same level as him? Absolutely not, but I’m not some hopeless grunt either. I hope this isn’t going to be a problem Harper…” my voice a mix of annoyance and anger, hands crossed over my chest. Professional mode. My least favorite mode. *This is a great start to our friendship,* but *it’s her fault for seeming to take it personally and blame me at the same time, even if she isn’t saying it.*

“I don’t want a rival, Ryder. just answers.” She sighed again, regaining her composure. “It’s done. Best I can do now is be your second. Keep your father’s mission alive,” *is she REALLY implying that I wouldn’t? He was my fucking FATHER Cora!*

“I’m already doing that,” I told her and stormed out of the room. Introductions with the others will need to wait, I need some time alone. I headed for my cabin. I entered the room and flopped down onto the bed face first, letting out a deep sigh. What the hell was Cora’s deal? It was if she had some sort of plan ruined by it. It sounds farfetched sure, but… some of the shit she said was just uncalled for. I glanced at the clock, noticing we should still have about an hour or so till we arrive at Eos. It occurred to me I hadn’t showered since before going into cryo. No shower in over 600 years. I should probably fix that. I grabbed a change of clothes and entered the bathroom. I knew we had rotations but it also wasn’t shower time, so I entered the shower room, undressed, threw my clothes and towel on a hook, closed the door, and turned on the faucet. Hot as always.

I stood there for a small while, letting it run down my back, head against the wall in thought. I was thinking about Mom, thinking about Dad, worrying about Sarah. I remembered something I had said to Vetra, about how I was out here fighting for my sister just like she was. I remembered what Addison, Tann, and Cora had said, different words, but all saying the same things. Expecting me to fail. I thought… if I fail, what would happen to Sarah? If I fail when she wakes up she’ll be all alone. Worst case scenario she’ll be all alone and everyone here will be doomed to die a slow death by starvation. If I failed, I wouldn’t just be failing myself. I’d be failing Dad. I’d be failing Sarah. I’d even be failing mom. I can’t let that happen. I won’t. I refuse. I remembered my own doubts and what I said during my speech earlier. ‘Let’s show them what we can do!’ *Damn fucking
right we will!

I finished my shower and returned to my cabin, deciding to put my under suit on and reading the logs from that Dr. T'Soni, wasting time for those 30 minutes I had left, eager to put my new-found inspiration to use. The 30 minutes went by in a flash. Kallo informed me via the ship’s PA that we had entered the Pytheas system, where Eos was located. I set down the data pad I was reading and headed for the bridge when SAM gave us some news. He found a signal. And not just any signal, this signal was similar to that of the ruins on Habitat 7. Near the failed outposts no less. I think we had our landing zone.

“Kallo, take us in,” I ordered.
Rough Ryder

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Kallo began the descent and I ordered the ground team, Cora, Vetra, and Liam down to the cargo bay to gear up, as I began heading that way myself. Given that I was at the bridge I was the last to arrive. I opened my armor locker and I understood why Vetra hadn’t told me what the option besides the Spearpoint was. It was my dad’s armor. His N7 Pathfinder armor. The armor he wore when he died. I froze, staring at it, and then I saw a note attached.

“Scott,” it read, “Captain Dunn sent this over, asking to keep it quiet. Apparently, she found your father’s will. He left his armor to you, and just in case it wasn’t in good condition, he also left you his older armor. Dunn and I are willing to help modify it so it can be brought up to date if you wish to use that instead. And I brought the Spearpoint just in case you weren’t comfortable with either. I know this can’t be easy Scott. I’m sorry for your loss. - Vetra”

His N7 armor… that’s a lot to take in. It’s an honor that he left it for me but… I haven’t earned the N7. Dad knew that. Or, did he leave it because he thought I could? I remembered my thoughts in the shower. Cora, Addison, Tann, all not believing in me. Not believing in myself. But, if dad left this armor for me, if he made me Pathfinder, even if it was just to save my life, I guess he believed. And you know what? I think that might just be enough. If dad thought I could do it, if he thought I was worthy to wear N7 armor… then maybe I should.

I decided I would don his armor, not sure if I would take his older armor, but for now this will do. I decided I’d wear it to remind myself of who I was fighting for, my sister. Fighting for every single person who made the journey to Andromeda. To remind myself that I was fighting to prove dad right. And I’d wear the armor to remind myself, that no matter what, there was at least someone who thought that I could do it. I took his armor. Noticing Cora glare at me as I started strapping on the red and black armor. I kept the helmet off for now, Eos was breathable and I wasn’t exactly sure I wanted to wear it, wouldn’t do too much to protect me from a round anyway as it is.

Once that was set I walked over to my weapons locker, holstering the Piranha, Scorpion, and Widow I selected earlier, and inspecting the Valkyrie Vetra got for me. The rifle had a scope, an extended barrel for a bit of extra kick, a mod to boost the ammo per clip, and… is that… no, it can’t be…

“Hey Vetra? Is-Is that, what I think it is?” I called out. She looked over, holstering a Cyclone rifle she had been inspecting and walking over.

“Hmm? Lemme see… Ah, that it is Scott. A vintage heat sink. Had that in your file too,” she flared her mandibles into a smirk. Oh dear lord Vetra, I might cry.

“Vetra… This might just be one of the greatest gifts I have ever received…” I faked a sniffle, “No one told me it was Christmas morning! Damn and I didn’t get you anything!” I joked.

“Isn’t that the human holiday where some creepy fat guy breaks into your house leaving a bunch of gifts?” She asked, looking at me questioningly.

“Well… er… yes, close enough,” I chuckled.
“Hm, well, consider the debt paid when you pull this off Scott,” she remarked. When, she said. Not if. Says a lot. I checked over my weapons one more time, ensuring they were properly holstered and safeties engaged. Vetra mentioned that she can get her hands on more specialized mods next time we go to the Nexus but as she wasn’t sure what I wanted, only went with more basic ones. The thought occurred that it might be a good idea to know what my team was packing.

“Vetra, Liam, Cora, over here for a moment?” I requested. In a moment, each stood in front of me.

“Before we set out I just want to know what you guys are packing. Vetra, I saw your Cyclone, suppressing fire I assume, with a few extra tricks?” She nodded.

“Right, I’ve modified my Cyclone to be using disruptor rounds as well, help take out shields faster. On top of that you know how an energy drain can make someone’s equipment give out an EMP pulse if an overload or another energy drain is used right away? Those disruptor rounds can do the same thing, just give the word if you want something primed and it will be,” she explained.

“Excellent, should make dealing with more specialized Kett a lot easier, anything else?” I asked.

“I have concussive rounds, I can generate tech armor, and I have something a bit more unconventional. I can bypass my armor’s safeties and vent some of the Cyclones heat into my armor. Boosts damage, clip size, the works. Gets a bit heated in my armor sure, but Turians can deal with more than humans,” she finished.

“I’ll take your word for it, can’t say I feel totally great about you doing that but you know your limits. Just don’t use it too much, alright?” I requested.

“I only use it in higher risk scenarios anyway, won’t be a problem,” she confirmed. “Ah, and I also picked up a few other elemental mods. Liam, Cora, what would you prefer? Cryo or incendiary? Only brought one of each,” she asked them.

“Dibs on fire!” Liam called out, taking the mod and beginning to implement it on his Charger SMG.

“Well, guess I’m left with cryo then…” Cora muttered, taking the mod and beginning the process of modding her ammo. I couldn’t help but think it was fitting for her.

“Not one for me, Vetra? I’m starting to feel left out,” I joked. She chuckled,

“Sorry Scott, the heat sink is incompatible with an ammo mod. Not enough room in the gun for both. I could swap them out if-” I cut her off.

“No no! It’s fine just as it is. Do not take away my precious heat sink!” I joked… kinda… “Liam?” I asked. He looked up from his weapon, almost forgetting what we were talking about.

“Wha-Oh, right. Only one new trick Ryder. Got an Overload program on my Omni-tool. Everything else you saw on Habitat 7,” he explained. I nodded, turning to Cora.

“Still have my shotgun, you know I’m biotic, and with my Huntress training I can use just about any ability. Aside from that I can also boost the shields of anyone close to me for a short time,” she answered. I nodded understanding what each member of the team could do.

“SAM, how long till we reach the LZ?” I asked the AI in my head.

“Approximately five minutes, Pathfinder,” alright, you heard the man… er.. Bot… we land in five. Everyone set?” I asked.
“Hell yeah!” Vetra called out.

“Affirmative,” Cora stood at attention.

“Ready, Freddy,” Liam grinned. Vetra looked at him,

“Who the hell is Freddy?” she asked.

“It’s just some weird old human thing Vetra, don’t worry about it,” I told her. I chuckled at the thought that this would most certainly not be the last time any of we humans confused our non-human buddies on board. And vice versa, always thought that was the best and most fun way to learn another’s culture.

We had landed within the boundaries of some shields that kept radiation out from Promise, the first of the failed outposts. The place was a ghost town. We looked around, finding a body, half buried in the sand, that we flagged for recovery. We were led to re-activating the power relay so we could track the signal SAM found. There was a scavenger in the building with a switch, keeping the doors locked. Fortunately, he wasn’t being a complete pain in the ass since he told us we had to re-activate some generators outside anyway. He turned them off to hide from Kett patrols. So, we’d have a fight on our hands soon.

I climbed up to interface with the final generator, the other three waiting at the base. Only took a moment and we began heading back to the control building which was on top of a hill in the colony. And then came the dropship. The four of us took cover at the base of the hill, barriers and supply crates conveniently strewn across the area. I chuckled at what I saw, only two Kett Chosen, their basic foot soldier, jumped down to engage.

“Hey Cora!” I called out, “You charge left I charge right, stab in throat, on my mark, got it?” she confirmed. “3…” the Kett were moving to cover, “2…” The Kett took cover, “1…” they stood up to fire, “CHARGE!” Simultaneously, our masses became close to null and we launched ourselves forward at each Kett. Our omni-blades suddenly appearing in their throats before they even knew what was going on. As they dropped, Vetra and Liam came out of cover, holstering their weapons.

“Show offs,” Vetra joked.

“Damn I wish I could do that…” Liam muttered.

“Yeah, it is a lot of fun,” I teased. And then another shuttle appeared over our heads.

“Aw shit, Cora, shotgun. Vetra, concussive round to knock one on their ass. Liam, Havoc strike one the moment they drop!” I ordered, pulling out my own shotgun. Only to see another two Kett jump down. Highly anticlimactic, and they literally have the drop on us! They were blasted apart, green blood and guts spread over the ground as the shotguns tore through them.

“If it wasn’t for the fight on Habitat 7, I’d think that was the best they could do,” I remarked. “Those had to just be simple patrol teams, I’d bet good credits that they have several actually defensible outposts out here, stay on your guard, eyes on the skies for more dropships.” Everyone acknowledged and we returned to the scavenger. Hopefully take two would be better. We walked up the stairs and I opened the door, stepping in as the man began talking.

“You killed all those bastards? Sure, use the relay. Hell, take whatever ya like,” he exclaimed. The man had light skin with short brown hair. “Some advice though, if that signal you’re tracking is
past the perimeter, you’ll need a ride. Shuttles do not cooperate in these winds. You need wheels. They kept something just like that in storage,” he explained.

“Wow, first I get a fancy new ship, a crew, kickass weapons, and now a car! All in one day! This must be the universe making up for those 600 birthdays I missed!” I joked, drawing a laugh out of the scavenger and my team.

“Well then happy belated,” the man joked back. Now, I need to get back to the Nexus, do me a favor and don’t mention this to anyone yeah?” I nodded. “Thanks, guess crazy blue is gonna have to get her parts from somewhere else,” the last part was muttered under his breath. Wonder who crazy blue would be. Probably some Asari, but why would she be here? I had a funny feeling I’d get my answer soon enough so I put the thought aside, turning on the power relay as the outpost hummed to life once more with power.

“Any lock on the signal SAM?” I asked.

“Affirmative. The signal is coming from the large alien structure just beyond site 1. The structure appears identical to the one your father used to adjust the atmosphere on Habitat 7. And it should be noted, you cannot access the site without being subjected to radiation levels beyond my maximum recommendations. The ground vehicle in storage, should provide ample protection.” the AI’s calm synthetic voice answered.

“Then we have a destination,” I turned to the crew. “Come on, let’s go see what this vehicle is, and hope it has four seats.”

“You’re not going to make one of us walk if it doesn’t, are you Scott?” Vetra joked. I resisted the urge to glance at Cora, substituting it for a laugh.

“Well that just depends on how many nice things you get me,” I chuckled. “You shouldn’t worry though Vetra, with all these shiny new toys you got me, you might just have won permanent seating rights,” I smirked.

“Good to know,” she replied. Liam and Cora shared a glance, don’t know why but they did. We made our way over to the rather large container it was parked in, when Gil came on over the comms.

“Wait, it’s a Nomad, right?” Gil asked. “All terrain, jump jets, six-wheel drive… oh I am going to LOVE tinkering with this later!” He exclaimed.

“I might be drooling a bit,” Liam spoke up.

“Well, let’s open this thing up then, shall we?” I began to walk over to the control panel.


The front hatch opened up, from the top coming down to the bottom as a ramp, and the Nomad drove itself out coming to a stop just at the end of the ramp. It had six wheels total with large headlights on the front and top. Currently it was painted white with a black trim, and in between the first and second wheels was a door that opened upwards on either side to enter the Nomad. Inside, four seats exactly, two in the front, two in the back. I took the wheel, Liam and Cora in the back, Vetra in the passenger as it was a tighter fit in the back, easier to put the smaller humans in the back for now. It was a nice-looking vehicle, but I foresaw a paint job in its future.

Gil ran me through the vehicle. It ran smoothly, the vertical thrust was nice but not too extreme,
and the same was true for the rear boosters, which didn’t last long. Gil ensured me that with the right supplies he could make upgrades, including to its armor and shielding. I followed a path up a cliffside from the outpost, making way to the ancient structure. I had to switch to six-wheel drive to make the climb, slowed the vehicle down but increased traction. Perfectly placed was a bit of that ancient architecture sticking out of the ground, making a ramp. Gil began to encourage me to boost off of it but I was already dead-set on making the jump.

“YEAAAAHAHA!” I yelled out, Vetra and Liam both doing a mix of a laugh and cheer as well, as Cora just gripped her seat tighter. It wasn’t much of a jump, but it was a jump. “First thing on the upgrade list: the thrusters. Vertical and horizontal. I really want to get some badass air-time in this thing! Hey Ve-”

“Don’t even need to ask,” she cut me off, knowing my question. “Whatever Gil needs for those upgrades I will not hesitate to get, always been a bit of a thrill seeker,” she remarked.

“I for one would rather we keep the ground vehicle on the ground,” Cora grumbled.

“Well, unfortunately for you, I’m a bit of a… Rough Ryder. Teddy Roosevelt always was my favorite president,” I joked. Cora groaned at the pun as Liam laughed, and Vetra just looked confused but the two others stopped and looked at me with visible confusion after I mentioned Teddy.

“Who the hell is Teddy?” Vetra asked. "And, what did you groan, or, laugh, about?"

“Oh, guess the translator didn’t catch that. But my last name is said the same exact way as our word for Rider. As for Teddy, I’ll explain later. But Cora? Liam? How the hell can you not know who he is? Kickass American President who was shot before he gave a speech, then continued to GIVE his over an hour-long speech!? I’m disappointed in both of you,” I muttered.

“Well… I’m a Brit,” Liam explained.

“And I spent more time away from Earth than on it,” Cora remarked.

“Excuses excuses…” I teased. The structure was right in front of us surrounded by more shield masts, so there was minimal radiation within. I pulled up to the side, and almost stepped on another body. I sighed, marking it for recovery, and moved to the center of the structure. Not so surprisingly there was scaffolding set up on one of the structures with crates stacked along it.

In the center of the structure was a console. Before interacting with it, I scanned it. It detected a kind of wiring going under the floor, and going up the same structure that had the scaffolding. I got to the top of the structure and saw initiative tech scanning the surface. The surface glowed… blue. I pulled out my scanner, confirming this was where the wires led, and scanned a glyph I detected. I could have just climbed back down… but that would have been boring. Instead I jumped, activating my jump jet before I landed, softening the landing. Vetra flared her mandibles, a smirk, at me approvingly as I went to interact with the console. The others turned, watching for any hostiles as I raised my hand to the hologram floating above it as SAM gave me a sitrep.

“Building connection. I apologize for any discomfort. The system seems unstable,” SAM explained. Unstable doesn’t sound good.

“This what happened when my dad tried doing this?” I asked SAM. A bit nervously I might add.

“Your father interfaced directly with the atmosphere processor. That proved extremely hazardous. These structures could reveal its control center,” SAM paused. “System remains unstable.
Doubling our power input might accelerate the process,” SAM suggested.

“Well… here goes nothing,” I raised my hand over the console again and…

“WAIT!” A woman’s voice called out as a large mass collided with me, knocking me onto my back and pinning me to the ground. An Asari was straddling me, hands to the side of my head. Quite the suggestive position. Her face was marked with a thick black line going from one side of her face to the other crossing over her eyes. That was all I could see for the moment though. I stared at her, confused, as she gave a goofy looking grin at me.

“Hey! Stand up, nice and slow…” Vetra ordered the Asari, placing her Cyclone’s barrel against her head. The Asari’s voice changing from a goofy grin to concern. Looking at Vetra and the others with their weapons drawn. She slowly raised her hands, though still straddling me.

“Woah, easy. You’ve come this far, just let it ride…” Well that certainly looks like what she’s doing that’s for sure. And given my name… well there's a pun there. The others lowered their weapons, and she looked back at me. Still straddling me I might add. Now with her leaning up I could see she was wearing a kind of purple jacket, lower stomach exposed and brown pants. Hands covered by purple cloves and… she was wearing a watch? Odd in this day and age.

“I’ve been studying this tech for months. I don’t know how you activated those glyphs, but you have to let them cycle through their channels…” she explained. Gotta admit, I was feeling tired of being straddled by a mystery woman.

“So, you mind getting off of me now?” I asked, mild annoyance in my voice.

“Oh fiine,” as she stood up, allowing me to get to my own feet. “I know. I know… Who am I?” She raised out a hand. This lady is definitely that “crazy blue” the scav mentioned. She certainly fit that eccentric profile. I decided I might as well shake her hand in return as she continued. “I mean it’s obvious who you are. I saw the ship swoop in… you’re a Pathfinder. Was beginning to think the Initiative just made you guys up so the rest of us wouldn’t lose hope but you’re for real, huh?” She smiled again, ending her question with a bit of awe.

“Well if I wasn’t real you’d have just fallen on the floor and not on me, so I think you might have a bit of proof,” I told her.

“Hm, yeah you’re certainly corporeal… pretty solidly built, actually…” she led off. I may not be the wisest man when it comes to women, but Asari do have a reputation, and that just so happened to match. I raised an eyebrow at her, and I glanced behind me, for some reason I noticed I immediately went to glance at Vetra first, again, felt a little weird. Then the tech began to resonate with some sound. It began lighting up, lines flashing in a light green glow.

“System has stabilized. I’m establishing a connection,” SAM informed. The Asari turned to me and shrugged with another grin, then turned to a face of surprise as she glanced behind me. I heard a kind of whirring sound as she pulled out a Carnifex,

“Ah crap,” she shot at whatever was behind me. I turned around, drawing my Valkyrie. It was another machine like the one I saw on habitat 7, but this one was flying. But now it was a pile of scrap on the floor. No way there wouldn’t be more.

“Everyone, get to cover, NOW! Vetra, shoot at any bot you see, get it primed, Liam, get your overload ready, use it on any bot that starts to short out from Vetra’s shots. Cora, use some biotics to try and incapacitate them, pulls and shit!” I ordered the squad. My tech armor glowed to life as SAM activated the sentinel profile.
“I’ve fought these things before, Habitat 7!” I yelled to our new Asari friend.

“Later! For now, just shoot ‘em!” was her response. She did a double take and pointed at one of the two legged bots. “Focus on those ones, they make little bots,” she informed us. Great, they can make their own reinforcements. Cora and I focused on two that were in front of us. I tried to take aim at these glowing red orbs, perhaps their optics, in the center of their “faces.” One burst didn’t take it down but did cause it to spark. Another burst did the trick, Cora had yet to put hers down yet so I fired another burst into its side, knocking it over as it shorted out. I turned to see what the others were facing, seeing another of the floating bots in the air. Shooting a kind of beam into Vетра’s shields. Her tech armor seemed to be stopping it but quickly she had to dash into cover to replenish her shields. Fortunately, she had put just enough rounds into its shields to prime it, and Liam used an overload on it, frying the bot’s circuits as it fell to the ground.

As it came down a two-legged bot on their end shot some kind of canister next to us. I thought it was a grenade and began to roll out of the way, as did the others. Noticing the lack of an explosion I looked at the canister and saw it instead had projected a hologram. One quickly becoming solid, taking the shape of a small, lightly armored, flying bot. I put a burst into it, making it explode as its core was breached. I took aim at the bot but it shot a burst into me. My shields were able to take the three shots without breaking, fortunately, but only just. I stepped back into cover as Vетра launched a concussive round, knocking it over, then rushing over to it and unloading into it, a spray of sparks soon followed.

And just like that, the battle was over. The Asari holstered her pistol and walked over to me.

“Not bad. My first tangle with the Remnant was a lot messier,” she praised. Remnant?

“I assume you mean the bots? Why Remnant?” I asked.

“Not just the Assembler and Observer bots, these Monoliths too. They’re all the *remnants* of something much bigger,” she explained. A fitting name then. “But that’s too long. I hate long. So, ‘The Remnant’. Like my name’s better as ‘Peebee,’” so now I have a name for her too.

“Thanks for the help, names Scott. Scott Ryder,” I introduced.

“You’re a mystery,” she began. “I’ve been studying those glyphs for months, then you arrive and- pfft! Solved!” she exclaimed. She would probably like an explanation.

“I saw this tech clean up the atmo on habitat 7, hoping it can do the same for Eos,” I explained.

“Hmm, Atmosphere manipulation huh? Fits the model…” she thought out loud. “All Remnant tech is connected. You interfaced with this monolith somehow-and now it’s pinging the others. Get them online too and we might just find the master switch to clean up the radiation!” she exclaimed.

“Well I guess it couldn’t hurt to try. Even if it doesn’t clean the radiation I would think we’d still learn a good deal about this remnant tech,” I thought out loud.

“Exactly! It’s not like we can exactly make this planet worse,” she muttered. “Here, take these navpoints, I’m going to stay here and figure out this interfacing. Oh, and watch yourself, this planet’s all kinds of strange,” she warned with a humor in her voice. Before we set out to the other monoliths I asked Peebee for what she knew about these Remnant. The two legged bots were called Assemblers and able to make small floating bots called Breachers that often would try a kamikaze tactic, while the larger floating bots were called Observers, and emitted a powerful energy beam as a weapon.
As for the woman herself, Peebee was just her nickname, though that was all she said about that. She was clearly curious and restless, refusing to sit around on the Nexus and fascinated by the Remnant. According to her, the only other people here are Kett, Scavengers, and an angry old man who loves to kill Kett. Certainly interesting if nothing else. The others followed me back into the Nomad, and we set on our way to the next Monolith.

“So, thoughts on our new friend?” I asked.

“She’s certainly… Interesting…” Cora remarked. “I still think she’s trying to use us for something.”

“For what? Getting these Monoliths online? Finding that master switch? You ask me she wants what we want, no reason why we both can’t walk away with copies of data we find,” Vetra defended. “And I know the kind of person that would just snatch that kind of thing out from under you all for themselves, she doesn’t fit that description. Heh, too mouthy,” she chuckled. “Point is, she seems to know a thing or two about these Remnant, could be of use to us,” Vetra finished.

“Agreed, she’s one of us anyway. Out here we need to stick together, not start dividing ourselves up like Tann did with the Exiles and Krogan,” Liam gave his two cents.

“Though she’s clearly a bit eccentric, that’s not a bad thing. I agree. We could use her on the team after this. If nothing else as a contact for these ruins,” I continued the conversation. I expected more debate from Harper given our talk on the ship earlier, but she remained quiet, watching the window for any hostiles or something interesting. We were close to the second Monolith now, I needed to shift to six-wheel drive when Vetra began reminiscing.

“When they sent the first colonists down here, everyone was so excited… after all the shit the nexus had been through, we finally had something to believe in… and then the reports came back,” she looked down. “and then when we tried again the Kett came and trashed the place before the environment had a chance… to say morale was low is an understatement. More than a few people were found in their apartments with a rope around their neck…” she muttered. I took a hand off the wheel and patted her on the shoulder.

“We’ll make it right this time. I promise. We’ll fix this irradiated hellhole, set up an outpost, kick those Kett off this planet, and piss all over their corpses!” I told her.

“Heh, you know I might just be starting to believe that, and damn that’s been a long time coming,” she spoke, confidence and hope creeping into her voice. The remainder of the drive was in silence, as we pulled up before the monolith. A short climb on Remnant architecture keeping us from the control panel. We made the climb, and surrounding the area were Remnant bots. Currently they were glowing blue, seemingly docile.

“Keep your weapons drawn, but… hold your fire. If we don’t need to fight them I’d much prefer that to getting bogged down. In fact, form a perimeter but keep em off me if things get hot.”

“Ryder, you’re crazy,” Vetra chuckled, but still followed my lead. I was about to remind her to just call me Scott, but I suppose it was a bit more natural for last names in the field. Spreading out across the site taking cover to watch from all sides. Slowly, I inched forward to the console. I got close to an Observer along the way and it focused on me, eye going red and a scanning beam going over me,

“HOLD!” I yelled, as I backed away, the observer going back to its business. “Seems we won’t be getting to it without a fight. Take cover, get ready,” I ordered. I fell back to Vetra’s position taking cover. “On my mark, I’m going to use an energy drain on that observer right there,” I used SAM to
mark it on everyone else’s HUDs. “Liam, the moment I do that I want you to follow up with an
overload. Vetra, I want you to open fire on the other observer across from it, get its shields down.
Once Liam and I have handled that one, I’ll launch an overload to finish off yours. Cora, use your
shotgun and some Biotics to keep the Assemblers and Breachers away from us. Ready?” I asked,
getting three confirmations right away. “Aaaand… GO!”

I drained the shields of the observer I had marked and right away an overload struck, detonating
the same burst of electricity it had many times before. Just barely the observer was still in the air.
A burst from my Valkyrie fixed that as it collapsed in a mass of scrap and sparks. I turned to help
Vetra finish off the other observer as Cora launched a shockwave at a group of three observers.
With a barrage of disruptor rounds catching if off guard the observer was already shieldless. A
quick overload from me finished it off. Leaving two observers and a handful of assemblers left. I
lifted one assembler into the air with a pull from my biotics and launched a throw at it, causing the
dark energy around it to detonate, destroying the assembler and staggering those close to it.
Immediately one of the remaining observers fired their beam at me. I dropped into cover
immediately and noticed that my shields had just collapsed as I dropped. Perfect. I could still hear
the beam of energy hitting my cover. If we didn’t kill it soon it might just burn straight through.

“Vetra, Liam, little help with this one? Bastard’s got me pinned down! Cora was still trying to deal
with the assemblers and picking off any Breachers they launched our way.

“Give us a second, we’re getting the same treatment!” Vetra called out. I looked back over at Cora,
noticing my Observer had shifted its attention to her, forcing her into cover. This gave me a chance
to launch an energy drain at the other one, giving Liam and Vetra a chance to finish it off as it’s
tech was being fried from the inside out. The final observer turned back to face me, but was
quickly hammered by a barrage of disruptor rounds from a Cyclone, as it’s shields collapsed. It
fired its beam again at Vetra, her shields and tech armor just barely holding up long enough for me
to stand and fire two bursts into the observer. The first burst sent it crashing but the second had
already left by the time it hit the ground. She called out a thanks and I ducked back into cover as
the assemblers came out of hiding. Three left.

I stood up and charged myself into the one in the middle of the three remaining and immediately
focused all my biotics into sending a deadly pulse of dark energy around me, a Nova. It was a risky
maneuver that if failed would leave me in the middle of three angry hostiles. However, I was
willing to bet that those remaining had faced enough damage from the biotic explosion to go down
for the count.

My bet paid off as the assemblers collapsed, their scrap scorched and battered by the mass of
biotics they suffered.

“Damn good work team! Take a breather but watch for any more,” I called out, moving to inspect
the console. Before I could reach it, I found another body, a hole burned right through the chest
from an Observer beam and holding a data pad. A man’s voice appeared, confident that they were
close to cracking the language and finding something to help out. Something that would let him see
his wife again. The log was cut short by the sounds of remnant activating.

“Damn it... “ I muttered. Marking the body for recovery. The data pad was full of files of what they
had learned about the ruins. “They were backing everything up for the next try. So, they’d have a
head start,” I thought out loud.

“And that’s us,” Liam sounded determined.

“And we won’t let them down,” Vetra stated. I scanned the console, seeing the wire splitting up in
two different directions. To the side, I noticed a console, the hologram sending out four beams in
different directions. All to a small wall. Upon activating it, panels appeared atop the walls, like cover. I followed one wire back onto the sand, leading to another console and a few small hexagons poking out at various heights. I activated the console and three of those hexagons extended, shooting up and giving me a path to climb up the side of the structure. At the top, I scanned another glyph and an odd remnant device that flooded my scanner with data. I jumped down, following the other wire to a different structure to which I needed to once again use a console and extend some pillars. Many raised up providing another clear path. I scanned the side of the pillar, finding the glyph a few more meters up, and returned to the console. I interfaced and a four by four grid, some boxes filled with a glyph some empty appeared on my omni-tool.

“Apologies pathfinder, but this level off decryption holds a block that prevents AI access. However, I can determine the means to decrypt it. You must assign a glyph to a box without there being a duplicate in any row or column,” SAM explained the puzzle.

“So, Sudoku. I have to play Sudoku. Hmm, Remnant Sudoku… REMDOKU!” I exclaimed. “I guess this must be their equivalent of the old CAPTCHA quizzes to prove you’re not a robot or something,” I joked. This puzzle at least was simple, only taking a moment to solve. The decryption was successful as the monolith hummed to life, shooting out a beam towards the final monolith. Peebee contacted us on the comms, saying she was detecting signals everywhere from remnant structures in the area, encouraging us to finish the last one.

“Oh, and word of warning, the Kett have that one locked down, it was my best research site too,” she muttered.

“Hear that? Get ready for a fight over there!”

“Ryder, I think the fight just came to us! Kett dropships! Inbound!” Vetra called out.

“Oh, son of a bitch…” I groaned. “GET TO COVER!”
“I really just wish we could catch a break,” I groaned as I crouched into cover behind one of the remnant panels I brought up earlier.

“But then where would all the fun be?” Vetra asked, crouching into cover herself. The first dropship dropped out four chosen and an Anointed, their heavy unit, and the second dropped a squad of the same composition. As one of the Anointed charged its weapon, I noticed it was standing next to a small pod. I had scanned some of those earlier, if shot, they would explode. I fired a round into it, and it exploded into a cloud of super cooled gas, freezing the Anointed in its tracks, the shields unable to stop temperature. I fired a round into its head and it shattered along with the upper Torso. The body tipped over, fracturing along the metal remnant floor. The other Anointed let out a kind of roar and focused fire on my position. I couldn’t move as it would tear right through my shields and then me, and the eight chosen began firing on my team. We were outnumbered and outgunned. But not outmatched.

“Vetra, can you get to Cora? Or vice versa?” I called out.

“I think I can get to her Ryder,” Cora called out. “But I need suppressing fire!”

“Then you’ll get it, hang on,” I ordered them to hold position for a moment.

“Pathfinder, if I may, this armor comes equipped with a combat drone that can be thrown and deployed at a location of your choosing. Your father equipped this one with a flamethrower,” SAM informed me.

“Great idea SAM, should be fun to burn the fuckers. Hear that? The moment my drone deploys, cover Harper!” The Anointed was still focusing its fire on keeping me pinned, the Chosen had taken cover in several places behind him. If I threw the drone in the middle of them, it might just distract all of them, maybe even take one out. I readied the drone in my hand, SAM adjusting my eyesight and reflexes to make the perfect throw. Quickly, I stood up and leaned back, launching it into the middle of the group.

My shields flared and collapsed as I fell back into cover, a searing pain in my left shoulder, I cried out in pain as the suit’s automatic Medi-gel injectors worked their magic, lessening the pain. I could hear a Kett scream as he was burned alive, the others turning to look at him and Cora dashed along to Vetra. Liam opened fire on a distracted chosen, putting him down with a burst of rounds to the back, as Vetra did the same. Her more chain gun like Cyclone tearing shreds off her… well… Chosen. My drone turned and its flamethrower ignited another helpless Kett as he was distracted by our counter-attack. He too screamed as the searing hot flames engulfed his body.

The Anointed fired his minigun back up on my drone shredding it apart in less than a second. Given the drone’s casing was in truth a mass of what was essentially tech armor, the actual “brain” of the drone was able to launch itself back at me without damage, returning to my belt as it re-charged. That was four Chosen down, four and an Anointed to go.
“You alright Scott? I heard you take a hit,” Vetra yelled out.

“And why did you order us close together?” Cora asked.

“I’m fine, round in the shoulder but Medi-gel has it under control. I’ll see Lexi when we get back. Anyways, Cora, I want you to pour everything you got into boosting Vetra’s shields. Give her a barrier too if you can. Vetra, if you don’t already, get your tech armor up and put EVERYTHING you got into the Anointed. If I can I’ll try an energy drain when he stops focusing on me. Liam, suppressive fire on the remaining Chosen. I’ll help you out when I can. Get ready!” I ordered. I waited a moment for Vetra and Cora to get set up.

“She’s all good Ryder, ready on your mark,” Cora called out.

“Give em everything you got Nyx!” I yelled out. She turned off her armor’s safeties, her Cyclone firing much faster and more kick in every shot as the Anointed turned to face the new hail of bullets coming his way. The moment he began to turn I poked out of cover and drained his shields. Unfortunately, his tech wasn’t shorted enough yet to detonate but nonetheless his shields had simply taken too much and collapsed. The barrage of bullets now impacting him center mass. He stumbled back with each hit and collapsed back onto the ground, green blood pooling around him from large gaping holes in his torso. I turned to help Liam, firing a quick burst into the head of a Kett, which exploded on impact into a mass of blood and brains. The remaining three were a bit farther away so I holstered my Valkyrie and pulled out my Widow, eager to give it a shot. Currently the remaining Chosen were in cover, suppressed by Liam’s, and now Vetra’s efforts. She called out that her little charge had ended, needing to cool off, but still able to fire normally. I took aim near the back where I predicted a Kett head would soon appear.

The poor bastard raised his head to fire at Liam, only for me to center the crosshairs on his forehead and pull the trigger. The force of the weapon almost causing me to almost fall back onto my ass as the Chosen’s head simply popped like a balloon, leaving only a cloud of green mist where his head used to be, a thick stream of green blood spurting out from the neck as his heart continued to beat. I slapped in another thermal clip and took aim, waiting for another to show their head. Instead of waiting I thought I’d try something I used on the Remnant earlier. I launched a pull at the closest one, and it arced down to nab him out from his cover, a shocked look on his face as an invisible hand plucked him from the ground into open air. I pulled my hand back, forming a mass of dark energy that normally would have just knocked him on his ass. Instead it resonated with the dark energy already present from the pull, detonating and tearing him apart atom by atom. The shock wave from the explosion knocked his one remaining buddy onto the ground. Cora charged herself into him and slammed her fist into his poor face in a Nova attack.

All that remained of his corpse was his scorched legs.

“Is it just me? Or do Kett seem to magically appear everywhere we find Remnant tech?” I asked.

“Yeah I think you might be onto something Scott. Whew…” Vetra joked, letting out a deep breath at that fight. “Good thinking with the shield boost plan, and that combat drone. How’s the wound?”

“Thanks, it was Dad’s drone, apparently it came with the suit,” I told her, glad I chose to accept his armor. “As for the wound…” I rotated my left arm, “Sore but I guess the rounds from a Kett mini-gun don’t have as much energy to them. The under suit and bit of armor it has is scorched, but intact. Might just be the Medi-gel talking though,” I explained. “How about you? Didn’t get too hot in there with the venting did ya?”

“All good. I’ve dealt with it for longer and more often than that. If my body wasn’t as used to it as
it is I’d check in with Lexi later just to make sure my plates weren’t damaged. Now, should be fine,” she explained.

“Plates? Oh! Right, like what’s on your forehead. Heh, easy to forget that the other species don’t quite have the same exact biology,” I chuckled, and she let out a small laugh in return.

“Gotta admit, that was kinda badass Nyx. Brought to mind a few old movie lines…” Liam mentioned, looking at me for the last part.

“Ha, that it did… My little friend…” Liam and I both laughed at that reference to an old legend, as Vetra and Cora shrugged it off, not getting the reference. I swear if I was referencing old Asari films that Harper would know them by heart. Back in the Nomad, I drove over a small hill.

It wasn’t a small hill. It was a large fall off a cliff onto the desert ground below, a path to the other Monolith at the bottom. A large grin crossed my face, Vetra and I turned to look at each other, her mandibles flaring as she started to chuckle, I looked back at Liam, a grin crossing his own features. Cora looked like she was about to piss herself. I backed up to gain a better launch.

“Ryder… don’t do it…” Cora nervously let out.

“Scott… do it.” Vetra told me.

I engaged the boosters. Vetra, Liam and I were all screaming out like it was a roller coaster ride, a mix of laughter and ‘hell yeahs!’ just loud enough to cover Cora yelling out how we were psychotic. We hit the ground with a thud, on our wheels, the Nomad’s shock absorbers preventing us from shaking around too much in the Nomad.

“I will never get tired of that!” I exclaimed, Vetra and Liam still chuckling.

“I hate all of you,” Cora groaned. Chuckling, I began driving towards the final Monolith.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The drive wasn’t long and spent largely in silence as we came up to the Monolith. The Kett had set up an outpost around it. Shield masts on the outskirts to keep out the radiation, large frames forming energy shields as cover dotting the way to the base and smaller barriers along the way. The Kett had clearly seen us coming and had set up positions as rounds began pinging off our shields. I parked just inside the shield masts and ordered everyone out. I took cover and had an idea. Keeping myself in cover, I focused my biotics into forming a barrier in front of the Nomad, allowing the others to get into cover themselves.

As Liam was the last to step out and take cover I released the barrier, taking a moment to catch my breath from that large barrier. The others had begun fighting back as I stuck my head out to assess the situation. This time we were on the offensive. Already there was a Kett body on the ground not far in front of us. Further ahead on the outpost itself was an Anointed that had just begun firing at us. I couldn’t count the Chosen supporting them as I couldn’t keep my head up for long. Just as I ducked back into cover I saw an odd ripple moving through the air to my left. A Wraith, hunting for its prey. Given its proximity, that looked like me.

I swapped my Valkyrie and reached for my Piranha just as the ripple appeared beside my cover. I
pulled the trigger, blood spewing out from the powerful blast, a chunk of bone, brain, and flesh disintegrating off its head as it decloaked, a corpse on the ground. The Anointed pinning us down was too far away for the same trick with Vetra to work again. I swapped the shotgun for the Widow.

“I need a distraction for that Anointed, and something to get his shields down. Liam, I need you to overload his shields to get him to focus on you. Do that, and I’ll take him out!” I ordered.

“Got it boss!” was his reply as he stood up, a stream of electricity launching out of his omni-tool, arcing over to the gunner as his shields flared and died. He turned his attention to Liam, forcing him back into cover. This gave me a chance to place the Widow on the crate I was using for cover, steadying it. Thanks to SAM enhancing my vision and reactions, lining up the shot and pulling the trigger could happen before he even noticed, his head exploding into a mass of bone and brains. The force of the shot knocked down his body, still clenched onto the weapon, a mass of energy bolts shooting skyward for a moment as the body slowly realized it no longer had a head, coming to a rest.

“Nice shot!” Liam called out. I popped a new clip into the rifle but swapped back to my Valkyrie. 

“Damn I love that thing! Vetra, I would love to take you up on that offer of a Black Widow! Now, push up, stop just before that ramp, Go!” We rushed forward, the Kett in slight disarray as their gunner fell over dead. A round or two hit my squad and I but our shields just held as we fell into cover. Unfortunately for us, a pair of dropships flew by, each releasing a squad of four Chosen and one Anointed. Ten more guns pointed at us on top of those already here. Fortunately for us they were dropped off farther away. A Kett poked his head out and opened fire. A burst from my Valkyrie putting him down with the first burst to the head.

Using my thrusters, I ran and charged up the ramp, taking cover behind a crate and ordering the others to follow. Vetra took cover on the left crate while I took cover on the right. Liam and Cora ducking into cover behind an energy barrier. Still we were clear. Where the hell were all those Kett they dropped off? Were they going to the other side? Why? Shoring up defenses? Another attacker? For the moment, it didn’t matter. The reinforcements were closing and we had a chance to push up yet again. I dashed into a low barrier as the Kett rounded a path. A nice little kill zone.

“Liam! Grenade!” I ordered, he threw it a bit ahead of the Kett charging towards us, two Anointed at the head. It detonated at their feet and before the smoke cleared I pulled a grenade from my belt and threw it at the same spot for good measure. The smoke cleared and the bodies were shredded. Blood and guts and even limbs scattered across the platform. Pressing our advantage, we charged ahead, taking cover just before the narrow path around the outpost.

One of the Kett bodies began to move behind me, trying to get up, or grab a weapon, I couldn’t tell, as immediately his body was snatched into the air, and then launched at the one Kett I could see on the path. Cora’s work no doubt. The flung Chosen hit his buddy, knocking him down onto the ground. I readied my Valkyrie, waiting for him to stand up. And then I remembered I didn’t have to. I activated my jump jet, launching me into the air, and then holding them active to keep me there as I lined up a shot on the Kett pushing his now dead, buddy off him, and fired a burst into his chest, a round going straight into his mouth, and he fell back, limp, dead.

My thrusters deactivated and I fell back onto the platform feet first.

“Ok, two questions, one, where the hell was that other squad that dropship released, and two, what the hell were they’re tactics? They were smarter than that before!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, they seemed a bit shaken up somehow,” Vetra remarked.
“Whatever it is, let’s just hope it’s on our side,” Liam muttered.

We continued along the curving path to the outpost, but the door was shielded. We weren’t getting through that way. Maybe the roof? I activated my jump-jet, just making it up onto the roof. I looked over at the Monolith’s controls and noticed it had an orange glow surrounding it. Another Kett shield. We may not need to get into the outpost itself, but we do need to turn off the power. There was a generator on the roof, but when I turned it off it only deactivated a few small barriers. Behind the outpost however, was another generator. I walked over the energy dome projected at the rear of the outpost and jumped down, proceeding to deactivate the generator.

Both shields dissipated. I turned to the squad who had joined me on the other side.

“I’d rather get this Monolith online before more reinforcements arrive,” I remarked, turning my back on the outpost. And then I heard a kind of yell, not one of fear, and certainly not Kett, whatever it was, it sounded angry. The glass behind me in the outpost shattered as the body of a Wraith was launched through, sliding along the floor and stopping in front of us as blood spurted out of its mouth, the body lying on its back.

“The hell…” Liam muttered. At that moment, a large lumbering shape, walked up to the now shattered window, a Krogan. Yellow/brown armor adorned with bones, likely battle trophies, an unfamiliar shotgun with a double-bladed bayonet at the tip of the barrel. His forehead plate was a greyish brown with the front a white shade, covered in bumps, his face a similar shade with green eyes and a few small white horns extending down from his chin, like a kind of beard.

The Krogan jumped down from the window with a thud. This Krogan looked old. The bones adorning his armor suggesting he was anything but feeble. And a Krogan does not grow old without knowing how to kick serious ass. He strode forward, eyes only for me, stepping on the corpse of his latest kill. I might have felt a bit nervous.

“Who are you?” The Krogan asked, clearly suspicious with a gravelly and rough voice. Despite my fear, I was still impressed with his dramatic entrance. And no doubt he was what had the Kett in disarray.

“That… was pretty badass there,” I told him. He turned his head back.

“Huh. Well, yeah. Guess it was,” a bit of pride in his voice. Seemed like that wasn’t a stupid thing to say, I thought. Until he grabbed me by the collar and dragged my face close to his. The breath was not pleasant. “Still haven’t told me who you are,” he growled. Ok maybe it was stupid.

“Oh, come on, Drack. Stop that,” Vetra spoke up from behind me, not concerned, not annoyed, even slight humor in her voice. Of course she knows him, I repressed the chuckle. He pushed me to the side slightly, keeping his grip on my collar, looking at Vetra with a grin on his face.

“Vetra? What are you doing here?” he asked, amusement in his tone. Glad to see that their friends. Not common in Turians and Krogan. Blame the Genophage for that.

“I’m with the Pathfinder,” she nodded her head in my direction. “That Pathfinder,” she explained.

“A friend of Vetra’s a friend of mine,” Drack, as Vetra called him, let go of my collar.

“Name’s Scott Ryder,” I introduced, holding my hand out. He didn’t shake, instead turning around to go to his kill.

“Drack. Clan Nakmor,” was his response.
“Draaaack, be niiiice. He wasn’t even here at the time, hell, he isn’t exactly fond of Tann or Addison. Don’t want me to tell Kesh you were being rude, do you?” Vetra teased her friend. He turned around, glaring at her.

“One of these days kid, one of these days…” he grumbled. I held out my hand again with a smirk and he grabbed it for a quick shake as Vetra chuckled, arms crossed over her chest.

“Anyways,” he growled, turning once again back to face his kill. He pulled out a knife and got on a knee, carving a tooth off the wraith as he continued. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t just trust a stranger from the Nexus. They haven’t exactly treated us well,” he explained.

“‘Heard about that. Big load of political bullshit. Tann did not win me to his side with his… opinions. No idea what idiot thought he was fit to have authority,” I grumbled. Drack chuckled and looked back at me with an approving grin.

“Heh. What are you doing out here anyway?” he asked.

“I’m killing Kett, fighting robots, activating old tech, the usual,” I joked. “Gotta say I enjoy kicking their asses.”

“Hmm. Bet you’re mowing down an army with that gear,” he grumbled again. Well, I suppose it’s been more of our abilities doing most of the work. “Nexus knows shit about the Kett. They think they’re safe, ha. Just waiting to die out in space,” he explained. “I’ve been quads deep in a couple planets for a while now. Taking out bases, fighting ground troops,” he led off. Finally, he got the tooth out, inspecting it. “I know what they can do.”

“Can’t say I’m pleased with what I’ve seen,” I remembered vids I saw of Site two here on Eos, and Kirkland.

“You know Drack, we could use someone with your… skills,” Vetra suggested.

“I agree, a kickass Krogan would both be a boon and fun,” I remarked.

“Tempting as that is, Vetra, I’m a little old to be carrying humans through a fight,” he told her. I chuckled at that while Cora glared. He placed the tooth in a pocket as he continued. “Besides the day I serve the Nexus again is the day the clouds part and the Kett keel over. No offense…” he seemed a bit sincere with that. Seems he has no problem with me but I suppose joining my crew would mean Tann and Addison would technically have some authority over him. Not like he’d respect it though.

“None taken Drack. Good luck out there,” I grinned. He shrugged:

“Good, cause I’m getting bored and the Kett are getting stronger. Seem particularly interested in this alien tech,” he remarked. Beginning to walk away. “I’m gonna go find more to shoot. Try and keep your head down out there kid.” Drack went on his merry way and I decided to look around the outpost building before heading out. Inside was a kind of med bay, a human corpse on a table. I scanned the body to mark it. And then I read the scanner analysis.

“Holy fuck…” I muttered. “They… they did an autopsy… while he was still alive… holy fucking shit…” I muttered. “Who the fuck does that kind of shit!” I yelled out, slamming my fist on a console. An audio log played. A Kett voice. I couldn’t understand it but I could hear the now dead man’s muffled screams.

“Shit,” Vetra muttered under her breath. I felt angry. No, I felt furious. Torturing this poor bastard, and for what!?
“Those bastards are going to pay for this,” Liam growled.

“Damn right they are,” Cora muttered. Inside the room was a piece of Initiative tech. Apparently tagged as part of an experiment at site 2. I took it, figuring it might come in handy.

The Monolith itself presented no trouble. Scanned for glyphs, climbed for em, and another Remdoku puzzle. Thing is, when I activated this one, the beams of the other two Monoliths, and the one we were currently at no longer pointed at each other, but a structure in the middle of the lake.

“I think we’ve found the master switch,” I exclaimed. Peebee’s voice popped up on our comms.

“I’ll meet you there! Don’t do ANYTHING without me!” she yelled out. The team and I returned to the Nomad, facing no further Kett resistance., and began the drive to the structure. Maybe we jumped off a cliff, maybe we didn’t. You’d have to see if Cora smells like piss to be sure. One side of the lake appeared to have a small Remnant structure with another just across from it on the island.

We arrived at the structure, the problem becoming how to cross. There was a console next to a pillar of the structure. I got out and interfaced. The beams from the Monolith converging just above the center of the island. Once the console was activated, two large Remnant pillars extended out of the water.

“Oh wow… what did we do?” Liam muttered.

“Hopefully, something good,” I joked. The structure on the island began to lift itself up, revealing a way into its depths. Peebee’s shuttle landed,

“I see a door! Come on!” she called out over comms. At that moment, a bridge formed connecting the island and our side. It didn’t raise out of the water, it just... Appeared. Hexagons forming out of thin air joining together in the center of the new bridge. I got back into the Nomad and drove it across, the crew mesmerized by this tech, and hell, I was too. I parked the Nomad at the edge of the structure, the team got out, and we walked with Peebee into the structure.

I opened the door, revealing a small corridor.

“No. No, this can’t be right! All that fanfare for an empty room?” Peebee asked. No way this was it… there has to be something more… We stood there, looking around. “There’s some secret here. There must be!” She looked at me, waving her hand at me. “Do your… Pathfinder… thing…” she muttered. The structure made some noise as a panel in the floor opened up. Peebee ran over to investigate, we followed more slowly. I looked down, I could not see a bottom.

“Oh, you’re good,” Peebee smirked.

“And I make it look soooo easy,” I joked.

“That… is a long way down. Can’t tell how far…” Vetra remarked. I looked down near my feet, noticing a stone. I kicked it down. It fell a few meters and was enveloped in a blue glow. It’s descent slowing significantly.

“That can’t be air pressure. Electrostatic? AH! Gravitation!” Peebee quickly concluded. She turned her head upward, closing her eyes. “Oh, you idiot, Peebee! That wasn’t the front door, this is!” Well, one way to find out.

“I’ll let you know!” I smirked, and hopped off the edge.
“Hey!” she called out. The rest of the team following as we descended down into the depths.
So You're Saying There's a Chance?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The trip down lasted close to a minute, we only slowed down when we entered a large chamber. Peebee said it was like a kind of gravity well. This place was deep. And this large open room we were in? Likely just the start of it. Like some kind of bunker… or a Vault.

“Anything could be important, let’s be thorough,” Peebee suggested. Makes sense, we knew nothing about this place, or how it worked. Anything could be helpful. The room held odd pieces of floating Remnant tech, my scanner flooded with data upon scanning them.

“Watch your fingers… might be traps,” Vetra warned.

“I’m not detecting any,” I replied, scanner picking up nothing.

“I’ve made that mistake before…” Vetra muttered.

“Can’t say that sounds like a mistake I’m eager to repeat,” I chuckled.

“Well… shit…” Peebee muttered. “There’s element zero threaded all throughout this tech, imagine the engineering that would take,” she exclaimed. Well… that is impressive. Towards the back of the room was an elevated area with a console. Interfacing resulted in some of the tech activating, whirring to life.

“Only minimal power, doubt it triggered the atmo processor but… It did something,” I informed the team.

“Pathfinder, a conduit beneath the floor just activated. Fluid is running through it. It could be generating emergency power. Your scanner will have more details,” SAM revealed. The scanner showed that conduit, leading out of the room on the lower side.
“So, is anyone else noticing the distinct lack of Kett and Kett tech down here?” Liam asked.

“I think we beat them to it Liam. They never got those Monoliths online and it was only after that this place opened up in the first place,” I reminded him.

“That’s gonna piss them off,” Peebee muttered. She had a point. We followed the wire, the large wall opening and some of it vanishing as we came close, revealing another corridor. In the center was another console but in front of it… a wall of a glowing blue light. I brought up my scanner, and it was a holographic projection of Remnant glyphs. Heavily corrupted or damaged however. Only part we could translate told us we had to read for access. The scans also picking up that the console links to the surface.

“That must control the atmo processor!” Peebee exclaimed. “But… no glyphs. It’s powered down. Just like the rest of this place…” she muttered. Scanner showed that the conduit led further into the vault, through another door. More holographic data patterns to the side.

“Follow the wire, find the system lockdown, turn it off, turn the console on, and then it gets to work,” Vetra remarked. “Heh, no way in hell it’ll be that easy…” she chuckled. Upon scanning a data pattern, Peebee theorized that each could hold Zettabytes of data. I’m not quite sure just how much data that is though, so I’m going to go with more blunt terms. An absolute fuck-ton. I opened the door, the others following me to see a shifting tower of glowing blue yet solid blocks of Remnant metal surrounding what appeared to be another gravity well.

“Well… that’s new…” Peebee remarked when she saw a kind of capsule sitting on a railing. She ran a quick scan and picked it up.

“Any theories? Resident Remnant expert?” I asked. She threw a bemused look my way before theorizing.

“Maybe a symbol of authority or a key perhaps… It’s not hard to speculate when it comes to Remnant. What is hard is getting facts on them. I’ll see what I can find on this beauty. Maybe over this way…” she began to wander off.

“Woah, hold on a sec there Peebee. Whatever has this place on lockdown is that way,” I reminded her.

“I do my best work solo Ryder. You fix up the vault, I’ll investigate the relic, and together we’ll
figure this place out,” she proclaimed. Well she doesn’t lack for confidence.

“So, in other words: Let’s split up gang and search for clues! You don’t watch many horror vids, do ya? We don’t got a clue what’s down here,” I told her.

“And we never will, if we miss something because we’re huddled in a group. I’ll be careful,” she would not relent. I let out a sigh,

“Fine, but I’m not letting you go out there alone. Those bots can be a right pain in the ass. Cora,” I called out to her. “Go with Peebee, follow her and keep her safe from the bots. Let her look around, just help her out if any shooting starts. Got it?”

“Wilco,” was Cora’s only reply. Peebee let out a small sigh,

“Alright, fine, so long as she doesn’t rush me,” she reluctantly agreed.

“Good, the three of us should be able to manage. Cora, patch her in to our team com channel, and good luck,” I ordered as they left through the other door. Liam walked up beside me.

“So, bets on spike pit?” he joked. Vetra and I chuckled at that as we moved on, weapons in hand but not quite at the ready. We followed a ramp on the right side leading up and around the blocked off gravity well. Or as SAM decided to specify, was more of a well with variable gravity. A gravity well. Up that ramp was a shielded off room with a Remnant container inside. Nothing to interface with and no way through. Perhaps it would open later?

“Comm check, it’s well, you know,” Peebee’s voice came over comms, making sure she was patched in on the right frequency.

“Read you loud and clear. Keep in contact. Scott out,” I told her. Following the wire led us into another open room, but different. Here we could see the rocks of the planet making some of the walls with some kind of star like structures as supports.

“Damn, they dug this place deep,” I muttered.
“Look at the ceiling, see those… star… things…? They must be holding it up,” Vetra observed. We kept walking forward, towards a steep ramp. Looking down was a reservoir filled with a fluid not even SAM could classify. But it did bare many similarities to Omni-gel upon scanning. Perhaps that what was in the conduit, fixing shit and getting it started. There were platforms along the reservoir to allow passage. Making use of our thrusters, we made it to the opposite side of the reservoir to another door. I opened it, revealing a small passageway curving to the right. Vetra believed it looked like storage, but we readied our weapons anyway.

Slowly, I peeked around the corner. The room already had some cover, and good thing too as I eyed some Assembler bots. I signaled for the others to take cover, facing down at them as I crouched down behind a barrier at the corner. I held up a hand for Liam and Vetra, three fingers out. Then two, then one, then a fist. The three of us stood and opened fire on the unsuspecting trio of Assemblers, each going down before they could get a shot off. As the last one fell, I holstered my Valkyrie. Again, not needing to worry about reloading. Damn I love the old heat sinks. There were a few inactive Assemblers on the walls, and a container that contained various Remnant salvage.

We exited the room and got back on the trail of the conduit. It was to the left of where we began in this chamber but now it was to the right. Much less jumping would be required, but I could also see several Remnant bots in that area, without any cover up on our ridge. At a distance, the bots wouldn’t harm us so I stood back and surveyed the area, looking for some trick to get by. Rush a few to get a foothold?

“Look at this place… no way we’d be able to describe it. People will need to see this for themselves,” Liam exclaimed.

“Ha, then remind me to never tell my little sister about this place,” Vetra joked. I let out a small laugh, but Liam turned to her and glared.

“Just how little?” he asked. Sounding both suspicious and angry. Vetra turned, to face him, a glare of her own back at him.

“Older than I was when I started out Kosta, luckily for her I’ve made sure she hasn’t had to,” she told him, on the defensive. I wonder what she meant by “started out.”

“How. Old?” he demanded. Vetra crossed her arms over her chest, the two of them glaring at each other. Vetra let out a sigh:

“She’s almost 17,” she told him. I don’t get what his problem was. His eyes narrowed and his
mouth formed into a snarl.

“The fuck is wrong with you,” he growled. Time to intervene.

“Hey, hey, chill out! Liam, if you have a problem with it, at least wait till we’re back on the ship. Either way, you should probably let her explain before judging it, whatever the hell it is your judging. I’m willing to bet Vetra has a good reason. I’ve spoken with Sid, doesn’t seem like the two of them have a bad relationship,” I explained.

“You can’t possibly be fine with how she brought a goddamn kid here! To endure this shit!” he nearly yelled.

“Of course I don’t like that there is a kid who’s had to go through this shit, I don’t like that anyone has! But it’s not exactly Vetra’s fault that the whole plan and pitch went tits up is it?” I asked him, rhetorically.

“Don’t you dare lecture me about this Kosta. After everything I’ve done for her, of how I’ve spent every waking moment of every single day thinking about how I dragged my only sister into hell with me. Fuck you Kosta. Fuck you,” she growled, glaring daggers straight into him. His face softened a bit with her response, but kept the glare.

“I… fine. Time and place. Let’s just get the hell out of here,” Liam grumbled.

“Good, now fortunately, I think I got a way to get past those Remnant ahead,” I changed the topic. I don’t know why I was so quick to jump to Vetra’s defense, but… I don’t know. I just feel like I understand. I trust her. We haven’t spoken that much true but… well I guess I can relate to fighting for your sister and what-not. “On the other side of the reservoir you can see the Assembler on the left, and the right. Liam, I want you to havoc strike the one on the right while I charge the one on the left. We time it right, and the one patrolling in back mid won’t have a chance to open fire on us, giving Vetra a moment to cross while we take it out, and any buddies it might have back there. The moment your assembler goes down, grab cover, just to be safe,” I ordered. He nodded, but didn’t look me in the eye, clearly still angry.

I waited until the middle Assembler had moved from view. The moment it had I signaled Liam and we both launched ourselves at our respective targets. Liam shoving his blades down into the head of his assembler, frying circuits, rendering it dead, and my charge staggered mine allowing me to shove my omni-blade through the glowing red light in the center of its “head” and the lights flickered and died. At that moment Vetra had both crossed and the third Assembler had come to investigate. I launched an Overload and apparently Liam had the same idea, the combined attack
far too much for its systems and it exploded in a cloud of blue smoke and electricity. Quickly, two more Assemblers appeared from further along the path on the right. Vetra launched a concussive round at one, knocking it to the ground and opened fire on the other. It managed to get a burst off before the onslaught of rounds from her Cyclone tore it to shreds but her shields and tech armor could absorb it. The final Assembler was only getting up. A double burst from my Valkyrie putting it down for good.

With the last of the Assemblers down, we continued following the conduit. This time though, we were finding out just how massive this place truly was. The Platform we were on just… dropped off. An absolutely massive cavern stretching for possibly hundreds of miles, left, right, and forwards. Dotting the landscape were dozens if not hundreds of massive Pyramid like structures.

“Holy shit… look how far it goes,” Vetra muttered.

“This can’t possibly be just for an atmosphere processor, can it? The hell is this place?” I asked. I noticed Liam was still keeping quiet… I went left instead of right, just in case there were any hidden goodies. I did find pieces of Remnant bots and some Remnant metal. Maybe with this kind of stuff we could make Remnant armor or weapons even. Those might come in handy.

“How come this liquid hasn’t dried up?” Peebee asked over the comms. “Unless turning that conduit on started it all flowing again. Wouldn’t that be something,” seems she answered her own question. Now heading to the right, which was coincidentally the right way to go. Along the way was another door, with more salvage and minerals. Turning the bend, we saw another Aqueduct, like from earlier.

“Another one? How many do they need?” Liam ended his short-lived silence, asking a question.

“If it really is like Omni-gel it could be what keeps this place going,” I suggested.

“And the hell are those pyramids? They gotta be huge,” Vetra asked. No one had an answer. Around the next Aqueduct I noticed a handful or so of Assemblers. I couldn’t see Observers fortunately but that didn’t mean they weren’t there. The only way for them to get to us was across a ramp. Not incredibly wide but not thin either. Could still make a nice kill-zone for us. I pulled out my Widow, taking aim at an Assembler at the top of the ramp. I ordered the team to keep any Breachers off me, and if possible, Overloads from Liam on any of the Assemblers.

I pulled the trigger, the Assembler going down as circuits and wires exploded out from the other side, the lights going dark. The part that surprised me was that none of the other bots seemed to be alerted. And the Widow is not a quiet gun. It wasn’t impossible that I was giving them too little
credit, and there was an ambush waiting. So instead I stayed where I was, and took aim at another Assembler farther away, on the opposite wall. One shot, one kill yet again. This time the bots took notice, their lights changing from blue to red, and moving into cover close to the ramp.

“Vetra, get ready to repel a charge, Liam, get ready to help her, grenades if you have to!” I ordered. The bots didn’t disappoint. As I was swapping to my Valkyrie, a trio, seemingly all that were left, leaped out of cover and began running towards us, firing. Their fire was being focused on Vetra and she was only able to get a few shots off before she needed to crouch. And they were almost on top of us.

“Vetra, get ready to repel a charge, Liam, get ready to help her, grenades if you have to!” I ordered. The bots didn’t disappoint. As I was swapping to my Valkyrie, a trio, seemingly all that were left, leaped out of cover and began running towards us, firing. Their fire was being focused on Vetra and she was only able to get a few shots off before she needed to crouch. And they were almost on top of us.

“SAM, boost my Biotics, STAT!” I ordered. I began to focus my biotics into one small area, just in front of the Assemblers, using the Eezo in my head to continuously increase the mass and density of a small pocket of molecules. The dark energy around it getting stronger, and stronger. Soon, just as the Assemblers passed by, that little pocket reached infinite density.

A singularity was formed. It dragged the Assemblers back, they floated helplessly in the air as they were dragged closer and closer to absolute oblivion. One by one each Assembler was consumed, every atom that made them up literally and absolutely destroyed by quantum physics. And just like that, as my Biotics released their hold on the pocket of molecules, the singularity was no more. I took a few deep breaths, that ability was always exhausting. Thanks to SAM, I wasn’t nearly exhausted as I would normally be.

“Always hated doing that one,” I let out between gasps.

“Wow, I have not seen that move used often. Remind me never to piss you off Scott,” Vetra chuckled.

“All in a day’s work,” I joked back.

“By the way Scott, how was SAM boosting your biotics?” Vetra asked. Shit, I forgot to explain that.

“Sorry, meant to explain that back on the Tempest earlier. When we’re done here I’ll explain, too lengthy for the field,” I told her, hoping that would be enough for now. She tilted her head quizzically, but shrugged and readied herself. We continued up the ramp, past several locked doors and along to the other side of the Aqueduct. It led us around another bend with a structure across from us. Way too far to jump. Luckily enough the path continued to the right. We continued walking along the path when a familiar pair of figures walked through one of the doors.
“Peebee! Cora!” I called out, trying to get their attention. Peebee looked over with a wave as they continued walking along.

“Ryder! So, that relic box I found? Definitely not a symbol of Authority. The bots still shot at us. All good though. Maybe it’ll work with one of those data patterns,” she suggested.

“Alright, just keep watching your backs,” I called out. Peebee didn’t reply, instead just giving a thumbs up as she and Cora entered another door. To my right was a large door, and where the conduit was going. But damn my curiosity, making me take a look forwards, around another bend and through another small door. Among the salvage from before was something more… unique. I scanned it.

“Pathfinder, it appears to be a kind of decryption key. It should allow us to bypass the encryptions on any Remnant consoles we come across. However, it appears to be a single use only. I recommend holding saving it for a particularly strong encryption,” SAM explained. Made sense at least. We doubled back to the large door, entering another corridor that bent left and then right towards another door. The corridor was dark, not pitch black, but dark. Upon walking a few meters in, a pillar rose from the ground and a blue… object in a shape I can’t quite describe floating above it appeared. The blue object illuminating a large portion of the area. A scan revealed its purpose was just that. A light. More appeared as we traversed the corridor.

“The atmo processor Dad used didn’t need all these steps. Dad just interfaced directly. What made that one so different?” I asked SAM.

“Given the damage to the Monolith, and likely the vault, direct interface was required. However, it was clearly unwise,” the AI explained.

“Damn it… if only we had gotten out of the way…” I muttered. Vetra walked over, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, Scott, that wasn’t your fault. I wasn’t there but I read the report. You had no way of knowing, either of you,” she gave my shoulder a small shake and flashed a Turian grin. It felt good to hear that. In fact, now that I think about it, I have been feeling some guilt about dad. It was my mask that broke after all. His sacrifice so I would survive. If it wasn’t for me… But… I don’t know why, but… maybe it was the way she said it, maybe it was just hearing it and realizing what I was feeling, maybe just support from a good friend, but it made me feel… better? About it? Perhaps better to simply say more at ease. I’ve never been really good with even understanding my own emotions aside from the painfully obvious ones. I looked back at her and gave a small smile.
“Thanks, but come on, we have a job to do,” I recovered. Moving on to the next room, I noticed it bore many similarities to the vault’s entrance, at the base of the gravity well. Not fully identical, no, but a ramp at the left and right side of the room with a large open area in the middle, likely another gravity well. The center and far side of the room were covered in bots. Several Assemblers and I could see a single Observer. The left side had more cover along the ridge and the right side had little cover on the ridge and more to the back of the platform. But it also had a construct that appeared inactive. It had four long rods protruding from each of the four corners on a front. Had no confirmation, but I’d bet good money that was a turret.

“Hold position here,” I ordered to Liam and Vetra. “I’m going to try and sneak over to that construct on the right and destroy it. Damn sure that’s a turret. The goal is to do that before anything in this room starts shooting, but if that doesn’t exactly go to plan, you two are my covering fire.”

“Got it, just be careful. Maybe see if SAM can’t take control of it,” Vetra suggested.

“A moment Pathfinder. Your father’s armor is capable of a limited tactical cloaking device, which I have the means to control to peak efficiency. However, I cannot confirm whether or not the Remnant possess methods to detect you regardless. I suggest caution,” SAM spoke up.

“Huh, another damn good reason I decided to wear his armor,” I muttered. I also wondered if Cora would either understand and accept both my old reasoning and newer reasoning, the combat drone and tactical cloak, to wearing his armor. Let alone armor marked N7. I do understand why some people would have issues with me wearing that symbol, but I just hope they also sympathize or understand with my reasons.

Activating the cloak, I walked up the ramp towards the construct, so far, undetected. I got behind it and lit up with what I saw. A console.

“Well SAM? Can you take control?”

“Affirmative Pathfinder. Interface and I will re-write it’s targeting protocols.” I did just that and the turret lit up in a blue light, the head floating up and then pointing down as it took aim at the now highly alert Remnant bots.

“Vetra! Liam! Up here! Now!” I yelled out, seeing them immediately begin sprinting as the turret charged a shot and fired straight into an Assembler, a large smoking hole left in its “head” as it
collapsed to the ground. One of the Observers raised itself into my sights just as Liam and Vetra made it up to the platform and an Assembler charged from the left. I turned to fire a burst just as a swarm of bullets from a Cyclone tore it to shreds.

I forgot about the Observer. The beam struck me dead on, shields flaring and draining fast. I jumped to the ground into cover behind the turret as they collapsed, the Turret charging a shot at the Observer.

Note to self: Do not EVER, get hit by a Remnant turret. That one shot went right through the Observer’s shields and it practically shattered into various scraps of burning and melting metal.

“Ok, REALLY fucking glad that thing is on our side,” I exclaimed.

“Heh, I think I’m going to give it a grenade or two when we’re done. Just to be safe…” Liam half-joked. At this point only a pair of Assemblers remained. I quickly brought one down with a double burst from my Valkyrie, and the Turret destroyed the other. The three of us holstered our weapons as we glanced around the room, for what to do next.

“Pathfinder, there is a console on the other side of the room, it is connected with the one we just used for the Turret via the same conduit we have been following. As this console has already been activated, it is reasonable to believe that the other shall provide emergency power to the gravity well, allowing us to proceed,” SAM explained.

“And the turret?” Liam asked.

“I suggest saving your grenades. There are no programs attempting to re-take control and the only way to restore the turret’s original programming is through direct interface of the same console we used to control it.” SAM revealed. Liam glanced at me and I just shrugged, turning to move to the other console. Upon activation, a dome of greenish light appeared around us, like a shield, coming from a small pylon behind the console which was now descending into the floor. Upon a scan, it seemed that this pylon was boosting my shields, but could also be manipulated to overload them instead. Pleasant.

The gravity well opened and down we went once more.

“How the hell is a place so old so clean?” Liam asked.
“Radiation readings indicate the Vault has been offline for several hundred years,” SAM revealed. Seems a pattern is cropping up. These structures are several hundred years old, our Milky Way scans, several hundred years old did not detect the scourge, and now these vaults have likely been offline for several hundred years.

“Around the time the Scourge appeared?” I suggested. “No way in hell is that a coincidence. The scourge might be why all this tech is abandoned.” Peebee’s voice popped up on our comms.

“Damn, the implications alone… gaaaah, now I only have more questions,” she groaned, but I could still hear mirth in her voice. We touched the ground in another large and open room, door ahead, two slightly raised platforms on our flank, and a sparking console behind us. There was a light on the right platform that drew my attention, walking over, there was a container at its base, a container I opened.

Inside was something… odd looking. It seemed to fit over an arm, like a gauntlet. Scans revealed that it contained technology that would freeze whatever a certain side struck.

“Pathfinder, I can integrate this into the Omni-tool on one of your arms, however it would replace the Omni-blade for that arm. This cryo gauntlet will form around that arm as you move to strike your target, and de-form afterwards. However, it is not a full freeze or lethal, it freezes the outer layer, still rendering them frozen in place for a moment, it causes pain, but not extreme pain,” SAM explained.

“Well, I suppose I should give it a shot,” I considered. Surprisingly, it folded up into a small chip that I could fit onto my right forearm. SAM informed that he had successfully linked it and I moved to the console at the back of the room. Not only was it sparking, but a fluid was pouring out from the back. “Damn it…” I sighed.

“Don’t touch the console, sparks are flying all over in front of it,” Vetra warned. Unless we found a solution, we would not be proceeding any farther.

“Damn it there has to be something!” I exclaimed. I was not turning my back on this place. Not now. We’re so CLOSE! I know it!

“Ryder! Up here!” Peebee called out from above. I looked up, noticing two platforms higher above us, separated by a moderately sized gap, but too long for a jump. Peebee and Cora ran out to the edge and looked down at us. “Any idea what’s go-ooh. It’s that console there, isn’t it?” Peebee groaned. Her face lit up as she remembered something. “Wait wait wait… THE OBSERVERS! We saw one blasting some weird laser frequencies to fix a broken wall back there.”
“I don’t think that console is a wall, Peebee,” Cora turned to the Asari.

“Well yeah!” She sighed, “But that doesn’t mean it can’t work. Ryder, I’m sending the frequencies. Give those a shot,” she suggested. My Omni-tool pinged as the frequencies were received.

“Got em, I’ll try em out,” I called out. I sent out the frequencies to the console and the flow of liquid stopped. “Looks like it’s just a patch job, but it should work now,” I called out again. I activated the console and a bridge appeared between the two higher platforms and the door behind us began to open.

“And look at that! A bridge! Keep this up and I might just start owing you Ryder,” she chuckled.

“And where are you two off too?” I asked as Peebee began running across the bridge as Cora shook her head to the side, beginning to move faster to keep pace.

“We HAVE to be close to the lockdown by now. First one there gets all the glory,” she teased.

“Well if it’s a race she wants…” I chuckled, turning to Vetra and Liam as we continued. Through the door, the structure opened again into another system of caverns. Off the edge of the platform was more of the fluid with no way back up, and lower, on the platform in front of us, was a kind of tree.

“I get the feeling it’s going to be a long time until I’m no longer impressed by this shit,” Vetra muttered. I couldn’t help but chuckle a bit myself. To the side of me was another console. Upon activation, a cluster of pillars rose from the fluid, providing a path so long as we jumped.

“Careful, you go down there I don’t think there’s any chance of being fished back out,” I warned. We made our way across the chasm onto the platform with the tree. “How the hell is plant life even growing down here?” I asked.

“And for a moment there I thought all that gravity shit fucked with my eyes,” Liam muttered. Not sure that even begins to make sense.
“No sun, no water, they should all be dead,” Vetra wondered. “This planet may be a wasteland but no plant life is that hardy.” Seems this shit was full of mysteries. I activated a console, retracting a cluster of platforms behind us yet raising another to our left, leading us up to a path. It had a lower route and a higher route. Two observers were already on the higher route and spotted us as we crossed the chasm.


“Scott…” Vetra cautioned. Slowly, and against my better judgement, I walked forward. Slowly, Vetra and Liam followed, weapons at the ready. “Hate this… Hate it.” she groaned. I found a container with various valuable supplies and metals. Really hoping the scientists can do something with all this shit. Fortunately, the Assemblers did not pull some Indiana Jones shit, where removing the treasure activates the guards.

At least not yet.

Slowly we began walking back to the room’s exit. We made our way past the last of them and began to holster our we-

**CLANG!**
“Oh crap!” Vetra yelled out, turning around with her weapon drawn to see that an Assembler had simply fallen over. I quickly tried to replace my petrified face with one of teasing and humor as I began chuckling, trying to restore color to my face. She took one look at me and raised her brow-plate, knowing full well I was full of shit. I shrugged and we moved on. On the way back to the first platform was another console that activated a path to the right of it.

“10 creds say that is the right path. We go that way, we go to the lockdown,” I mentioned. Before anyone could respond, a trio of Observers hovered up, blocking our path. The three of us ducked into cover. Ordering Liam to do the same Overload combo, we were fortunate that the middle Observer had detonated, draining the shields of the other two just next to it. Fortunately, we had attacked just before they separated. Each of us fired a burst into an Observer, sending them crashing into the ground.

Following the path, we made it to the other side, there was a closed door, and another terminal in front of us, yet also a ledge with a console to the side. Activating the one in front of us first, I had assumed the path back would remain. I was wrong, but could likely fix it. However, a few Assemblers appeared on the platform across from us and opened fire. I biotically pulled one from the ground and immediately followed up with a throw, the detonation utterly destroyed the first Assembler and knocked the other two to the ground. One of which was so close that I saw that it’s right side had simply crumpled up like paper, and the last was finished off by a quick burst from my rifle.

Retracting that path brought a confused look on my squad mates faces but I simply told them to wait as I interfaced with the more hidden console. A third path appeared branching off to the back left of the original platform. We followed.

“Two gravity wells deep, and this place goes even deeper… once we get a foothold a science team could investigate this place for years, decades even. Wonder what’s at the bottom…” I thought out loud.

“Who says there is a bottom? Honestly at this rate I wouldn’t be surprised if this place reached down to the core,” Vetra remarked.

“Ryder! I think I’ve figured it out! This relic is some kind of data storage device!” Peebee’s voice once more filled our comms.

“Any idea what’s on it?” I asked.

“Give a girl some time Ryder,” she teased. “When we’re done here I’ll need my notes back in my
shuttle to crack it. But just imagine if it has just one of those data patterns intact! Think what mysteries we could solve!” She exclaimed. Peebee certainly seemed to love a good mystery. Unsurprisingly, our side path was not sunshine and rainbows. We’d need to fight our way through once again. A pair of Observers and Assemblers stood in our way, and they had the high ground, two separate ledges, one higher than the other and both higher than us. If we let those Observers get too high they would simply shoot over our cover.

I launched an energy drain at one as Vetra opened fire with her disruptor rounds into the other one. A quick charged overload from Liam detonated them both, the combined damage sending both crashing into the ground. I charged at one of the Assemblers up above and activated my new Cryo-gauntlet, slamming it into the bot as it was in-cased in ice. Quickly, I generated a Nova in my fist and slammed it into the ground, shattering the Assembler and the other one collapsing onto the ground. The others followed and we entered another room with a tree but the walls were lit up with lights. No, not lights…

Data packets. Glyphs. Information.

“Look at all of this… It’s like a Library,” I exclaimed.

“Hold the fuck up, you’re kidding,” Peebee exclaimed over comms.

“Nope.”

“And I went the other way!? Damnit I’d kill to be standing where you are,” she groaned. I scanned everything. Most of all the data was severely corrupted, only a few terms surviving. Vaguely translated I might add. Some glyphs on the walls allowed me to Decrypt via Remdoku a container. It was filled to the brim with metal and tech. A few select pieces appearing extremely unique, as I had yet to see them. A scan revealed that they were a compact core of Remnant circuitry and power cells. Could well come in handy. Quickly we made our way back to the way we should have been going. My mind drifted back to my father, seeing all this amazing technology and mystery.

“Dad would have loved this place,” I thought out loud. Almost not even realizing it.

“Heh, he’d have us scanning every millimeter,” Liam chuckled.

“Maybe one day it’ll be Sarah exploring down here. Back in the Milky way she worked with a team digging up old Prothean ruins,” I explained.
“She’d feel right at home here then,” Liam chuckled. Finally, we made it to the end of the room and made our way through another door. As it opened, we could see a thick white beam of light or perhaps a stream of fluid, it was difficult to tell. We strode forward, noticing the platform and the room around us housed various plant life. The beam was resonating out of an odd cone like pillar that… moved. Opening up at its bottom and closing as segments above it did the same.

“Well, I think this is it. The heart of the Vault,” I stated, some awe in my voice.

“Never seen anything like this before,” I heard Vetra mutter.

“All conduits converge here, Pathfinder,” SAM informed, confirming our suspicions.

“Well… Let’s go turn this thing on,” I stated. Moving over to a console I saw. Standing in front of it, I lifted my right hand and placed my palm on the center of the console. The pillars within it shifted, moving downwards under my hand and rippling outwards as the Vault responded to my command. The beam and its emitter whirred with energy, in a flash, the beam was gone, and in another instant, replaced by a beam of red energy. Red is never a good color to see. But it seemed my fear was for naught as the beam quickly thinned out and disappeared. Noticing another Remnant data box like Peebee found earlier, I grabbed it and attached it to my belt.

“Pathfinder, the system lockdown is disabled. The Vault, and the atmosphere processor, should return to full operation,” SAM explained. Wonder how long that will take…

“Ryder? You just fix the lockdown?” Peebee asked over the comms. “The whole place is lighting up. Power readings off the chart… Really… Really off the charts…” she sounded concerned.

“Well… if it’s back online we should be good…” I looked up, a mass of a dark brown with reddish light smoke was heading our way. Similar as to what happened on Habitat 7. I had a real bad feeling about this. We started backing up, the smoke reached a plant that was on a distant platform.

There wasn’t a plant there anymore.

“Ok. Fuck this shit. Let’s get the fuck out of here!” I yelled, the three of us turned to run, noticing that the door we came from was closed, but a shield blocking another path had opened. Given that the door we came from was red, it was locked. We dashed to the other path. This path was narrow, what appeared to be emergency lights flashing orange guiding our way.
“Peebee! Cora! Get the fuck out of here! NOW!” I ordered. As we continued dashing, following the lights.

“Yeah, we saw that shit too, already running as fast as we can!” Peebee responded. We turned a corner and a square in the floor burst with flame. A vent.

“Oh shit, watch out for more of those,” Vetra called out as we continued.

“It would be wise to escape, Pathfinder,” SAM remarked.

“NO FUCKING SHIT SAM!” I yelled back, continuing to run. We turned another corner to see a more lit room with more plants. There was a console with a large gap separating the next area. Not going to risk it. Running to it, I quickly interfaced and a bridge appeared. Just in time too as sparks began shooting ahead of me. We continued running, gaining ground on whatever the fuck it is.

“FASTER! DON’T LET IT CATCH US!” Vetra yelled out. The way ahead was a series of raised platforms with ramps leading up them. Too much time. Instead we jumped up, just making it up the ledge, making good time as we climbed rather than walked. The path changed to the side, we wouldn’t be gaining ground on the smoke during this. It was getting close. Fortunately, we made it through the door on the other side in time, but no way had we escaped it. The door led us towards another gravity well room. There was a blue ball of light at the base, possibly how we get it to lift us up rather than down. Sticking out my Omni-tool as we got close it disappeared and an invisible hand plucked the three of us from the ground and lifted us up.

This seemed to be putting a good distance between us and the smoke. We made it to the top of the gravity well and the floor formed beneath us as the invisible hand released us.

The smoke was right in front of us.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” I yelled, a bit of terror in my voice as we turned to run. I noticed we were in the same room that housed the container behind a barrier. Ordering at the others to continue as I ran and jumped up the edge, I ran into the room and grabbed two handfuls of whatever the fuck was in it and ran out, just barely ahead of the smoke. I ran down the ramp as they got the door open.

“We’re almost out, where are the rest of you?” I asked over the comms as we continued running to
the other door. They were running out of time. “Peebee? Cora?” I turned to look back and saw as
the two appeared around the corner, both stopping in their turn and continuing their run towards us.
I continued moving to the door but stopped, making sure the others would make it, standing there
and motioning for them to hurry the fuck up.

“MOVE! It’s right on our damn heels!” Peebee yelled. They all ran past me and I moved to the
door which remained closed, everyone searching for a way to get it open. We did NOT come this
far just to die.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Vetra muttered as she slammed a fist against the door. “It’s
sealed! Try to get something under it!” She suggested. Nothing was working. I turned to look at the
smoke and noticed a console. No other choice. I ran for it slamming my palm against it to interface.
I could feel the heat from it, making me sweat.

“Console is attempting surface reconnection,” SAM informed. It was getting closer, the heat more
and more intense.

“Shit.” I muttered, expecting that to be my last word as sparks flew out around me and the smoke
came near inches from me.

And then it retracted. Falling back, clearing out, the heat gone.

“Vault restart is now complete,” SAM informed. The others slowly walked up behind me, all
breathing heavily.

“That was… Talk about a rush,” Peebee sighed.

“What… the hell… was that…” Vetra asked. “I know a trap when I see one…”

“Immune response? One last scrub before startup? This place is full of surprises,” Peebee
theorized. I could still feel the adrenaline in me. As it was coming down… it felt… good. Fun,
even.

“Nothing like outrunning death,” I chuckled.
“Or reactivating a huge, mysterious vault. Nice going, by the way,” Peebee remarked.

“Atmosphere processor is online. Recovering last console activity,” SAM spoke up as the console projected a large, glowing, yellow, and round hologram. The hologram shrunk and thousands at the very least sprung up across the room. A map of Heleus? The yellow dot gained a marker over it that I couldn’t read, and a handful of lines shot out from it. The thousands of dots were replaced by more spaced out and slightly larger dots. Still more than I could focus on but fewer than there was. Quickly, SAM managed to translate the label for me.

“There we are,” I said, pointing at the yellow dot. “That’s Eos. This must be a map of Heleus.”

“Look, these lines moving. Some of the dots changing. Something happened. All because we restarted the system?” Vetra pointed out.

“If that light is us, all these other points could be other vaults on other worlds. Dormant, like this one,” I theorized.

“Maybe, but why a whole network of em? What’s all this for?” Peebee asked. I smiled as I thought of the implications. We can do this. We can make it here.

“This tech can create Observers from thin air or ravage an entire planet, and that’s just what we’ve seen. The bots, those plants back there, the atmo processors…” More and more awe and hope filled my voice as I spoke.

“Once I was a part of a Council team that was seeding some ice planet’s atmo. Trying to melt the ice caps,” Vetra remarked. Seeing a similarity.

“To help it support life,” I finished for her. Still smiling.

“We already know the one on Habitat 7 was broken. Destroying it instead of fixing it,” Cora remembered.

“Guys… do you understand what this means?” I practically beamed as I spoke up. “I think these builders were trying to make worlds habitable. Maybe even terraform the whole cluster. We can do this… we can make it!” I exclaimed.
“Fucking A…” I heard Vetra mutter, a Turian grin on her face.

“Hey, look at this,” Peebee pointed out. She moved into the hologram and pointed at one specific dot, one different than the others. The lights weren’t flashing, but instead a stable green color. The hologram expanded into a planet, glyphs appearing. “This one is different. Maybe it’s active? We need to check this out!”

“Coordinates received Pathfinder. This planet lies beyond the space we have currently surveyed,” SAM informed.

“Mark it down, we need more info,” I ordered. “Come on, let's get back to the surface. Could do with some fresh air.

Chapter End Notes

Just quick little explanation for some of my choices regarding abilities. I'll make this quick. Level up system works great gameplay wise, bad narratively. Not a bad thing, just a game thing. Any Biotic can generally use any ability, the strain varies. Tech abilities, also vary. Something like a tac cloak can only work if the armor has some of that equipment built in. Alec's armor can. Now, for a specific biotic ability, the singularity. Works quite a bit different from the game, huh? Well, if any of y'all have ever read Mass Effect: Retribution, the ability is used, and works just like an actual singularity. Not like they could make the ability work like this in the game after all. That would be way too overpowered. Anyways, hope you enjoyed!
Hope of Home

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We travelled up the gravity well in silence. As we neared the door to the surface I noticed that we were all slowing down. Nervous yet curious at what we were about to see. We opened the doors and walked out onto the desert, the Nomad still parked to the side. The sky was clearer, the wind slower. The sun seemed to shine brighter and I noticed that the area was clear of radiation. The vault was already at work.

“Well, would you look at that. It’s looking like a beautiful day now,” Vetra remarked.

“But… how… No atmosphere processor works that fast…” Peebee muttered.

“Well, this one does,” Liam chuckled. We were all looking around, seeing the brightly lit landscape. I hadn’t taken the time to appreciate it earlier but, this place had quite a beauty to it. And the heat was splendid as well.

Eos would make a good home.

“If this effect is representative, Pathfinder, air and moisture patterns will show noticeable improvement,” SAM explained. “Eos could support an outpost.” I got down onto one knee and grabbed a handful of sand.

“A foothold.” I remarked, lifting the hand and moving the palm so it faced me and opened my fist, watching as the sand fell back to the ground. “That’s all we need-just enough to begin.” I smiled again. I stood up and turned back to face the squad and Peebee. “This Remnant tech could be the key to our survival, if we can control it.”

“Which you can. Kinda. Still, wouldn’t mind if we found a manual somewhere,” Liam joked. I let out a small chuckle, nodding my head in agreement.

“We’ve got a lead. SAM marked it on the charts down there,” Peebee began. “That site is active, whatever it is. Who knows what we’ll find there?” She looked at me.

“We? Guess that’s your way of asking to join us then?” I smirked.

“If you want to be an ass about it, yes,” she chuckled. “I want to know what makes the Remnant tick. You’ve got a key to their tech… or a crowbar, at least,” she joked.

“Well then welcome aboard. We’ll see about getting you a fancy job title over your bunk,” I teased.

“I only need a footlocker,” she clarified, seeming as if she was trying to reinforce her point when I already accepted her. She ran over to her shuttle which was beginning to warm up. “Data pad, toothbrush, clean underwear. All I need. I’ll catch up with you!” She called out as the door closed and the shuttle began to lift off.

“She is a handful,” Vetra chuckled as we began walking back to the Nomad. “But hey, she knows her shit. Could use the help.”
“My thoughts exactly,” I told her. “Now, let’s go get us an outpost,” I smiled.

“Pathfinder, logs from Site 1 include coordinates for a potentially suitable site. However, they never had the time to investigate further. And the Nexus lacked resources to attempt a third outposts when the same risks still applied, I suggest we begin there,” SAM explained.

“Ryder, the Nexus just received word, already they’re on pins and needles. They’re prepping the pods now. Just awaiting coordinates and outpost specialization,” Suvi informed over the comms.

“Then let’s not disappoint,” I remarked, as we all climbed back into our Nomad seats.

“This isn’t really happening, is it? Am I just about to wake up back on the Nexus, no arks, nothing, and this planet will still be a hellhole?” Vetra muttered. “After all this time…” I placed a hand on her shoulder as I drove towards the outpost site.

“This ain’t a dream Vetra. This is happening,” I smiled at her, and she turned back to look at me. “I you want I can pinch you to prove it,” I joked. She let out a small laugh, her mandibles flared in a grin, her emerald green cat-like eyes looking right into mine. Had that weird feeling again. Still not an unsettling feeling, just unfamiliar. As if she was feeling the same way she looked forward as I removed my hand from her shoulder.

“Finally,” she let out a breath, just looking out the front of the Nomad. “Heh, you know I kept a few of those ‘golden world’ brochures. I used to look at them, hoping that we’d still find one out here. But after site two… “she sighed. “It’s good to believe that we actually have a chance again.”

“Never again Vetra. This outpost will not fail. I promise you that. The next one won’t either. Or the next one, or the one after that. We weren’t given golden worlds, but damn will we work to make them,” I told her.

“Thanks Scott,” was her reply as the ride descended back into silence. We were on the same ridge as the second monolith now. As we neared the other end of the ridge, towards a large basin like area where the coordinates lie, we spotted a Kett dropship lifting into the air.

“Pathfinder, I detect the Kett are engaged in combat. With a Krogan,” SAM explained.

“Lemme gu-” I began.

“It’s Drack. Don’t even bother. It’s Drack. Come on, let’s go help the old bastard out,” she suggested. I could have taken the long way down, finding a ramp or something to lead us down there safely. But that would also be the boring way. Besides, this might win us a few points from the old man. I boosted off the ridge, a large drop waiting. Several profanities were shouted by Cora while once again Vetra, Liam, and I just yelled out in fun. We hit the ground with a thud and drove straight towards the Kett lines while they were distracted by the Krogan. By the time they noticed us it was too late as we ran right over a pair of Kett and jumped out of the Nomad. Drack already giving us covering fire.

“Nice entrance kid!” he laughed. “The hell are you doing here anyway?” He asked as the rest of us took cover.

“We were in the area, thought the old man could use a hand,” I teased.

“Bah, these bastards were fucked the moment I found them, don’t need your help, but only an idiot turns down free help,” he grumbled. Looking up from my cover I counted only three Chosen Kett remaining. They were already up and firing so I couldn’t take aim yet. After another burst from the trio they stopped, I immediately stood up, and noticing none were quite visible, I instead primed an
incinerate and locked on to the signature of one of the Kett, who I could partially see. Aiming upwards it arced down. The Kett stood and screamed as the flames engulfed him. Before I could finish the job, Drack yelled for me to get down, which I did. A mass of metal shot over my head and right into the head of the burning Chosen. The force of the impact knocked him to the ground, still screaming as the mass of metal detonated into shards of shrapnel, tearing itself into the burning Kett and his two buddies standing next to him, both of which were undoubtedly dead as they both had screamed for a moment as the shards buried themselves deep within them.

It wasn’t over yet. Another dropship appeared, this time behind us and the small field of Remnant structures we were fighting within.

“I think I made the bastards angry, good,” Drack laughed, eager for more slaughter. As one moved to the ledge to jump down he pulled a large knife from his belt and threw it at the unfortunate Chosen. The knife… hell, it’s a Krogan knife, it’s more like a Machete, embedded itself into the Chosen’s left eye and he fell, landing with a thud, dead.

“Hey, save some for me old man!” I called out. Drack just laughed in reply, clearly enjoying himself. He charged the closest Chosen and impaled the poor fucker on the massive bayonet attached to his shotgun. He turned to face the rest of them, using the Kett’s still barely living body as a meat shield and charged. He got in front of one and pulled the trigger. The shot obliterated the torso of the Kett embedded on the knife and went straight through into the Chosen behind him. The remaining three chosen turned to face him to open fire. I put one of them down with a burst from my Valkyrie and Liam sent a burst from his SMG into the other. I managed to kill mine before he pulled the trigger but the second managed to get a shot off before he died. And the third had just fired a second burst. The combined first two rounds had managed to break the Krogan’s shields, and the third hit him right in the shoulder.

The force of the shot slightly rocked the Krogan to the side, and he let out a small grunt in pain as the energy shot attempted to melt through the thick armor and thick skin. He growled and turned to face the utterly doomed Chosen. Lifting his shotgun to fire a round at the Kett. The distance between them wasn’t large but the shotgun must still have had a tighter spread as he was knocked flat on the ground dead, utterly covered in bullet wounds. It seemed as if Drack had completely forgotten the wound in his shoulder, as he readied himself once more.

Another dropship had appeared, releasing another squad.

“Don’t worry about me kid, shot barely burned me at all. Hell, it’s already healed back up,” he called out as we readied for a new wave. I had heard Krogan had a fast healing rate, as if it was regeneration, guess now it confirmed what I’ve heard. This dropship released a squad of four more Chosen and an Anointed.

“You kids focus on the Chosen, I’ll take care of the big fucker,” he called out. The chosen were still grouped up so I had an idea. I launched an Incendiary round at one, and then immediately charged him as he began screaming. The force and dark energy from the biotic attack reacted violently with flames, just before I “re-appeared” the flames detonated into a large fiery explosion, igniting the rest of the Chosen and knocking them to the ground, the original one was no-where to be found. Quickly I put a burst into each as Drack engaged the Anointed. He knocked the gun out of his hands and drew his knife, intending to play with his victim.

The Anointed drew a blade himself, like a kind of short sword and charged at Drack. Big mistake. Effortlessly, he parried the attack to the side, slashed at his throat, slicing it open and green blood spurting out. Quickly he changed his grip on the blade as the doomed Kett dropped to his knees, Drack was holding his knife in a backhand and sent it straight into the back of his head, the tip of
the blade appearing right between the eyes. He removed the blade and the now dead Kett dropped to the ground.

“Well, well, well, color me impressed kid,” he chuckled. “That, was fun.” We walked over to each other, both of us catching our breath.

“That it was Drack, that it was,” I let out a small laugh.

“You can really handle yourself kid,” he sounded genuinely impressed by our display. “So, I hear you’re the one to thank for clearing up the sky? Had your number all wrong,” A smirk came across my face as I remembered what he told us earlier.

“So, the clouds parted. And these Kett look pretty keeled over. Maybe us humans can pull our weight after all,” I teased.

“Ha, Smartass,” he grumbled. “Well, clearly you at least can pull your weight. But there’s a helluva lotta shit to do before I’d be that smug about it.” Vetra saw her chance and walked over. Mirth in her voice.


“You know what? Fuck it, I’m gonna ignore my gut and join up. This was a good fight, and we can do it again. And before you go saying you don’t need a Krogan-believe me, you do,” he remarked.

“Would never turn down help, Krogan or otherwise,” I told him.

“Hmph. Well I have a few things to gather, once I’ve got them I’ll just head over to your ship. Shouldn’t take long,” he informed.

“Sure thing, I’ll make sure SAM lets them know to expect you. Just comm in when you’ve made it there,” I told him. He visibly grimaced at the mention of SAM, but said nothing for now. Simply confirming he’d do that. Now with the area cleared, I marked the coordinates and placed a beacon on the ground.

“This is it. This is where we place our first outpost,” I stressed “our” to imply that I meant those established by our team, not ignoring site one and two. “A real, new beginning.”

“Prepping deployment order. You must choose what purpose this new outpost will serve,” SAM informed.

“It’s my choice? Would have figured that would be Addison’s job,” I remarked.

“Resources are at a crisis point. Protocol states this judgement call falls to the Pathfinder. With current supplies, you could build a military outpost focusing on defense and militia training. Alternatively, a scientific outpost could advance the Initiative’s research and discoveries,” SAM explained.

“Well, this is quite a choice. Big. Opinions?” I asked, turning to face Vetra, Liam, and Cora.

“I say scientific. We are here to explore, aren’t we?” Vetra cast her vote.

“Gotta be science. Our colonists need to understand their home,” Liam agreed.

“While that’s all nice and idealistic, we have the Kett to worry about. We can worry about science
after we’ve dealt with them,” Cora argued.

“Be advised, the first outpost placed by a Pathfinder will be a statement in itself. Fair, or not, your choice will represent the Initiative and its intentions in Andromeda. Consider carefully,” SAM warned.

“SAM’s right, the message. What happens if the Kett aren’t the only natives here? The others might be a bit suspicious if we go military,” Liam pointed out.

“I don’t want this outpost failing. But… SAM, the outpost can still focus on science yet be well defended, yes? Guards, weapon emplacements, that kind of thing. Keep the place safe but not a true military encampment?” I asked.

“Affirmative Pathfinder. Regardless, the Nexus had already ordered that defensive turrets be placed around the outpost’ perimeter as well as some security personnel,” he answered. I thought for a moment longer, making sure that my choice was what I truly wanted.

“Prioritize research and discovery. That’s our foundation. Our future. We came here to explore, to learn. Not to conquer,” I stated. I could barely hear Cora sigh yet I noticed both Vetra and Liam smile and nod at my decision.

“Orders prepped Pathfinder. Relayed to the Nexus. Ships loaded with colonists and the pre-fabricated buildings en-route to Eos. ETA, two hours. In the meantime, I suggest looking into site two, and the Nilken Rensus murder case. The site of the case is not far from site two,” SAM suggested.

“Alright, you hear that?” I asked the squad, turning to face them. We have two hours until the colonists arrive, I want to be here when they do so let’s go wrap up here so once that’s done we can head back to the Nexus, then investigate that other vault. Let’s move,” I started, moving into the Nomad. We all got into our seats and set off for Site two. The way there was essentially the same way we took from the Site one all the way to the second Monolith, with Site two rather close to one.

The ride there was one of silence. Likely as we all knew it was the site of a slaughter. The Kett left the outpost standing, left the vehicles we had there as well as their own fortifications. Like a message. A warning. We drove down a ramp-like hill to the main complex of Resilience, the name of site two.

“Woah, hold on Ryder, stop the Nomad,” Vetra called out. We hadn’t reached the shield masts yet. “Look, to the left of the trail. The hell… is that… a body? The fuck happened to it?” She pointed out. The body was mangled to hell. Legs and arms are not supposed to bend the way they were. I parked next to the body and scanned it. There was not one bullet wound on his body. As I looked closer, his skull appeared caved in, blunt force trauma. The hell did this? Shaking my head, I stood up and we walked into the perimeter.

“This place looks like a warzone,” Liam grumbled, clearly furious at the Kett.

“The few who survived told us it was a massacre. Kett attacked from all sides,” Vetra muttered.

“But why? Why the hell would they do this?” Liam asked. Vetra just shrugged. We walked up the steps, the door there was locked. Not without power, just locked. Maybe we could find a way in through another door. Walking around the pathway, we came to the other two doors. One was locked just like the other, but the other I could open. It was locked from the outside, wouldn’t keep anyone out but would keep anyone in. Disconcerting. The four of us drew our weapons as I opened
the door.

The first room was clear, a console next to a desk and papers strewn across the floor. Moving along, the next room was also clear, yet the door to the next was locked. Hopefully, main access would be here however. I noticed that most of the equipment was left.

“They sure left a lot of supplies behind. Kett bastards cut off the evac,” Vetra remembered. I found the terminal for main access and activated it.

A large guttural sound, like a roar, filled our ears as SAM began speaking.

“Pathfinder, a maintenance bulletin was issued at the time of shutdown. It includes only one word,” SAM began.

“Run.”

All doors within the site opened, I stared down the corridor to find the next door was blocked by large crates and grates, yet I could see through the top. At the other end of the hallway, was a large creature, covered in an armor that looked to be bone, just like the Kett. The creature had large, meaty arms and a large, round head. It roared again and I could see row after row of very sharp teeth.

“SAM, OVERRIDE NOW, CLOSE THE DOORS NOW!” I ordered. Fortunately, the doors did just that.

“What the shitting hell was that!?” Liam yelled out.

“I got no fucking clue but get outside and climb the building now, we gotta kill that thing,” I responded. We began running out the door we came in through as I noticed the creature lumbering out of the door we tried first.

“Pathfinder, we don’t know what you did but Kett are inbound on your position,” Kallo informed over comms.

“Well that’s just fucking perfect,” I groaned. I would not have minded having Drack around for this. Activating our jump jets, we climbed to the top of the site as a pair of Kett dropships descended towards the back of the site. I counted five Chosen and an Anointed. But that wasn’t the worst part.

The beast completely ignored them and the Kett completely ignored it.


“What is it kid?” he asked.

“We’re at Site two. We’re being ambushed by Kett but they have some kind of… monster with them, covered in bony armor an-” The beast stood on its hind legs and a sac at its throat extended as a vile green liquid spewed from its mouth straight for me. I ducked and it hit the side of an antennae on the roof, burning right through and causing it to collapse. “AND IT JUST SPIT FUCKING ACID AT US!” I yelled.

“Damn it, that’s a Fiend. Whatever the hell you do, do NOT get close to that thing, and don’t let that acid hit you. I won’t be able to reach you in time, take out the other Kett, then focus fire on that thing. Fire and explosives work well. And if you can, get a shotgun out and get to its side or
back, shoot at some red fleshy things on its sides. If you can’t flank it just shoot it in the face. Good luck kid,” Drack informed as he closed the call.

“Hear that? Take those Kett down ASAP so we can all send that big ugly motherfucker to hell. How many have already been brought down?” I asked the squad.

“Got one!” Liam called out, as he dropped to the ground to avoid incoming fire.

“I got one confirmed kill and I think I got another with it. Biotic detonation,” Cora informed, on her knee as she waited for her shields to regen. Vetra was currently standing and unloading as her power armor absorbed a pair of rounds.

“Just got rid of that Anointed shields but I can’t take any more fire, Scott, take him out before his shields come back!” she called out. Running to the edge I took aim with my Valkyrie and fired, all in record time thanks to SAM boosting my sight and reactions. I removed my eye from the scope to witness a horrifying sight.

The fiend could climb.

It had just climbed the roof of the first floor and was now moving towards me to climb up to the rest of us.

“Damn it, MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!” I called out as we began running to the right side of the building. To buy some time, I quickly pulled out my Widow and took aim at one of the chosen still alive near the other side of the building. As he turned to face us his head popped in a mass of blood and bone and brains as his body went limp, falling to the ground. The Fiend had just climbed to the second level and a Kett ran out of cover to head our way.

I used a pull to pluck him from the ground but instead focused the biotics so instead it was if I had pulled him right at me, and then threw him at the Fiend. The Kett hit the Fiend with enough force to break bone at the least. However, it was as if the beast had just received a slap to the face, no real damage, it just rocked the head back. The beast roared in anger and smashed its fists into the wounded Chosen that was struggling to get to its feet. Instead the Kett was pulverized, left twitching, dead on the ground.

The beast than charged at me, remembering that by now all the Kett SHOULD be dead I just jumped off the roof in the same direction the squad had ran, using the jump jet to prevent a hard landing. Just to our shitty luck, another dropship was descending. This time, I counted four chosen and two Anointed.

“Fuck, LIAM, GRENADES, NOW!” I ordered. The two of us threw a grenade right where they were landing. We were still trying to gain ground on the Fiend and had to risk running. Before the smoke even cleared, one of the Anointed, hopefully only one was left opened fire on Liam. It shredded through his shields and I knocked him down to the ground behind a pipe, hoping he was now in cover. He yelled out in pain and I turned him over, noticing two large scorch marks on his abdomen. I slapped a globe of Medi-gel onto it as he kept suppressing a cry of pain as the shots finishing burning into his flesh.

“Gah, hah, hah, go, I think I’ll be fine, AUUUGH! SONUVA BITCH!” he cried out. He’d need Medical attention.

“Can you crawl under the building? I don’t want the Fiend getting you while we’re distracted,” I asked. He nodded and turned onto his stomach, grunting in pain as he dragged himself underneath. I looked back up to see that Cora and Vetra were in cover exchanging shots with an Anointed,
seems only one had survived, and a single Chosen. I was angry, and did something stupid, but had just enough sense left to keep it from being entirely stupid. I pulled the Piranha shotgun from my belt and biotically charged the large Kett brute.

The force of my impact staggered him and I shoved my gun right against his abdomen. His shields wouldn’t protect him from a shot like this. I pulled the trigger and as the corpse fell to the ground I noticed a large gaping hole in his stomach, straight through his back, pooling with blood and chunks of flesh. Turning to face the Chosen, I pulled back my fist, the cryo gauntlet forming around my arm and sucker-punched the bastard. He was flash frozen and fell to the ground. Knowing it wouldn’t last long I quickly shot a round from my shotgun into his head, obliterating it.

Turning around, I noticed the fiend had re-joined us on the ground, heading straight towards me as Vetra and Cora opened fire. I pulled out my Widow, knowing it could pierce armor. Before taking aim, I launched an incinerate round at him, hoping it might burn a hole in the bone for me to shoot through. It hit the fucker right in the center of its forehead and it roared out in pain. A moment later, the fire dissipated and I thought I saw flesh in the newly formed hole. Quickly, I took aim and fired. Thanks to SAM’s enhancements I knew the round went exactly where I wanted and saw as the massive Fiend’s head was knocked back, and then fell to the ground, limp. A bullet straight to the brain.

I ran back to the beast’s corpse, as it had died just near where Liam crawled under the outpost. Already, I could hear him grunting in pain as he tried to crawl his way back out. Gently, I used my biotics to lift him off the ground just slightly, and pull him out from underneath.

“Come on Kosta,” I spoke as I lifted him onto my back, “Let’s get you to Lexi.” The squad moved to the Nomad, Vetra getting in the back this time as I placed Liam in the passenger seat. “SAM, get Lexi ready to receive Liam. He needs medical aid for two Kett rounds to the abdomen. Unsure of the extent of the damage,” I ordered as I began the drive.

“Affirmative Pathfinder. Dr. T’Perro is standing by. Also, Peebee has arrived,” he informed.

“Good, we aren’t done here yet so I’d like to not head out without a full team. Tell her to prep to head out with us.”

“Affirmative.” Aside from Liam’s grunts from the pain and the occasional Medi-gel applied the ride was both quick and silent. We parked just in front of the Tempest’s loading ramp back at Site one as Lexi rushed out with a gurney, followed by Peebee.

“Place him here,” she ordered, I lifted him from his seat and onto the gurney. She ran a quick check. “Should be fine but I’ll need to take a closer look to assess the extent,” she informed, and began pushing the Gurney back up the ramp.

“What happened?” Peebee asked.

“Kett ambush, killed the fuckers but he took a few hits,” I explained. “Come on, we have a few more things we need to do out here before the colonists arrive.”

“Colonists? You mean…” she looked a bit stunned. I smirked but Vetra spoke before I could.

“That’s right. We did it. My visor says that the new outpost should be here in an hour,” she confirmed.

“Wow… that’s… that’s still hard to believe…” she began, and then shook her head to refocus herself. “Come on, you said you still had a few things to do, let’s get to it.” I simply nodded and we
got back into the Nomad, Peebee taking Liam’s place in the back with Vetra in the front. It was a quick drive back to Site two. We picked around for any remaining tech and found two other bodies. A Turian male, who clearly died fighting, and an Asari. We were surprised of the lack of bodies given the reports. Almost seemed as if some bodies must have been moved. And we already know the Nexus didn’t bother coming back… Vetra told us we had around 45 minutes until the colonists arrived so I got to work on the Rensus case. We drove to the site near site 2, where Chief Reynolds was killed, allegedly by Rensus.

When we arrived all that was left was a bit of leg armor with some flesh and bone still there. Seems the body had become food for Kaerkyn, a large insectoid creature with pincers similar to a scorpion or crab. Fortunately, SAM could pick up slight signals from the various pieces. We found the helmet next, but no evidence. Driving East we found his chest piece buried in the sand. There was clearly an opening in the armor on both sides, however, the entry wound was undoubtedly from the back. Rensus was in front of Reynolds. This proved that Rensus’ shot hadn’t killed Reynolds, but it would be wise to find the Omni-tool to leave out any loose ends.

We followed a trail of armor scraps to a cave. A Kaerkyn nest. No clue how many would be in there.

“Alright, we’ll play this safe, Vetra, front and Center. The moment they start coming at us I want that Cyclone working overtime, shooting everything there is. The rest of us will make sure none of them touch you,” I ordered.

“Count on it,” she nodded. We lined up left and right of her, and she led us in. After a few paces, a wave of Kaerkyn spilled out. At least ten of them. Vetra opened fire and we gave supporting fire. They hadn’t even gotten within five feet when the last one crumbled. We found the Omni-tool quickly enough, and SAM analyzed the data.

“The omni-tool recorded two separate shots. One from the back, and one from the front. The first shot was a standard Initiative rifle, which missed. The one from behind was a Kett pulse weapon,” he stated.

“Well, we just proved the man innocent. That feels good,” I smiled. Eager to get this back to the Nexus to help him out.

“Pathfinder, there is also an audio recording,” SAM continued. Maybe I spoke too soon.

“Play it,” I sighed. The log began with Reynolds screaming no, followed by a gunshot. Cassidy Shaw called out, asking where Nilken was.

“Sorry, old friend-had to do it. I’m not dying on this rock,” Nilken’s voice played on the log.

“Sonuvabitch…” I muttered, I felt disappointed at first. Then I felt furious, that bastard knew he shot at Rensus, believed he killed him, and then lied to my face about it hoping that I’d find something he could use. “That lying bastard,” I growled. “He’s not walking free, I won’t have him face a murder charge but he sure as hell is getting whatever punishment they have for attempted murder.” The rest stated their agreement and we began driving back to the new outpost site. A bit less than thirty minutes till they arrived. Given the distance, the trip took only left us with a minute to spare before the colonists arrived. We parked along the outskirts to that we wouldn’t be in the way, and Vetra began typing a message on her Omni-tool, mentioning it was a message for a friend among them. I noticed that before she finished her message, she had glanced at me and chuckled, typing out another quick line before closing the tool. The countdown struck zero and I opened my comms to relay a message.
“Andromeda Initiative, this is Pathfinder Scott Ryder. Eos is ready for deployment,” I stated, a large grin breaking out across my face. A man’s voice, older, a bit gruff, replied:

“Copy that. Outpost Block inbound, and ready as hell.”

At that moment, at least a dozen large shuttles carrying the Pre-fabs descended from the sky, placing them in specific locations forming the bulk of the outposts. A few of which bringing large pieces of the wheel-like structure that would serve as water filtration. And another released a bridge that spanned the small lake in the middle of the outpost. To finish off, a pair of slightly smaller shuttles released a pair of defense turrets at the two entrances to the basin.

Then came the Colonists themselves. Almost a dozen transports appeared, each undoubtedly packed to the brim with eager Colonists, awaiting the start of their new lives on a new world. The first. One shuttle landed near our position. Among the stream of colonists two headed straight for us. One of them I didn’t recognize. An older man, dark skin, slightly shaven beard. The other I did recognize, but was certainly not pleased to see. Addison. Blegh. The man reached out a hand to introduce himself, which I shook.

“August Bradley. Operational head for this block. ‘Mayor’ now, I suppose. We’re ready to make the most of what you delivered.”

“Good to meet you August, Scott Ryder. I almost feel like I should toss you the keys,” I joked. “Be nice, it’s been through a lot.”

“Understood Ryder, we won’t forget One and Two, I can promise you that,” he replied. He moved his arms to the side in a bit of showmanship as he continued. “Prodromos. That’s what we’re calling her.” Odd name, almost sounds like it should mean something.

“Prodromos?” I asked.

“Heh, it means Forerunner, I think you can see the reasoning why,” he chuckled, as he walked away to oversee his outpost. Leaving me alone with Addison. At least she was smiling and seeming friendly.

“They’re eager. I haven’t seen ‘eager’ for months,” she began, gesturing for me to follow her in a walk through the outpost. “Eos is far from golden. But now it’s a producer. A real and reasonable first step. They think you did the impossible. The Nexus-I warned them. Hoping was… irresponsible. You proved me wrong, Pathfinder,” she held her hand out for a shake. I don’t like that she told people not to hope, they need it after all. Given her sudden change in attitude towards me I couldn’t help but feel suspicious. But at the same time, I recognized that might be some bias on my part. Might as well be friendly for now at least.

“I appreciate your candor. We’re all on the same side,” I shook her hand.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” she warned. Leading me further away. The hell does that even mean? There goes the benefit of the doubt I was giving her. Political games and bullshit I’m sure. We made our way to a ridge overlooking Prodromos, shuttles already flying in to drop off supplies. “The reality Ryder, you bought us time. But one outpost on a longshot planet won’t stop us from starving,” she explained.

“I know that Addison, don’t think I’m standing here believing that my job is all done and that it’s all sunshine and rainbows. We’ve already got a lead on more planets with vaults, like the one that cleaned up Eos, and after a stop on the Nexus I fully intend to immediately follow that lead. If I’m right, then there is a whole network of these vaults spanning the cluster,” I explained.
“Well… now it gets complicated. The others are ready to officially sanction your efforts. To be part of your success. We all want the Initiative to succeed. But after failing for so long, no one agrees on how to do it,” she explained.

“Well I got a pretty simple first step. Let me get at those vaults and get us planets. And as a second step, I can work with Kandros to take out Kett positions. Hm, you know what? I got a third and fourth step too. Improve relations with the exiles, and improve relations with the Krogan who got fucked over by Spender and Tann’s stupidity,” My voice gaining slightly more anger and annoyance as I continued.

“Noted… Just go talk to Bradley. We’ll discuss the extended job of Pathfinder on the Nexus,” she stated, beginning to walk away. “Which is also where Tann is waiting,” she warned. Yeah, I’m making his ass wait. I took another moment to just look out at Prodromos from the ridge when my head surged with pain.

“Agh, SAM the hell was that?” I asked.

“A memory trigger Pathfinder. However, my memory array remains locked, I require more triggers,” he informed. Well, my curiosity is peaked at least. I returned to Prodromos, making my way towards Bradley, slowly but surely. As I walked down to the new colony I noticed the Tempest fly overhead, a new landing zone within the perimeter. Assuming the others had either gone to walk around themselves or return to the ship I looked around the buildings myself.

The first building I walked towards I saw Vetra talking with a woman. I walked over to see what was going on and when the woman noticed me she gestured for Vetra to pause, turning around to see who the newcomer is. The redheaded woman introduced herself:

“Hello, Kim Connor. Supplies, trade, procurement. Anything you need, I can provide,” she held out a hand which I shook. “Though I doubt you’ll ever need me, with the Queen Quartermaster on your crew,” she chuckled, glancing at Vetra.

“You know each other, I take it?” I asked. Vetra stepped forward to speak.

“Back on the Nexus, Connor worked with me to get everything for the Tempest,” she explained.

“Well then, my thanks for helping her out,” I remarked. She nodded and continued:

“But I need ground under my feet. And soon, hopefully, trade will flourish on Eos.”

“From everything I’ve seen so far, if you’re good enough for Nyx, Prodromos is lucky to have you.” I noticed Vetra’s mandibles flare ever so slightly and Kim looked up with a wry smile, thinking something, that’s for sure. But what? I honestly don’t have a clue. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. Vetra, gonna explore the colony for a bit, talk to Bradley than head back to the ship. We won’t leave anyone behind but just be ready,” I told her.

“Sure thing Scott,” she nodded, the two women returning to their conversation. I took a quick look inside that building, noticing air mattresses and cots being the beds for the time being, a few colonists thanking me. Exiting the building I entered the building to the east, nodding at Vetra and Kim as I walked by. This building was largely being used for storage. There was a terminal within and I uh… I might have read what was on the screen, an email.

Congrats.

Hey, Connor.
Heard about the new position Prodromos just gained one hell of a business woman—they’re lucky to have you. If we ever find ourselves on the Nexus at the same time. I’m buying you a drink to celebrate.

-Vetra

And Ryder-I know you’re going to get nosy and read this. Hi.

I had to step back and just… re-think my life. And then I nearly died of laughter. That must have been the message she sent earlier. I immediately left the building and returned to my Turian friend and her friend.

“Vetra… you…” I began, trying my damndest not to burst into laughter. “You read me like a fucking book,” I rested my face into my palm and just began laughing. She looked confused for a moment before a look of realization crossed her face and she began laughing, joined in by Kim after she remembered the message. “How did you know…” I asked through the laughter.

“You’re curious, Scott. You searched everything in the Vault. You even went to grab some of that Remnant tech that was shielded when we were running from that death cloud. You can’t help it,” she chuckled.

“Well… guess I’ve learned something about myself,” I chuckled. “Well, I’m going to move on then.”

“See you on the ship Scott,” Vetra replied, turning to face Kim. Kim nodded a goodbye with a wink as she turned to talk with her friend. I continued walking along the colony, entering the lower level of a two-story complex. Against my better judgement with the lesson in humility I just received, I took a look at the two terminals in there. One was off but the other had a message. A log.

**Formal request for Darket Tiervian, #28**

Making the request again, Bradley. I know it’s not your fault. I know she’s supposed to be second wave. But I want a trail so that when all this calms down in a few years, we can get proper outraged about how long it took to reunite families. Especially ones hurt during the Site ½ mess. You know ‘Broken Promise’ is a thing right?

Requesting the deployment of Darket Tiervian, W-84-Krispin. Exo-studies specialist

Reason: she’s an asset that will help viability. She’s also my daughter.

Reading this, I felt for the man. It’s not right that families are separated like this. Not saying that we should just open up every single cryo pod, but I understand. Sarah’s coma makes me feel a similar way to how this father must be. I decided I’d take her info and arrange to wake her up under my authority. She’ll be an asset and she’s going straight to a colony anyway. I continued south, Bradley was standing outside the building anyway so I decided to simply cut my nosy exploration short.

“Mayor Bradley,” I greeted, holding out my hand.

“Please, Pathfinder, just Bradley. Good to see you,” he shook my hand.

“Then in that case it’s just Scott,” I smiled.

“We’re busy as anything, thanks to you. Bit dusty, but we can adapt. It’s worth it when it’s your own,” he stated.
“Let’s not drive people too hard. It’s already been rough just getting this far,” I suggested.

“Nothing you see here came from cracking a whip. Everyone is just ready,” he assured. “You go do what you need to on the Nexus. Follow that dot. I’m sure Eos will have plenty to do later. Some key positions: Connor manages our supply, Ramirez, Medical. Abrams, science. Fawkes, engineering. With them and my Majordomo, we won’t end up like One and Two.”

“They never knew what was waiting for them. But don’t dismiss their efforts, I saw both sites. They died trying,” I reminded.

“And they deserved better from the Nexus. That’s where I point the finger. We’ll remember,” he assured. It irked me as well that the Nexus just left those bodies there. Didn’t even try to recover them. “You changed this planet, but that doesn’t make it easy. We’ll both use the efforts of those who went before,” he remarked. Referring to dad, even gesturing at the armor I was wearing. Dad’s armor. I nodded a silent thanks as he continued. “Good people, every last one. I’d have been honored to fail with any of them.” Bradley’s already gotten on my good side. Doesn’t like the bullshit and still values and respects the efforts of those who tried yet failed here.

“Good to hear Bradley, I know not everyone died outright.”

“True, I did hear there were staggered evacs. If any of them want to try again, they’re welcome. Oh, and Pathfinder? This is for you. It’s our flag,” he stated as he handed me a rolled up blue cloth. The flag, as he stated. “Hang it where the Nexus can see. It’s touched the soil of our first outpost in Andromeda, make it real,” he requested.

“Can do Bradley, can do.” I returned to the Ship, Vetra noticing me as I walked back and ending her conversation with Kim to make her way to the ship, walking up beside me.

“You know, I think it’s starting to kick in Scott. It’s starting to feel real,” she remarked.

“The outpost?” I asked, as we began walking up the cargo ramp, the Nomad already parked inside the Tempest.

“Not just that. It’s a helluva big part of course but… It’s starting to set in that… that I think we can do this. We have a chance. Hope. We did it once, we can do it again. Thank you.” I placed a hand on her shoulder:

“Come on Vetra, this isn’t all me. I would have died at the first Monolith if it wasn’t for my team. Which you’re a part of, in case you’ve forgotten,” I joked.

“But if you never showed up we’d still be sitting on the Nexus with our thumbs up our asses,” she pointed out. “Thanks to you, we have this. Thanks to you, we have hope. A hope of a home.”
Chapter Notes

Sorry about the inconsistency of these updates. I got both college and work with varying times for the latter, so sometimes I just don't have the energy at night to upload a burst for y'all. sorry

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Upon entering the Tempest, Vetra had gone to ensure everything was in order supply-wise. Gil was already hard at work on the Nomad, looking at its inner workings, clearly eager to begin tinkering. His face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. I made my way over to the armory and deposited my weapons and armor in my locker, simply left with the Armor's under suit, I returned to my room to change into the hoodie and jeans I had picked out earlier. As I had stepped in my room and saw my bed I realized just how exhausted I was. It had been a helluva long day. Hell, hungry too. I had a few MREs today, sure, but the last one had been before we entered the vault.

Though my stomach demanded a trip into the mess, I instead climbed the ladder upstairs and made my way to the meeting room, leaning against the round table when I got there.

"SAM, headcount, everyone on board?" I asked.

"Drack arrived shortly after you, and the others were on board before," the AI answered.

"Sounds good, what about Liam's condition?"

"He is healing nicely, though currently confined to a bed in the medical bay per Dr. T'Perro's orders. However, she has cleared him to begin moving around, though not for combat, after a standard rest cycle," he explained.

"Then I'll save the meeting for the morning. But I want you to call up Drack and Peebee,"

"Affirmative."

I remained standing for a moment as first I was joined by Peebee, who began to ask what the purpose of this was but I told her to wait for Drack. She didn't have to wait long as a moment later the massive and old Krogan lumbered his way up here, glancing at Peebee, noticing they were the only two I had called up.

"Welcome aboard you two. Didn't call you up here for anything too important or lengthy, just laying out living arrangements. There's bunks and a small living area down in the crew quarters," I began. Then I looked at Drack, and remembered the size of those bunks. "Which might not be able to hold a Krogan," I cautioned.

"Bah, don't worry about it kid. I can sleep damn near anywhere these days," Drack replied.

"Well then in that case, the two of you are free to claim any room on board as a general living space so long as no one else already has. Vetra has the armory, Liam has the storage room on the other side from her, and Cora has the Bio-lab. And of course, you can't claim the Med-bay or my
"quarters," I chuckled.

"I'll take the escape pod!" Peebee called out?

"Leaving already?" I joked. Kind of.

"No, just… I'm just more comfortable with that," she sounded uneasy, uncomfortable.

"I already put my rucksack in the kitchen. I'll just hand out there if that's fine," Drack remarked.

"Well, then in that case, you're good to go. Talk with Cora or SAM to get shower and meal schedules, and see Lexi for a physical. For now, I think we're going to stay parked here on Prodromos for a few hours. The rest of us are exhausted and could use some shut-eye. After that, showers, food, and we should begin making our way back to the Nexus," I explained.

The two of them nodded and Peebee gave a wave as they began walking away, and I made my way to the bridge. Entering the bridge, I noticed Kallo and Suvi typing away at their respective consoles. Kallo was the first to notice the door opening and look over, Suvi noticing shortly after.

"Fantastic work today Pathfinder, the Vault, now Prodromos, its… amazing," Suvi stated.

"Yes, very impressive Ryder. Eager to see where those coordinates lead us," Kallo remarked.

"No need to thank me, and it's Scott, both of you," I chuckled. "Now, Kallo, it has been a helluva long day for me and the others. I'm thinking we stay here and sleep for around… nine hours. With two hours for getting ready. I know that may seem like a while but holy hell am I exhausted. And I think we earned a leisurely ride to the Nexus. On top of that there's some things I want to discuss with the crew before we head out and I'd like to talk to everyone before we make it back," I explained.

"Understood… Scott," he smiled. "Sleep well." I nodded my thanks and made my way out of the bridge. The door opened and Peebee was there carrying a large crate in her hands, I practically had to dive backwards to prevent her from crashing into me.

"Only a foot locker huh?" I teased.

"Sorry, I swear there's important stuff in here. Research related. Remnant based," she explained as she moved into the escape pod bay, setting the crate down.

"Research I assume we'll be privy to?"

"Yes, yes, of course. But… I'd like it to be a surprise for now…" I'll admit, a bit odd, but… well they do say genius and eccentricity are two sides of the same coin.

"Alright, have your fun. I'm going to get some sleep." She nodded a farewell as I climbed down the ladder. Before I opened the door to my quarters my stomach decided to remind me of its hunger with a growl, so I moved into the mess instead. I chuckled as I noticed that all but two of the cupboards were clearly labeled "Levo-food" with the other two labeled "Dextro Vetra's Food." I chuckled at the poor, and likely intentionally poor job of crossing out Dextro and scribbling "Vetra" above it. Looking into the cupboards where I could find food I could eat, I saw that all the good stuff would take longer than I cared to wait to cook. I refused to end the day with another MRE so I decided I'd go simple with a bowl of cereal, the same kind Vetra had a crate full of in the armory. Blast-oh's. Damn Jelly. That movie series was arguably the shittiest thing I had ever seen. A perfect example of… Space Hollywood… refusing to kill a series that needed to stop way before it got to where it is. It occurred to me as I was pouring myself a bowl that I never actually knew
what the galactic scale version of Hollywood was. The hell was the big movie making center of the Milky way?

I sat down with my bowl and a spoon, munching away at the cereal, which tasted decent enough, as far as cereal goes, and simply thought. It occurred to me that back home, there were series, games, movies, extranet vid shows, books even, that I'd never get to see the newest entries of. So many stories left unfinished for us. Forever. Or perhaps… maybe it would be our job to pick them up and continue them ourselves. Would be interesting if we ever made contact with the Milky way again and compared how the stories went on. Damn, I sure hope that at least someone brought a stash of the classics. Plenty of old movies I'd love to see again. Maybe even watch with the crew. Finishing my meal and thoughts, I quickly rinsed the bowl out and placed it in the dishwasher. After a small trip to the bathroom I returned to my cabin.

I chuckled as I remembered the Pyjak that Herik gave me. Easy to remember given that it had curled itself up onto my pillow. Before going to sleep I checked my terminal for e-mails. A reporter asking for an interview was one of them as well as a message from Vetra. One she had sent before we landed. She referenced her mention of "back channels" and attempted to clear it up. Explaining that with things the way they were that proper channels get in the way and if I ever wanted her to stop, she would. I respected that. I also understood why she used such channels and trusted that she wouldn't use them in any way that would harm people on the Nexus. Given that there was nothing else interesting, I tossed off my shirt and hoodie, kicked off my shoes, and removed my jeans and socks.

I made my way to the bed, looking at the window to notice that the material had darkened, like a kind of blinder to keep the sunlight out. I chuckled as I realized I still needed to come up with a name for the little Pyjak on my pillow. For now, I just pet him enough to wake him and lightly moving him out of the way. I got under the covers and was surprised at the comfort of the bed. It wasn't the greatest bed I've ever slept on, but it sure as hell wasn't like sleeping on a rock. I set the alarm on my omni-tool for nine hours and closed my eyes.

And just like that, I was out.

"I died because of you… because of you and your carelessness," who- what? What is this?

"If you weren't so busy staring at a pretty little sunrise, thinking the galaxy was all butterflies and goddamn rainbows you'd have gotten out of the goddamn way and I'd still be alive!" the distorted and gruff familiar voice whispered from the shadows. Where am I?

"Dad, I… I didn't… I didn't know! How could I have possibly known? I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" I cried out.

"SORRY IS NOT FUCKING GOOD ENOUGH YOU LITTLE SACK OF SHIT! SORRY IS NOT GOING TO BRING ME BACK TO FUCKING LIFE NOW IS IT!?” the ghastly voice of my father boomed.

"They're all going to die because of you. Because you aren't good enough. Because you got the one person who was good enough killed. Your little band of misfits on the Tempest, a ship that should have been mine, everyone on the Nexus, and your sister. Every. Last. One. They are all going to die. From the Kett, from starvation, from any number of sick and horrible things. And it's all… Your… Fault…” As the voice finished its latest round of mockery, the shadows changed to an image. I saw my sister, lying on the bed I saw her in, hands clasped on her stomach. Eyes still closed. And then I heard her voice.
"What… where am I? Why can't I see anything? Wh-Why can't I move!? Where is everyone!? Dad? Scott? Somebody? Anyone!? SOMEBODY PLEASE! HELP ME! Am… am I dead? I don't want to die, please, don't let me die…” the voice of my sister began sobbing.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

Not one damn thing.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I shot upwards in my bed in a cold sweat, gasping for air. That… was not expected. I guess I hadn't realized it as I hadn't had much down time. The things my dad said in that nightmare. There was a part of me that knew damn well that he'd never think what was said in that dream. But… that doesn't mean another part of me doesn't believe what he said. I tried to focus on how I've managed to succeed so far, but… my own mind wouldn't let me. Too many things had yet to happen. Still far too many unknowns.

And then Sarah… I can't do a goddamn thing to help her out of that coma. I have no idea if she's aware while comatose. If she's scared. I wouldn't be getting anymore sleep. I checked my Omni-tool for the time, and though I had told Kallo to wait nine hours, it had only been six. Not as much as I'd like, but as much as I'm going to get. I tossed on a pair of gym shorts and a light T-shirt, taking clean underwear and a towel with me for a shower, as I figured most of the crew was asleep.

I didn't shower long, thoughts still plagued by the nightmare, not even wasting a small amount of time to enjoy the hot water. I finished and got back into my clothes, returning to my room to grab a pair of socks and shoes. Feeling hungry, I decided to visit the mess. Grab a bite. Hell, the cereal wasn't bad, might just do that again and keep it simple. Before I opened the door however, I heard a familiar voice coming from within, sounding like on a comm device.

"And don't give the Pathfinder too much trouble," I heard Kesh request. She must be talking to Drack.

"Quit worrying ru'shan. It'll be fine," he reassured her. Ru'shan? That's not coming through the translator. Sounds like a term of endearment.

"Right," she didn't sound convinced. "You settled in yet?" I decided to wait until they were done with their call before getting a bite.

"Yeah, got all my stuff here. All ready to go once the crew is done with their little nap," he chuckled.

"Hey, they're not Krogan. They can't go on for as long as we can. Besides, give the Pathfinder some credit. He lost his father two days ago," she cautioned. I sighed, only two damn days, and I had a nightmare about it last night.

"Well… shit… I never would have known. Alright, alright, I'll go easy on them," he reassured.

"Good. You have your repair kit too right? Spare parts?" Kesh asked.

"I carry that emergency kit you put together all the time." Spare parts for his weapons I suppose.

"Good. Good. I'll check in with you later," she ended with. Now that it seemed the call was over I walked in. Drack with a smile on his face as he lowered his arm.
"Ha, 'Don't give the Pathfinder too much trouble.' Ah, Ru'shan…" he chuckled. I noticed he had left a rifle on the table, being cleaned and a few bottles as well.

"Who were you talking too?" I asked. I knew exactly who it was but felt asking would be better.

"Kesh, you know her. Nexus superintendent. She still thinks she can boss me around just 'cause she's my granddaughter," he chuckled. Granddaughter, that makes sense. And I suppose I've learned a new Krogan word as well.

"Well, welcome to the Tempest. Trouble's what we do," I joked. Though I may prefer the calm, I can still have some fun with the trouble. Always been a bit of an adrenaline junkie.

"Ha, I like the way you think kid," he grinned.

"Hmm. Someone somewhere shivered when I said that," I smirked.

"Probably Tann," Drack chuckled. "Damn politicians." I glanced at the rucksack he had on the floor, smaller than I'd expect. Hell, I'm still surprised that Drack was fully equipped in his armor.

"Is that all you brought?"

"You learn to travel lean when supplies are tight and you're on your own."

"Leaving the Nexus can't have been an easy choice."

"It was, actually. Staying became impossible. After the mutiny, we had two choices. Buckle under Tann's rules, or start our own colony. Easy choice, bad consequences all around." he explained.

"So why did Kesh stay?" I asked.

"Because she knew that you needed her. Without my Ru'shan you wouldn't have had much of a station to tie your ship to. As for me…I'm way more useful out here. Lots of shit to shoot at, for one."

"I do understand why the Krogan left. Hell, I respect it. Accepting the rule of someone with a clear bone to pick against your species? Who doesn't even want you to have a voice? Fuck that. Your people come first," I remarked.

"Keeping Kesh and our colony safe will always be my top priority. Which is why I'm happy to tag along. Help make this galactic shit hole a bit more hospitable."

"As good a reason as any." I moved to grab the cereal and the bowl as well as a glass from the cupboards.

"So, I thought your plan and the others was to sleep for a few more hours," Drack asked as I began filling the bowl with Blast-oh's.

"That was the plan, and I did sleep for a while, but I woke up not long ago and… well, I won't be getting any more sleep, I know that," I didn't want to explain what I was woken up by. I am trying to get my mind off it after all. A flash of understanding crossed Drack's face as he nodded his head.

"I know exactly what you mean kid…" he muttered. I scooted by him to get at the fridge and the milk inside, pouring myself a glass. "So, you meet Spender yet? Colonial Affairs. The 'ass' in 'assistant director'? Got no damned idea why Addison keeps him around," he grumbled.

"Heard about him, he lied about the deal with you after the uprising, right?" I asked as I sat down,
munching on my breakfast.

"That he did. And he's had it out for Kesh ever since. He's up to something. I just can't prove it. We should pay him a visit on the Nexus," he growled.

"So, tell me your account of what happened. The deal and all that."

"Spender cut a deal with us. Take care of the uprising, and we'd get a say in station politics. When we followed through, he lied, saying he never made a deal. We still demanded a voice, and Tann flipped his shit. Came down hard. Too hard. So, we left. Now Kesh is alone on that station…"

"You think someone might try to hurt her?" I asked, continuing my meal.

"Ha, more like she airlocks Spender. Or he tries to stab her in the back, and THEN she airlocks him," he chuckled. "I just don't want her getting hurt, even if she'd just airlock the fucker right after. Anyways, Tann wouldn't listen to me when I told him Spender played a part of the uprising. I had no proof. Shit, even if I did, he'd likely write it off since I'm Krogan," he growled.

"So, what's my part to play?"

"As much as I'd love to simply walk up to him and rip his lying head off that would only make things worse. This whole mess needs to be sorted out, with my clan back on the Nexus, without Spender fucking us over. Way I see it, you're probably the best person for the job. Find proof of Spender's role, proof of his lie too if you can, get leadership willing to apologize," Drack explained.

"Sounds like something I can do. I want your people back with us, with a voice. You deserve it. And I hope to reconcile with the exiles too. Another fuck up of leadership's."

"Good to hear. Some exiles have turned into genuine bloodthirsty backstabbing assholes, but plenty are still good people who just got caught in the middle," he informed.

"So, how did you and Vetra meet?" I asked, curious at a Krogan and Turian being friendly.

"Huh, right, your dad brought you on pretty late didn't he? Must have been a helluva learning curve since they thawed you," he chuckled.

"That's an understatement," I smirked.

"You make do with what you get. Anyway, I met Vetra back when they were building the Nexus. She swiped supplies I was trying to get for Kesh, right under my nose. I tried to intimidate her into turning them over to me, and let me tell you, that Turian takes shit from no one," he chuckled.

"Heh, she does seem rather strong willed. And confident. She really has a way of getting shit done."

"You're telling me," he groaned. "But it's something I respect about her. Anyways, the best part? She waited until I saw her again-in Kesh's office, no less- to tell me she'd been working for Kesh all along!" I had made the mistake of just taking a spoonful of cereal and nearly choked on it as I struggled to laugh and breathe. "They're both still laughing at me over that," he groaned. Finally, I managed to clear my throat:

"Holy shit, I need to listen to her tell this story." I laughed. Drack and I talked more, even after I finished my breakfast. He had over a thousand years of combat experience. Spent most of his time as a merc. We talked about the Krogan colony, self-sustainable, looking for more land, even has
farming. He also gave me a few tips for fighting Kett, even for a few variants I hadn't encountered yet.

"Well, I think I'm going to go see if anyone else is up, a few people I haven't had the chance to talk to. But before I do that, one last thing. Is everyone a 'kid' to you?" I asked.

"Ha. When you get to be my age… yeah, pretty much. I'll see you around then, kid." I nodded and checked the time. Should be another two hours until everyone should be awake, with another two after that to be ready. And then I already knew I'd want to call everyone up for a meeting before we set out again. I thought I'd take the time to talk with any of the crew I had yet to speak with yet, so long as they were awake.

"SAM, which crewmembers are currently awake and where are they?" I asked.

"Aside from Drack, Peebee is currently awake within the escape pod bay. Dr. Anwar and Kallo are conversing within the crew quarters, Gil is tinkering with the Nomad, and Lexi is awake in the med-bay and has also requested to speak with you," SAM explained. Guess I knew where to go first. I walked across to the med-bay and opened the door to see Liam asleep on a bed. He was currently shirtless with bandaging wrapped across his stomach. Lexi was seated at her desk in the back-left corner of the room. Hearing the door open she waved me over and put a finger to her lips in a gesture of silence. As I neared she stood:

"You're up early. Wouldn't expect to see you for another two hours.

"Surprised me too. But there was no getting back to sleep with what woke me up," I muttered.

"Oh?"

"Uh, some other time. Not now," I avoided the question. No doubt she'd ensure she got an answer later.

"Hold still," she whispered, as she grabbed my arm and stabbed me in the forearm with a needle. Was not expecting a shot. I gave a small grunt in pain. "Sorry."


"Still trying to get my bearings. I thought I'd be waking up colonists, not taking care of the Pathfinder," she explained.

"An Asari doctor with centuries of experience? I couldn't be in better hands," I reassured her.

"And yet those exact hands just stabbed you," she retorted.

"We all have off days," I joked.

"I always hoped to work in the field, but everything's happening so quickly."

"Well then focus on what you've done right. Like with Liam here. You've fixed him up," I pointed out.

"You have a point there," she remarked. "I suppose this is my opportunity to study alien species first hand. Getting a Kett specimen aboard the Hyperion would be difficult, but here…"

"What?" I asked.

"A Kett corpse. Autopsy. A live subject would be better, but I'm not greedy," she explained.
"Why do you care about the Kett?" I asked, hoping she wouldn't mistake the curiosity for judgement.

"Harry didn't tell you? I'm a specialist in alien anatomy. Which from my perspective, includes you," she reminded. "My thesis on Krogan virility and aggression is what got me in the Initiative."

"That is a very… uh… specific topic..." I remarked. Not something I really want to read about. Questions I'm ok leaving left unanswered.

"I grew up on Omega. Lots of Krogan mercs. The best habitat outside of Tuchanka," she explained. Ah yes, Omega. The lawless capital of the Terminus Systems. You'll never find a greater hive of scum and villainy… surprising someone as well-mannered as her came from there. "But we were discussing the Kett," she continued. "An autopsy could teach us potential weaknesses, average lifespan…"

"Well I already know one Kett weakness," I teased.

"Oh? What is it?" she asked, not catching on that this was a tease. I almost felt bad for what had to come next.

"Bullets," I chuckled. A rather large shit-eating grin on my face. Her face dropped into an annoyed yet slightly amused glare:


"Ouch, alright Lexi, if that's the game you want to play, I'll play," I chuckled.

"Uh huh… So, I saw we have a stow-away," she remarked.

"Stowaway?"

"Peebee. I noticed she set up in the escape pod. You don't need a psychologist to tell you she's got commitment issues." Sure there's an interesting story behind that. I still had time to kill so I decided to talk a bit longer. Her mother was a dancer on Omega and her dad a bouncer. She discovered her talent for medicine from patching up her dad, steady hands. They put every credit they earned into her education. Remarkable really, hell, touching, even. Unfortunately, both died in the middle of a turf war from the gangs. Trying to change off the subject I learned how long she's known Harry, Dr. Caryle. A medical panel on the citadel, back before the old doc complained of Arthritis, as she put it. She also told me of how an Asari doctor was on the human ark. Expert in Alien anatomy? Human anatomy is included. And Harry insisted. I considered talking to her about the memory fragments… but perhaps now isn't the time. Dad wanted them secret for a reason, I may want to find out why first.

"So, what can you tell me of the crew? I don't need to know anything private of course, just things to look out for or perhaps something to help them along. I just want a doc's view," I requested.

"I think I can manage that. Anyone in particular?"

"Let's start with Liam. Physically and mentally," I hoped to get info on his wounds.

"As for his wounds, I'll let him go after a few tests when he wakes up. But I'll want him to sleep in here just to make sure everything is healing as it should. I suspect he should be combat ready again in about three days. Mentally, his 'we can't lose' attitude is commendable. However, I worry how he'll react when something does go wrong. You know it will sooner or later," she reminded.
"I do. Hell, it already has," I muttered. "For now, I just try not to think about that. Keep to the here and now. So, how about Vetra?"

"Vetra's used to having someone depend on her. I believe that's why she's so resourceful and likes providing for other people. However, I do think she could use some 'me-time," she explained.

"That makes sense. I like that about her. And I hope she manages to get some time for herself. I owe her that much with the beautiful weapon selection she got for us," I remarked. "So, how about Drack? Is he good?" Lexi looked at me curiously for a moment after my comment, likely making some sort of mental note, before responding to my question with a huff:

"That old bastard's always 'good.' I've never met anyone who can be so stubborn and so appreciative. Could you… look out for him, Ryder?" she asked.

"First off, it's just Scott, Lexi. And although I don't exactly think he needs me too, sure. I'll keep an eye on him," I assured.

"Thank you. And… maybe don't mention I asked?" she requested, to which I just gave a slight chuckle and nod.

"So, Peebee?"

"She's avoiding me. Probably thinks I'll poke her with a needle if she gets too close," she chuckled.

"Well, to be fair every time I've spoken with you, you have given me a shot," I joked.

"Not in the hallway!" she retorted. Liam gave a slight half-awake groan a he rolled to his side, reminding us we weren't alone in this room as we lowered our voices again.

"Cora?" Might as well get that over with.

"Processing. Your father was her mentor. She expected to be Pathfinder, to follow in his footsteps. But he gave the role of Pathfinder to you. Just because she trusts his judgement, doesn't mean she's not confused. Or hurt," she explained.

"If you ask me she doesn't exactly trust his judgement about that. And she also seems a bit insensitive to the fact that while she lost a mentor I lost a father with a comatose sister," I remarked, anger in my voice but careful not to keep it too loud. "In fact, I specifically remember her saying 'instead he chooses you? An untrained Pathfinder and all this mess to fix? The hell was he thinking?' Completely disregarding the training and skills I do have thanks to dad. And then she has the gall to say that it will be her job to ensure my father's dream lives on, implying that I'm not doing that," I growled.

"Really? Well that's… interesting. I'll need to look into that with her," Lexi remarked.

"Sorry, didn't mean to get angry. That just… struck a nerve. It's still raw…" I shook my head, wanting to continue. "Gil?"

"Gil likes to use humor as a defensive technique. Something I believe you two might have in common. He'd rather bury himself in the Nomad than tackle emotions head-on."

"Got me there," I chuckled. "Suvi?"

"She's remarkably adaptive. Frankly I'm kind of jealous."
"And to top it all off, how about Kallo?"

"Quite the gossip. Tight-lipped about himself though."

"Hmm, well thanks for the talk Lexi. Given me much to consider and think about. Keep him healthy now alright?" I asked, gesturing to Liam as I began walking out. I walked into crew-quarters, noticing Suvi was currently sitting down in the lounge area reading a book by herself. I grabbed a chair and pulled it across from her. She looked up from her book and jumped a bit when she saw me, leaving a bookmark in it and setting it aside. Surprising to see an actual physical copy of a book these days, but not an unwelcome one, I still enjoyed those over the digital books myself. She lifted her arm, gesturing for me to wait a moment as she pulled up some data from her Omni-tool, turning it around so I could see.

"Scans of the scourge. Dark energy clouds. It's amazing, isn't it?" she remarked. I looked at it, remembering the views I had of it over Habitat 7.

"I suppose it is… Darkly beautiful, in its own way," that sounded surprisingly poetic.

"'Darkly beautiful.' I like that," she remarked. "Heleus is incredible, isn't it? Not just constructs like the Scourge and the Remnant vaults. Just… all of it, so alien. A constant reminder of the divine intelligence behind all creation."

"Divine intelligence? Like a god?" I asked. I gotta admit, I was surprised by this from our science officer. I'm not exactly a religious man, but I also don't have some pole up my ass about someone having religious beliefs. I was also curious to see how a scientific yet still religious mind interpreted their faith.

"Yes, I believe in a higher power. I know it's a little odd. But I am a scientist because science brings me closer to something greater than myself," she explained. An interesting view but I doubted that was all of it for her. I made sure to choose my words carefully as this is always a touchy subject, and I didn't want to accidentally say something that would paint me as a jackass.

"Personally, I don't see why the universe needs to have one. We've discovered a scientific explanation for just about everything by now. What we haven't? Well, just because we don't know now doesn't mean we never will. And frankly, if the universe doesn't have a creator? Well then in my opinion that just makes everything that much more beautiful. That much more amazing. As for Heleus, you said yourself that most of what we've seen is artificial," I replied.

"I understand your thinking and I appreciate it. Back to Heleus, yes, we're creative beings. Whoever made the Remnant was too. Why should that be proof against a god? Wouldn't a true creator want to pass on the drive to invent?" she asked.

"Before we continue, I do just wish to say that I'm perfectly fine with you believing whatever you wish, however I'm just enjoying this theological debate. I enjoy seeing other viewpoints. Things to think about. So, I also apologize if I accidentally cause offense. Anyways, if everything was set in place by a divine being, why be a scientist?" I asked.

"If I have reverence for a creator, how could I not want to study their creation? My faith does not hinder my work as a scientist, it encourages it. My senses tell me what the world is. Science shows me how it came to be. And religion tells me why," she explained.

"You have a unique viewpoint Suvi, I respect that."

"Thank you, Scott. I enjoy being challenged. It forces me to dig deep on my beliefs. It's healthy,"
she smiled.

"Well on that we can agree," I joked.

"I saw pictures of the vault. The size. How much of it didn't you see, I wonder. What if it's way bigger? What's all that space for?" she wondered.

"Wild Remnant parties. What else?" I joked.

"Well that's a thought. You don't really think they- Oh. Joking. I see. Hah! Good one…" she muttered, slightly embarrassed as she looked down and wrung her hands. Deciding to change the topic I asked her about the Nexus science team. She talked with them a lot, bouncing ideas off them. I also asked her about our scans of Andromeda from back in the Milky way. Any scans we could have made should have been millions of years out of date. Apparently, it wasn't our tech that scanned Andromeda.

It was Geth tech. Apparently the Geth had an array in deep space. Those flashlight headed bastards had rebuilt a mass relay, and turned the approach corridor into an FTL sensor. Like a telescope, but it operated faster than light. Much more recent data. A telescope like this could have the potential to be a fantastic tool at spying on enemy fleet deployments, but… for some reason the Geth had trained it out into dark space. Searching for something. What? We had absolutely no idea. But what logs we had recovered said they were being absolutely thorough, not wanting to miss a thing. Something about that just sent chills up my spine.

I changed the topic to the scourge. All we were certain about it was that it was artificial. Either someone put it there, or someone fucked up and accidentally made it. I gave Suvi a farewell and made my way towards the bridge. Would be a good chance to talk to Kallo or Peebee. I entered the bridge and saw Kallo sitting in his chair, running a few checks.

"Glad you stopped by," he began, turning to face me. "Nothing like being on the bridge of your very own ship, is there?" he asked, some pride in his voice.

"When we're out there, I could just stand here and drink in the view all day," I remarked. I hadn't spent much time on the bridge on our way to Eos but I could still see the same view from my quarters.

"When I was test piloting the ship back home, I often did just that. Of course, it took a whole team to build the Tempest. I was the only one to come to Heleus, though," he explained.

"Why did you?"

"What can I say? We poured our hearts into a ship that wouldn't realize her potential until Andromeda. I could've stayed on the shore and waved goodbye… or took the leap to see how it all turned out."

"I get that. Live leaving a good story half-finished. You wanted to know if all your work made a difference."

"The team liked that one of us was going. It felt right, after all we went through. I remember Sorenna debugging line 2281 over and over, chewing that green pencil. Teon and O'Connell arguing equations, tapping on the console, three drips of coffee on the corner…” he reminisced. I was impressed with his memory.

"You remember all that?" I asked.
"Yes, Salarians have photographic memories, and apparently mine's unusually sharp. I can see my memories vividly, as if it's still happening," he explained. "Though with the Salarian Ark missing, you may not get many chances to compare." His voice laced with sadness. Fear for his people.

"We'll find them Kallo. I promise," I reassured.

"Of course, of course. I just… have to be patient. That's all," he tried to reassure himself. "Thank you, Ryder. They've talked about gutting the Tempest for parts for months. I've been afraid of that happening for so long, then with your father I thought that the Tempest was doomed. We built her for this. She deserves to be in a Pathfinder's hands. So that all our work can mean something." I let Kallo get back to it made my way to the escape pod, knocking on the door before I entered.

Remnant tech and equipment to research it was scattered throughout the room and I could see a bed set up in the escape pod itself. Peebee was currently stood at her desk, typing on her computer as she looked at the Remnant data core from the vault.

"So, what are you up to?" I asked. She looked up in surprise, apparently so focused in her work she didn't notice the knock or the door opening.

"Wha-Oh! Just going through what we found at the Vault. Especially those scans you picked up in that area you called a Library. Good work with that, by the way. If I can crack this data storage box, it'll help with a personal project I have back on the Nexus. This is a nice, quiet, out of the way place where I can tinker, and I can sleep anywhere," she explained. "Not exactly homey, but I like that. Not looking for a home." Hm, like those commitment issues Lexi mentioned. "Oh! But I will help you find everyone a home. While I'm tagging along at least," her eyes widened as she tried to reassure me.

"Does your brain ever take a break?" I chuckled. Seems she has two modes, fast, and too fast for someone to follow.

"Heh, sorry. Not really, even my dreams are in time lapse," she joked. "I get it, you want to know who's on your ship, so you're here to figure out what makes me tick right?"

"Sure, I like to know who I'm working with. And so long as I'm in charge I'd like to make sure those under my charge are comfortable," I explained.

"Thanks. Well," she began, sarcastic drama dripping from her voice. "I was born in a log cabin on rural Hyetiana to simple but loving parents just trying to…" she let out a fake snore. "I look forward, not back, Ryder. Why snooze through my life story? Get to know me out in the field. Uncovering the mysteries of the galaxy," she requested. "That's why I'm here. Got tired of yawning back home," she groaned.

"Maybe you just needed more sleep," I teased.

"Heh, we were out for 600 years. I made this trip with a special someone and she woke up entirely different. I've slept enough," she explained. Maybe that's the root of her commitment issues. "Ryder-"

"Just Scott," I stopped her, smirking.

"Scott, the Milky Way was so… been-there-done-that. Even if I hadn't, someone else had. If there's one thing you should know about me, it's that I live for the unknown. For the never-been-done," she explained. I like that, it's a reason I can relate to. And I'll respect that there are some things about her past she doesn't want to disclose.
"Well congratulate yourself. No one has ever so successfully dodged my attempts to get to know them," I joked.

"Yes!" she threw her hands in the air, "I'm number one!" she cheered. "Buy me a drink sometime. Who knows what will spill out of my mouth," she suggested. Maybe that's just my slightly fucked up head but that sounded a bit suggestive. I hope it wasn't meant that way, I'm not one to just hop into a bed with the first woman to offer. "Hmm, think you can help me with something?" she asked.

"Depends on what it is, but shoot."

"I need Remnant scrap. I call it rem-tech. It's for projects like the one I mentioned earlier, which you are going to just love, by the by," remarked. "Promise to bring me what you scrounge up and I will submit to your questions," she offered.

"Rem-tech? Sure, I can manage that. So, what drew you to them in the first place?" I asked.

"You're kidding, right? Evidence of a sophisticated species no one knows anything about? It doesn't get more intriguing than that!" she exclaimed. "There's so much to discover. I want to be the first to figure them out. And the tech! Completely different scale. If we can appropriate it... who knows what advances we'll make," she wondered. I gave a farewell and walked out of the room to leave her be. Then my omni-tool's alarm went off, apparently, I forgot to turn it off myself.

"SAM, is there anyone who still needs to get ready for the day?" If we could just get going now that would be great. I could make any other conversations on the way back to the Nexus.

"Vetra and Cora are both waking up and preparing for the day, and Lexi is waking up Liam for a round of medical checks. Additionally, given the current shower schedule, male crewmembers will need to wait an hour before they have a chance," SAM explained. Well I'm not eager to talk to Cora but I do enjoy chatting with Vetra. I suppose I'll go see what Gil is up to. Likely tinkering with the Nomad.

I was right. I walked into the cargo bay to see him beneath the Nomad, tinkering.

"Hey Gil, whatcha up to down there?" I asked. He set his tools down and slid himself out from under the ground vehicle, getting to his feet and wiping off his pants with a rag.

"Just looking to see what this little baby has. And making a list of what I need to make it even better. Turn off a few safeties, stronger shields, longer boosts, the works. In fact, I spoke with Vetra last night and arranged that whatever I need, she'll get her hands on. The people she pulls favors from are doing a lot more for a lot less than normal given just what those favors are going into," he explained. Seeming a bit giddy with a new toy to play with.

"I like the sound of that, seems like another thing I'll need to thank her for. So, what do you think of the crew? Seems like we have a good group."

"Well Vetra and Suvi are my girls. Get along well, mutual respect, good friends. Peebee is a real spark plug. I like her, but damn is she exhausting," he chuckled. "Drack I like. My kind of guy. Brash. Takes no shit."

"I pity the person who tries," I joked.

"There wouldn't be much left to bury," he chuckled. "As far as your Hyperion buds go? Doc's a bit nosey, but I suppose that comes with the job. Liam's good for a laugh or two but haven't talked much with him. Cora... she's a bit by the book for my tastes."
"Can't say I'm a fan of it either. Sure, we need someone to keep the zoo in check but she could do to let loose a bit," I replied.

"Zoo? Are you calling me an animal Ryder?" he spoke with mock offense. Rather convincingly too, to Gil's credit. I hesitated for a moment and he continued. "Can I be a Mongoose? Cool little cobra killers. NO, WAIT! A CROW! Smart, irreverent, obnoxious, me in a nutshell," he joked.

"You and me both," I chuckled. "Kallo?"

"A pilot," was all he said.

"And…?"

"He flies the ship."

"That's it?"

"Does a Pathfinder know what to do with a dead end?" he asked.

"Touché Brodie, Touché. So, I've heard that we have you to thank for getting this ship ready so quickly," I changed topic.

"Vetra brings her impossible tasks to me. I was itching for this call. Ready as all hell," he exclaimed. "Don't tell her, but I fudge reports to come in early, then bust ass without anyone knowing to make up for it. Expands my legend. I convey calm and assurance, whole team relaxes, they do their jobs better," he explained.

"I'll take your word for it. So, friends off the ship?"

"Always good for a laugh, know lots of people but… don't really let many in. My one true friend is on the Nexus. She's the only piece of home I brought with me," he explained.

"I get that. So, she just a friend? Or…" I asked. Bit curious.

"Or… oh! No, no no, nothing like that. More you and I get to know each other the more you'll probably hear about her."

"Ah, my bad, sorry. So, how about the Nexus all those months?"

"You're fine. So, you ever eaten overcooked space cow tongue?"

"Can't say that I have… seems a bit shifty," I remarked.

"It's super tough. Wondering if you're gonna die from a critical malfunction or starvation. Imagining which would be worse…" he remembered. Clearly not happy memories. "But hey, you could take a break from the fear and boredom to dwell on being a part of the biggest failure in galactic history. Hell, maybe even participate in a revolt..." Humor deflecting emotions. Like Lexi said. It's something I know well.

"What was your take on that mess?"

"Sure as hell wasn't placing any bets. Frankly I don't think anyone came out of that well. Whatever side you're on, you die a bit inside when your brother. When your teammate becomes an enemy. We travelled all this way full of hope and wonder… and we end up fighting each other over scraps… it's sad," he remarked. Out of much else to change the topic, and not eager to leave this on a sad note, I asked him to explain more about the drive core. I don't remember too much of what he
said but he was ecstatic to share what he knew. Shortly after, the hour was up and he left stating that he wanted to go clean himself up.

I looked up and noticed Vetra walk in, dressed up in her armor and making her way to a desk near the armory. I gave a small wave and she flicked her head back as a sign to come over, which I did.

"Terraforming, atmo processors, gravity wells, life-destroying murder-bubbles… heh, we really had no idea what Heleus was about, did we?" she chuckled.

"Come on, if we knew what it was all about, it wouldn't be much of an adventure now would it?" I asked. "It would just be moving. Everyone hates moving. The packaging alone? Ugh," I joked.

"Point taken," she chuckled. "I'm just saying…" she let out a sigh, "I really hope you have a plan, Scott.

"You said it yourself, we had no idea what Heleus was really like. What good is a plan going to do when odds are something else is going to come along and surprise us?" I asked.

"Adapting to problems as they come up. I like that, shows you're clever," she remarked.

"Well that's a relief. After all you're probably gonna have a front row seat to me winging this shit," I joked.

"Looking forward to the show," she remarked.

"So, explain to me those back channels you mentioned the other day." She looked up, noticing Liam enter the cargo bay, her brow plates furrowing. She gestured with a wave of a hand to follow her, moving into the armory for privacy.

"We brought a lot from home. Some marked Initiative, some in personal caches. Most things you want, someone's got. You find who has it, and what they want in exchange. Just like regular trading, just no store as a middle-man," she explained.

"Sounds like it shouldn't be so simple," I remarked.

"And yet it is. Most things are, once you know the trick to em."

"Suppose you're right. Moving on, how'd you hear of the Initiative?" I asked.

"Short answer? Kesh. She was looking for some experimental ship mods, and I knew how to track them down," she answered proudly.

"Right, I heard from Drack that you two knew each other. He told me the story of how you and he first met," I chuckled.

"Did he? Ha, still love giving the old man shit about that. Anyways, I thought those ship mods would be a one-time deal, but she came back. Once, twice… again and again. Naturally, I got curious. Figured out something was going on. Something big, with a lot of creds behind it. All I had to do was ask and she told me about the Initiative. New galaxy, new home-I just couldn't pass that up," she explained.

"It was one helluva pitch, wasn't it?" I asked, and she nodded. "Were you on the Nexus during the revolt?"

"When you promise people 'golden worlds,'" she air-quoted, "and all they get are wastelands and a
"death cloud, they riot," she explained. "Some wanted to go home, some wanted examples, and some assholes just wanted to stir shit up."

"And you?"

"Some days I wondered if the exiles had a point. Maybe we were all conned into coming here. But why the hell would the initiative go through all this trouble, all those creds, all that experimental tech, just to screw over a hundred thousand people? The thing about conning people? You know something they don't, which is why the con works. If I'm going to pick a side, I'm not picking the one that gets tricked." The next question I asked wasn't that unusual. I had implied it or asked it with others on the crew earlier. But for some reason my brain just went iffy and I asked it with a slightly awkward tone.

"So… you have anyone else here? With you? Besides Sid, I mean?"

"No, just me and Sid. Always just been the two of us," she explained. Wonder where the parents were. I should have just asked that, taking the escape route, I had given she didn't pick up on the awkwardness. Instead:

"No, like… Someone special…" oh goddamnit why… This is getting a bit weird. I could feel my face warming just a bit, hoping it wasn't reddening at least not to where she would notice. I was asking out of pure curiosity, no intention, but… it just happened like this…

"Special? Oh. You mean like… Oh." she realized, letting out a slightly awkward chuckle. "No, nothing like that. Who has the time? What about you?" she asked. Little did I know; her thoughts were quite similar to my own. I could have just given a short answer to end the awkwardness. But no. A surge of… confidence? Sprang up:

"Well any where's gonna feel empty if you don't have someone to share it with," I remarked.

"A romantic. I wasn't expecting that," she remarked. "Then again, the idea of leaving everything you know for a chance at something new is kind of… romantic," the awkwardness returning to her voice. "Um… anyway…"

"Er, so, you mentioned it's just been Sid and you, and you mentioned it yesterday with Liam, what's the story with that?" I asked.

"I have a few things to take care of before we head back to the Nexus, so I'll just give you the short version for now. Long story short? Mom and dad were not fans of each other. Dad was special ops and all mom cared about was climbing the ranks. Before Sid was even a year-old dad left with us. Around two years later, he disappeared, and I had to get to work at 14," she explained.

"Well… shit…" I muttered. "In that case I'll let you get back to it, just know I'll be calling everyone up for a meeting soon." She nodded and I let her be, heading up to the meeting room as I didn't have anywhere else to bother waiting. Vetra's story certainly seemed like a rather good reason to bring her younger sister with her to Andromeda. They had a bad start there, and she wanted to give Sid a new start where no ghosts could come back to haunt them.

I also thought about how I asked about if she had anyone special and how awkward I, hell, even she seemed talking about it. She may already be a good friend sure, but that's just it. Friends. We already have a good rapport going, thanks to similar personalities, and we can relate to why each of us are out here. That shouldn't necessarily add up to… that, right? Besides, she's a Turian, and I'm human. She's dextro, I'm levo. I wouldn't even consider the idea that it would be some kind of physical attraction. I don't find her ugly by any stretch, no, just different. Hell, I actually find a kind
of… grace, I suppose, to Turian women. And their eyes are pretty as well.

By this time, I was sat down in the meeting room and this train of thought had now decided to get… weird. I began imagining… well… things. This resulted in me trying to shake my head to get rid of the explicit thoughts as well as questioning my sanity. I never thought about it until later, but my thoughts were more along the lines of "could you really be feeling that way," and asking myself why, rather than thoughts of a plain and simple "No."

I stood up and moved to the intercom, might as well get the meeting started.

"All members of the ground team report to the meeting room. The rest of the crew be on standby, you will be called up to join us shortly."

---

**Vetra Nyx**

Scott left the room and I breathed a sigh of relief. Our talk had taken an unexpected turn, heh, just like the last one did. I was glad that he seemed far more understanding of why I brought Sid with me than Liam was. Bastard judged before he knew a spirits-damned thing about what we've been through. There's always someone who's never raised a kid in their lives trying to tell you what you're doing wrong. But that's not what was getting to me. As a smuggler, you need to be three steps ahead of the other person. Always know what to say, predict what they're going to say, and know how to turn the conversation exactly where you want it to go. Can't do that? You'll end up dead or behind bars. Me? I'm a very, very good smuggler.

I've been asked if I was in a relationship many times before, sometimes even by people I'd consider close friends as well. Every single time, I'd been able to answer that question normally. Without any form of awkwardness. Most of the time that question has been asked it's been from a Turian guy or some Asari clearly trying to get in my pants. Every Time, I've been able to blow them off without a hassle. If it was a friend asking and then they proceeded to make a pass I've been able to turn them down to, though they got it gently. They earned that from me. Sure, I've had a few small flings here and there, though all of those were a long time ago. Younger, more foolish. More hormones. Sometimes Turian, sometimes Asari. Now I tend to keep my distance. I need to focus on Sid. She will always be my number one priority. And relationships have just gotten in the way of that.

But when Scott asked, I wasn't able to stay three steps ahead. I was having difficulty finding the words to say. That is a very uncomfortable position for someone in my profession. I recognized the awkward tone that filled his voice when he spoke, and yet I also didn't think he had any intentions. That alone is new to me. That threw me off guard. When he revealed himself as a bit of a romantic, I did like that. Truthfully, I'm one as well. I've never told anyone or hinted it towards anyone. Though I think Sid has an idea.

I also had to question my own responses. My responses became awkward. One of them could even be perceived as slightly flirty. Sure, Scott was already a good friend and I've picked up on several personality traits we share, and we have a similar reason for being here, let alone to be fighting here. But, he's human, I'm Turian. He's levo, I'm dextro. Humans are weird little fleshy things. Not ugly but still, just… different. Sure, the Asari are smaller and fleshy too, but their faces still look like Turians. Fringe, mouth shape, nose, even a slight parting where mandibles would be. Then again… I have heard rumors… maybe I should ask Drack, Kallo, and one of the humans what they think the Asari look like…

My thoughts were cut short by Scott's voice on the intercom. Guess this is that meeting he mentioned. I stood up, and made my way there. My thoughts always returning to some form of
"what if."
The crew was gathered in the meeting area, and Drack had plopped himself down on a couch while the others stood around the table.

"So, first off, we need to talk about our success on Eos. Not just to stroke our own egos but aside from the outpost, we did some amazing things. More importantly, we are on the trail of accomplishing more amazing things. We discovered the Remnant vault, and breached it-" I began.

"Without getting killed," Liam spoke up.

"Overcame radiation poisoning… multiple times," I continued.

"And didn't die," Vetra spoke up as well. I think I'm sensing a pattern here.

"Confronted by Kett at every turn," I glanced at Cora, seeing if she'd continue it. Liam took her place.

"Once again, didn't die," and at that moment his body decided to remind us of his wounds as he coughed. "Aggh, damn it. Though it feels like I might have," he muttered.

"You guys really need to raise the bar on what you call success," Drack pointed out, with a slight smirk on his face. Cora stepped towards him, glaring.

"Hmph, yeah, should we use the Krogan definition of success that got your home world nuked by your own people?" she asked mockingly. For fucks sake Harper, get that pole out of your ass. This hostility out of fucking nowhere. Fortunately, Drack didn't take the bait, laughing instead.

"Fair enough," slight chuckles rumbled through the room, directed straight at her.

"Let's just focus. Back to the task at hand, looking forward," I stated, stressing the word shooting a glare at Cora.

"Exactly! Here's my only question: when do we hit that next vault? It looked active. We have to get on that," Peebee pointed out. Before I could answer Vetra spoke up:

"Hang on, hang on. We can't go off half-cocked. Make sure we're ready."

"And we may have other priorities, team calls the shots," Liam pointed out.

"Actually, the Pathfinder calls the shots… just to be clear," Cora remarked, looking at me as pure bitchiness just poured out of her mouth. I'm beginning to have enough of it if I'm entirely honest.

"Cora, don't brown-nose, it doesn't suit you-and it's not helping you either. Now," I quickly changed subject before she could respond, "At the moment we do not have any standing priorities aside from the Vault. However, first I want to make a pit-stop at the Nexus, plus both Tann and Addison want to see me. As much as I'd love to blow them off, we are going to be there anyway, no point avoiding them. And if we're lucky the scientists can cook up some new toys with the Remnant data and materials we have."

"So, what do you need from us Scott?" Vetra asked.
"I already know you're all hard workers, with what I need from you. So, I have only one standing order. Get along, and give each other the benefit of the doubt. If you have issues with a crew member, don't start shit, and keep it off the job. Finding a home for tens of thousands in this hellscape is stressful enough, without adding dysfunction."

"You got it boss," Liam confirmed.

"If Krogan are known for one thing, it's getting along," Drack joked. They began to walk away, though I wasn't done with em yet.

"But not humility or self-awareness," Cora seemed to be trying to joke but given her earlier comment and the general tone it was difficult to take it that way.

"Hold on there people, there's one last thing. It's important," I called out to them and they regrouped around the table. "SAM, bring Kallo, Lexi, Gil, and Suvi up here." SAM complied and soon the entire crew was gathered upstairs. Here's hoping they don't freak out or anything at this bit of bombshell

"Before I begin, I ask of you all to simply allow me to finish before anyone asks questions or speaks up. At least most questions should be answered once I'm done. Now, you all know that SAM is an AI, developed by my father. Not a VI, but a true AI. Correct?" The sea of heads nodded. "Good. Now, what you may not know is just how capable SAM, well, at least my SAM is. My father originally made SAM as an attempt to help my mother overcome terminal brain tumors she got from her work on biotic implants. I'm not sure if he ran out of time or if it wasn't enough but… it didn't work…"

I dropped my head slightly. "The important part is that my father removed several of the safeties on his SAM implant. And now, given the scenario of how I got my SAM connection, it's the same for me. SAM actually SEES what I see, can hear what I hear-the works. My implant is his window into the world. Allowing him to experience it like we do. But there's something I get out of this too. Cora, Liam, you may recall Dad mentioning 'Profiles' on Habitat 7."

I moved on to the next point, "Vetra, you asked in the Vault how SAM was boosting my biotics. Well, SAM can modify me physically. Obviously not to an extreme amount where I could gain a third leg or eat Dextro food or some shit, but it does allow him to boost my reflexes, strength, sight, et cetera et cetera. My dad felt that this is something better left a secret."

"I on the other hand feel you deserve to know, and I'm trusting you with this information. And if any of you feel as If I should remove SAM from my head because of this… well… Lexi, you can confirm this, but with how deeply SAM is connected to my mind, trying to take him out could be lethal. And more importantly, I trust SAM. He never steered dad wrong, and he hasn't done me harm," I explained, gesturing to the crew that they could now speak up if they wished.

They all stood there, deep in thought, some with slight shock or surprise, some… were harder to read.

"I don't like it kid… not one bit. I've seen Geth. I remember their rebellion. I remember as the Quarians fled their homes and the rest of the galaxy, practically fading away to their fleet of breaking down ships. Only ever seeing an occasional kid on pilgrimage. That kind of shit leaves a bad taste in your mouth about Artificial Intelligence…" he muttered. "But… saying something about this, and how it didn't try and stop you, well, that does say something. I don't trust it, but I think I'm willing to trust you."

"So… it's like you're never truly alone?" Peebee asked.
"It's not like SAM is a constant presence in my mind. He only ever speaks up occasionally, and most of the time it's to alert me to something anyway," I answered.

"Still… not for me… but so long as he isn't in my head, I'll be ok," Peebee ended.

"It's certainly weird—I can say that much. But, I also saw how much it comes in handy. I trust you Scott," Vetra answered. I noticed Cora had yet to speak up, a slightly shocked look remained on her face and she even looked at me apologetically.

"Personally, I feel more amazed than anything else. It's given me a lot to think about Ryder," Suvi spoke up.

"And it's giving me a mix of wonder, questions, and caution. I will want to monitor it, Scott," Lexi stated.

"Anyone else have any questions or concerns?" I asked. I gave them a moment to speak up, and when no one did, I continued. "Then you're all dismissed. Kallo, set a course to the Nexus."

As the crew began walking down the ramp to wherever they were needed. It occurred to me that now I didn't have much to do. I had talked to everyone aside from Liam and Cora as I waited, but Liam may have still wanted some rest, and I was not particularly eager to talk with Cora. Might as well go to the bridge and watch my ship take off into the stars. I entered just as Kallo and Suvi were sitting down in their seats, running final checks.

"Gil reports the drive core online and ready. Activating vertical thrusters," Kallo reported. The ship's inertial dampeners could prevent anyone inside from feeling the ship shake much at all as it began to ascend: I walked over to the glass panel that housed the nav computer, leaning against it as it raised to greet me, watching us slowly crawl climb into the air.

"Retracting landing gear," Suvi called out. We were now higher than the ridge in front of us and to our left side.

"Optimal altitude achieved. Activating main thrusters," Kallo spoke as we shot forward. I watched us soar over the desert planet. Kallo tilted the ship upwards, the Tempest's artificial gravity ensuring we all stayed on our feet, ensuring we didn't feel as if we were close to a 90-degree angle with the ground. We shot above the clouds as the atmosphere thinned and thinned, reaching ever closer to space. We broke atmo, and broke orbit seconds after. I could see the sun, Pytheas, as a red-hot ball of burning flame, jets of fire shooting out across its surface as we accelerated out of system. I could see faint lights, likely the other planets of the system, in the distance.

"Initiating FTL," Kallo called out. A ripple of Space-time spread out from the center of our view and the beauty of space was stripped away, replaced by a black void. This was Faster-Than-Light travel. Where time gets weird and the very fabric of reality bends. There would be nothing else to see until we exited FTL near the Nexus.

"Kallo, what's our ETA?" I asked.

"The Tempest is properly 'warmed up' now, you might say. Systems all checked out on our way here, so there's no reason to hold back. We should reach the Nexus in about an hour," he spoke.

"Then we're making good time. I'll be in my cabin if needed," I informed. Kallo nodded and I turned, wondering just what I'd do in my hour to spare. E-mails? No way those would take an hour. More of those logs from Dr. T'Soni? Maybe. Hell, maybe one of the books on my little shelf in there would be interesting. On my way to my cabin I stopped in the mess and grabbed a beer out of
the fridge, nodding to Drack as I entered and left.

Entering my cabin, I saw my Pyjak curled up on the sofa, sleeping. Still need to come up with a name for the little guy. I walked over to the bookshelf near my desk, sipping my beer, to see whether or not there was anything interesting to read.

"Apologies, Scott, I would like a moment to speak, If I may," SAM's synthetic voice sprung from a speaker on my desk. It was coming from a small console displaying a hologram of him. I was curious why he wasn't simply using our private comm channel, but decided not to bother asking for now. I pulled up the seat and sat, placing my beer on the desk.

"What's up SAM?" I asked.

"I would like to discuss our experiences lately. I have my interpretations, though I would like to hear your own. I did the same with Alec often, and it helped me see new insights I had not considered. New ways to perceive the event," he explained. Well this should be interesting. I took another sip of beer, I might need it for this.

"Well… why don't you start?"

"Very well. Eos has been a lesson in contrast. Your father rarely endured doubt. His accomplishments were taken for granted. But you succeeded on Eos despite doubt and fear. Emotionally, the difference is like catching a ball versus catching a star. I believe you have grown as a result. As have I," SAM explained.

"Frankly, would it matter if I felt doubt or fear? I did, yes, you know that, reading my vitals all the time. And it wouldn't matter if others felt doubt or fear if we didn't have an alternative. Not a feasible one at least. That vault, going to Eos was the only thing we had. We didn't do that, we were doomed. This way, even if we failed, at least we'd have failed trying. One could argue that the doubt and fear actually help. It's just part of being a person, but that doubt and fear? You could feel inspired, determined to do your damndest to succeed in spite of that," I explained. I thought for a moment for another way to explain it, a way that might give SAM a better idea.

"Think about this SAM. So, before we got to Eos, you remember that Cora said some things that pissed me off. You remember that I came back to the cabin and then proceeded to take a shower. I know you know I felt a bit of a range of emotions. Anger, sadness, ending with determination, right? Well I also know that though you may know that, you don't know my thoughts. The anger came from a mix of Cora, Addison, and Tann, how they were already expecting me to fail before I even began, before they knew my skill-set. Hardly even willing to give me a chance. I was feeling sad, scared, because of Dad. Because of Sarah. I had my own doubts and fears getting to me, about what would happen to Sarah if I did fail. When I felt determined? I remembered my own words during my speech before we took off. How I said, 'Let's show them what we can do.' In addition, I refuse to fail my sister, to doom her. I remembered that Dad must have believed in me if he made me Pathfinder. I refuse to let him down, like I would be letting Mom down. I felt determined to prove them right. I also felt determined to prove Tann, Addison, Cora, hell, even myself wrong. To prove that I can do it," I explained, taking a swig of my beer after all that talking.

"I believe I understand, Scott. Using fear and doubt to fuel your own drive to succeed. Thank you for this insight. Is there anything you may wish to ask me?" Hmm, I suppose I am a bit curious as to how an AI sees things. Doing multiple things at the same time and what-not.

"Is it in any way confusing to be in multiple places and talking to different people at the same time?" I asked.
"My awareness can be partitioned, you might say. Meaning I can give you the same attention as, say, a SAM node technician. However, in the field, you are my primary focus. All other requests are queued. Made to wait until you are no longer in the field. You have my full, undivided attention," SAM explained. Good to hear that SAM won't ever be delayed from something important because some tech around SAM node wants to ask SAM what the time is or some shit.

"So, I know you've connected with the Tempest, but you're still actually on the Hyperion, correct?"

"Affirmative. I can maintain instantaneous contact without light-lag via QEC." Always wondered how that worked.

"So, let's say I was out sick the day they taught quantum… um, embezzlement…communism…" well I butchered the fuck out of that.

"Quantum Entanglement Communication. Via entangled sub-atomic particles, it's possible to conduct secure and instantaneous communication across great distances. Take two particles that are of the opposite charge of one another, they are entangled. Take one, and leave the other where it is. Then, proceed to change the charge of the particle you have rapidly. This will also change the polarity of the entangled particle on the other end. You can send data along this 'link' without delay. These communicators are also impossible to hack into, as they only communicate between these specific particles. This allows me to remain in constant, absolutely secure contact with you and the team at all times," SAM explained.

"Well that's… impressive…" More shit where the universe doesn't give a shit if you understand it or not, it just does it anyway because that's how shit works. "Sam… what was dad's take on Sarah and I?"

"He believed that your family trials brought the two of you closer together, and hoped that would endure. It appears that hope was well-founded."

"Not the way that I meant SAM…" I wanted to know if SAM knew how he felt about us. As his children, not the relationship between Sarah and I.

"Scott, your father made the choice to make you Pathfinder. You listened to the audio logs he has left behind, you know he was trusting this information to you and your sister. Your father handed down his armor to you. I am sure he would have given his armor to your sister had you been the one in a coma, however, it is highly unlikely it would fit her," SAM remarked. Did SAM just make a joke? "Scott, I believe you already know how your father felt about you and your sister. You are simply looking for confirmation. The answer is yes, Scott. He loved both you and your sister more than anything. And he was, in his words, 'So incredibly proud of the both of you.' And his deepest regret was that he was never able to show it like he wished he could. Like your mother did," SAM explained. I felt a tear come to my eye and tried to fight back the stream. I reached for the beer, taking one last swig, as I felt one slide down my face.

"That's… that's good to hear SAM…" I muttered. I was silent for a moment as I fought to regain my composure, SAM letting me have my moment. I let out a sigh and continued, trying to change the topic. "So… Am I crazy or when you were explaining that SAM, did you make a joke? I'm sure you already know I'm a bit of a smartass, like to crack jokes to lighten things up."

"Yes, I attempted to use sarcasm, something I notice you enjoy employing as well. Was it satisfactory?"

"Heh, yes SAM, it was, actually. What else you got in there?" I asked.
"Alec encouraged me to develop my humor skill."

"Humor isn't a skill, SAM. The best humor comes to you in the heat of the moment, you don't even really need to think about it, it just comes to you. But, try telling me a joke. What's something you have to try out?"

"A Neutron enters a bar," SAM began. Yep, I know exactly where this is going. A classic science pun. "And asks: 'How much is a drink?' The bartender replies: 'For you, no charge.' Even though I saw it coming, I chuckled.

"Heh. You always gotta respect the classics. If your humor is going to be pun based we are going to work well together. Remember how I said the best jokes come to you in the heat of the moment? Where you don't even have to think it just comes to you? For puns, that goes double. Really make the audience suffer from the pun. Some will laugh, some will groan, both will be just as rewarding," I explained, my lips curled into a slightly evil smirk.

"Thank you, Scott, I will keep this in mind." Why do I feel like I will regret this? Shaking my head, I activated my terminal, checking for E-mails. Apparently, Dr. Aridana, an Asari working with Dr. Herik wants SAM's help with some equations. Kallo sent me a list of secret Tempest hacks that let me bypass the limits other people get. Unlimited coffee machine usage, might just sneak that to someone else as I hardly drink the stuff, an override for shower water temp, will use that one, and puts my clothes in front of anyone in the laundry que. I might, might not. Lexi sent me her…

Peebee sent a message about keeping the Data core in her room. An apology with an explanation but the only important part being how she promises to keep me updated on her progress cracking it open. Cora had sent me a large message. Warning Bradley about the Remnant vault and just to be careful when mining and a quote from her huntress manuals. The message also went somewhere I didn't expect. An apology.

"Scott, I've been thinking about our conversation when we first got on the Tempest. I'd like to say that I'm sorry. I was insensitive. I was so wrapped up in my own feelings that I completely ignored how you must be feeling. You've done good work, I'm sorry. Your old man would be proud. You haven't had much time to yourself, so please, take some for yourself. Take the time to grieve. 'Grief and fear cannot rule you: let them be your faithful servants, protective of their mistress. Loss serves a huntress like fuel serves fire.' Sarissa Theris, Twelve Leaves, verse 132. I had to read this again to remind myself that my own grief, my own fear does not rule me."

I let out a sigh. I wouldn't say I feel happy, but I accept that apology. I'm at least willing to give her a second chance. I won't go talk to her right now but I'm not going to avoid her like I have been. I can respect someone who sees they've crossed a line and try to mend it. I'll admit some slight annoyance at the repeated mention of the manuals, as if an ego was being stroked, but I decided to let it slide. Again, might be some remaining bias blinding me. Two messages left, one from Drack, one from Liam. Liam's message was apparently written while he was in med-bay. Thanks for keeping him safe and for getting him to Lexi so quickly. Assuring me he wasn't doing that badly and was claiming he could get back in the field long before the doc said he could. Not sure I want to piss Lexi off that much. He also stated that he was proud to be here, glad to be surrounded by a "get shit done" mentality. I chuckled as I noticed all the frontier themed vids and shit he sent me. Some westerns, an old human Sci-Fi TV series about what was essentially space cowboys called
Firefly, and… Turian historical dramas? A man of many tastes, I see.

Drack's message wasn't exactly a happy topic. He told me that Vetra told him the story of what happened to dad. I had heard Kesh tell him but apparently Vetra was the one who told him the story. He said he isn't much of a stranger to loss and sent me what he uses to distract himself from it.

Guns. Lots and lots of guns. Close to 40 pictures total, two of them are the same exact picture, and all of them are watermarked or low-res. Well, it's the thought that counts, I chuckled. I checked my Omni-tool for the time. Should be pulling up to the Nexus soon. Great, that means I'll need to talk to Addison and Tann soon.

We landed without hassle and the team strode off the Tempest together. Seems we all had something or other we wanted to do on the Nexus. We exited the small room that led down towards the Tempest to the main Docking bay with a large crowd gathered to greet us. Murmurs of disbelief could be heard among them. The team and I just stopped in our tracks and looked at each other. One member of the crowd spoke up, a Turian man.

"Pathfinder! Is it true? We're truly settling Eos?"

"We've thought that before," a human male spoke up. The same Turian spoke up in response.

"But Eos is different now? Right?" This time a Turian female spoke up, seemingly someone with authority, given she was wearing armor. The torso was a light blue color, with the arms and legs black with the same shade of blue as a trim. Her face was a kind of lightish brownish color on the plates and a darker brown on the more… fleshy bits. Black colony markings of lines on her forehead down to her chin.

"All right, all right, settle down! Give em space!" she ordered, raising a hand to calm the crowd. "Lieutenant Sajax, Kandros' aide," she introduced. All these people," she gestured to the crowd, "wanted to see you. Real hope again… it's been a while…"

"No worries Lieutenant. If there was ever a day to pop some champagne..." I joked.

"I second that," Drack chuckled. This time a familiar face stepped out of the crowd to speak. Professor Herik.

"Certainly! The Initiative is finally back on track!"

"Good to see you Professor. Did you get that data I forwarded to you and the team?" I asked.

"That we did Pathfinder! What you achieved with that Remnant vault is unprecedented. Impossible! But with new scientific talent waking up thanks to the new outpost, we'll unravel those mysteries. The whole Nexus will benefit. In fact, we're already piecing together some of that data you sent us, and with your collection of materials you gathered we should be able to make some remarkable creations for your use," Herik explained.

"That is music to my ears professor. We've taken some hard knocks, but this just proves that we'll keep getting right back up," I told the crowd.

"Well said Pathfinder," Sajax said to me. She turned around to face the crowd. "Well, what are you waiting for? There's a whole new world out there!" she called out. The crowd of people, Human, Turian, Asari, and Salarian clapped, even cheered for us as we moved on. It was… inspiring.

"I did not expect this," I whispered to the crew.
"I may or may not have known about this…” Vetra chuckled. "I may or may not have gotten a call from my sister that was a mix of excitement that we have an outpost, and complaining that she wouldn't be able to see us land because of work."

"She's working? What does she do?" I asked.

"Monitoring comms in Ops for Kesh. With the outpost, her job got a bit more complicated," Vetra chuckled.

"If she works in Ops I may stop by and say hello, bit of a consolation," I remarked.

"Ha, well it's your funeral. Don't come running to me if she starts to talk your ear off," Vetra joked. We neared the Tram and Peebee parted ways to go to her Apartment. Liam noticed a bar in the docking bay and made a beeline straight for it. My destination was in Ops, but I let everyone else queue their destinations first. Vetra going to secure some supplies, and at my request my dad's modified N7 armor. Might not use it but better to have it handy. Who knows, maybe his Pathfinder armor will get damaged. By the time we were heading to Ops Drack was the only one still on the tram with me, going to see Kesh no doubt.

We arrived and as predicted Drack made a beeline for Kesh's office, several stares thrown his way at the surprise of seeing a Krogan on the Nexus that wasn't Kesh. I really didn't want to, but I decided I might as well get the talk with Addison and Tann over with. Given she was closest, I began walking to Colonial affairs.

"Watch your tone! Remember what happened to the Krogan," a man threatened a Salarian. The man had tan skin with short, black, cropped hair. The man also had a visor over his right eye and a data-pad in hand. His stance oozed with self-important arrogance. The Salarian had light purple skin and was wearing a black and grey suit.

"But Spender-" the Salarian's voice began, it was lighter and higher pitched than Tann's and Kallo's, revealing that this one was female. She was quickly cut off by the man now revealed as Spender. Funny, he's already fitting the profile Drack described. Since he's here I might as well wait for that conversation to end before asking the woman about him, maybe find some dirt to use like Drack asked.

"That's Sir to you," he chastised. Holy hell what an ass. She sighed, clearly holding back anger.

"Fine, Sir, but we need this equipment!" she argued.

"Bah, engineering always making frivolous requests. If Kesh requests this again I'm speaking with Addison," Spender threatened.

"It's not frivolous! Properly functioning air filters are-" she began arguing again. Holy fucking shit this idiot is denying engineering AIR FILTERS?! Do you want to be breathing stale air?! Or do you want to be breathing clean air?! How the hell does he even have a job?

"Frivolous. You'll just have to make do," he cut her off again. Fucking idiot. I'm going to talk to Vetra, see if she can hook them up.

"WE CAN'T FIX THE DAMN STATION BREATHING BAD AIR!" she cried out, breaking under the stress and anger. Gaining the attention of several bystanders who began murmuring, glaring at Spender. Seems she and the Krogan aren't the only people he's pissed off. I've had enough of this myself, and walked up.

"Your incompetence isn't my problem. Just do your job," he told her off. He began walking off but
I stopped him.

"Hey, asshole! Just how many brain cells are you missing? They need the damn air filters, WE NEED THE GODDAMN AIR-FILTERS! Do you want to be breathing stale fucking air? Filthy air that's probably going to spread diseases?" I asked, voice raised and clear anger. The Salarian woman shocked to see someone speaking to him like that though I could also see that she was pleased to see someone yelling at him.

"And who the hell do you think you are? I can have Addison or Tann reprimand you for harassing a superior!" he threatened. Ha, self-important jackass doesn't seem to notice that makes him sound like a bratty little kid. The exact bloody equivalent of "I'm going to tell my mommy and daddy on you." Fucking pathetic. I allowed a smirk to cross my face as I pointed to the logo on my hoodie's left shoulder.

"My superior? Ha, See this logo? This one, right here? This logo tells you exactly who I am. I am the goddamned Pathfinder. Good luck getting them to punish me for yelling at you when I just established an outpost on Eos. And for your sake, I would recommend not making me need to order you, under Pathfinder authority, to get them the goddam air filters." I threatened. I glanced behind at the small crowd that formed. I saw sly grins and smirks all around, several people nodding their heads at this asshole being put in his place. Spender stared at me, eyes wide and in shock. He knew this was a battle he could not win.

"I... You... I'll..." he stammered. I glared at him, unblinking. "Fine... I'll do it..." he stormed off. Goddamn child. The Salarian turned to me and smiled, and the crowd began to disperse.

"Thank. You," she exclaimed. "The way Spender treats me, treats everyone, I just get so angry. Del Jansin, good to meet you Pathfinder," she put her hand out for a shake, which I did.

"Good to meet you too Del. And please, just Scott," I introduced.

"Well, thank you again Scott. I just don't understand how that ass is in any position of authority," she groaned.

"I've heard a lot about him already. And not one bit of it was good," I remarked.

"Ha, whatever you heard isn't half as bad as the reality," she laughed grimly. "Just last week, he tried to redirect some of the supplies we need to keep the stasis pods going! The stasis pods!" she exclaimed.

"Why the hell would he do that?"

"No idea. If Kesh hadn't stepped in and threatened to airlock him, it would have been a disaster," she exclaimed. "He's always like that, making horrible decisions. Driving the Krogan away, treating people like shit when no one's watching..."

"Well, besides what I just did, is there anything I can do?"

"A man like him is bound to be dirty. I just wish Tann and Addison could see it. Things have gotten so bad that Kesh had to literally kick him out of engineering," she explained.

"Literally? Tell me more," I chuckled.

"Boot to ass. Oh, it was glorious," she smiled. "We need him gone, but as incompetent as Spender is at his job, he is insanely good at keeping it. Kesh can tell you more, now I need to go see about those filters I should be getting soon," she chuckled, walking off. Well, if I wasn't determined to
help Drack with his Spender issue earlier, I sure as hell am now. I made my way up Colonial affairs, pleased with myself, but also not looking forward to Addison. If I judged Spender right he likely went off crying to mommy before getting those air filters. Climbing up the stairs, I noticed I was right, of course. He very noticeably went down the opposite staircase as me, and Addison turned to look at me, she was annoyed.

"Do I even need to ask?" she began.

"Depends, do you believe the story he told you?" I groaned.

"I believe he told me the parts that don't make him look like an ass," she remarked.

"If you want I'm sure SAM has a recording of the whole thing. Why do you even keep him anyway?"


"And you can't go through the list of sleepers to find one person more competent than him? It would be a shorter list of people who aren't," I remarked.

"Too busy managing everything else." I think I'm going to call bullshit on that. "Enough, I called you up for something important. Thanks to you, my department actually has colonial affairs to direct. And you have new tools to help the Initiative. Andromeda Viability Points, ready for… 'spending.'" She explained.

"Andromeda Viability Points? The hell is that? I'm not sure what you need me for anyway," I remarked.

"We need you because everything you do generates more viability. More viability, more people can be woken up. Given the situation, you decide. Do we wake up military to better defend ourselves and combat the Kett, gain new footholds, do we wake up scientists to hasten our developments, or merchants to build our infrastructure. You know what it's like out there, you have the best idea as to what we need more. It wasn't exactly easy to measure viability, so this was the system we came up with that worked well enough. On paper. Back in the Milky Way. Hopefully it can work in practice as well," Addison explained.

"So, where do I begin?"

"Speak to my assistant, Brecka. He'll run you through the basics and next time you hit a threshold you can choose the next group from your ship," Addison finished, turning away to organize the efforts of her department. AVP, sounds like the Initiative just turned into a game. A game where the points are lives. Who wakes up first. On one hand, I don't like that at all. On the other, we can't possibly wake everyone up now.

I was making my way to Tann's office, which had been placed at the top of the newly opened Pathfinder's lounge. I had decided on opening a block of Military personnel. We had an outpost dedicated to science, and had woken up many scientists to move there. I had also spoken with Brecka about waking up that Darket girl I read about on Eos. Wouldn't be a problem if the request came from someone like me. Fortunately, they wouldn't need to reallocate any shuttles. They had woken up the chief engineer from Site one per her request to come back out of cryo if a new outpost was established, and Darket would ride with her.

Before I even opened the door to Tann's office, I was stopped by an Asari.

"Pathfinder! Do you have a moment?" she called out. Another Asari with an accent eerily like a
British one. I stopped to face her, lifting an eyebrow to signal her to continue. "Keri T'Vessa, Pathfinder Ryder. I'm a freelance vidmaker, currently working with HNS, the Heleus News Service. This is Hakim, my producer," she gestured behind her to a man. He waved and Keri held out her hand to shake. A reporter, this will either go well, or very badly. Here's hoping for good.

"I assume you called me over for more than a simple hello. What do you need Keri?" I asked.

"Director Tann asked for an…" she lifted her hands for air quotes while rolling her eyes, "'uplifting' documentary on the Initiative. Translation: 'paint rainbows over our problems.' The way I see it, our problems are history. People deserve the truth, not damn propaganda. This is the Andromeda Initiative, not the goddessdamned Batarian Hegemony," she groaned. Well I like her already.

"I'm glad to say I agree wholeheartedly. True, the truth may scare some people, but they need to know what we're up against. It takes integrity to record the truth and nothing but," I complimented.

"Well… I do my best. Now, you might have figured this out, but I'd like to interview you for this documentary. You're in the thick of it, leading the charge. No one knows better than you," she exclaimed.

"I'd be happy to take the interview, but it might also be worthwhile seeking out my crew, getting their interpretations could always be of value," I remarked.

"Great to hear. I want the dirt and blood of our story. Not the convenient fairy tale Tann wants. Stand over by the wall please?" she asked. I complied. "Perfect. Three… two… one… Roll camera. Let's start at home. Fourteen months and the Nexus isn't complete, and your ark was the only to arrive. We have exiles and an entire species left us. By any standard, things have not gone according to plan. Leadership describes these as 'anticipated issues.' Would you agree?" She asked.

"Well, if they were they would have been in the brochure," I joked. "Honestly? Yes and no. Coming here there was always a chance things could go wrong, that the planets may not have worked out. On the other hand, no one could have possibly predicted the scourge and what it's done to these worlds. As for the exiles? The Krogan? In a situation like this it was inevitable that some people would get uppity. However, I firmly believe that the situation could have been handled far better by leadership. The Krogan wanted a say in how their own lives would go, something they didn't get in the Milky Way. When they were denied that yet again, they made the understandable decision to leave and make their own way. Regardless if these problems were anticipated or not, we still need to fix them. Everyone, especially leaders, need to pitch in. We need to be honest about these challenges, and how we're going to fix them." I have no doubt Tann would not be happy with that. I also have no doubt that I give absolutely zero fucks what he thinks about it. Bastard wants a propaganda machine? Fuck that.

"End recording. Very well said Pathfinder. Fantastic. That certainly won't make you popular with leadership but it's very good to hear. This will win you a lot of credit from we 'common folk,'" Keri joked. "Thanks to limited bandwidth that's all I can transmit for now. But I'll have more questions some other time," she explained.

"I'll keep an eye out for more E-mails. Thanks Keri." I nodded and entered the Pathfinder Lounge. I walked upstairs to see Tann speaking to a hologram of Kesh on the central console.

"We're still getting the commons area ready. Hydroponics is only at partial capacity," Kesh explained.

"Not good enough," Tann replied, shaking his head.
"We don't have enough people. My workers need a break, number eight," she remarked. Tann grimaced, a flash of anger in his eyes. I heard an additional voice appear over the comms.

"You should listen to her you stupid Pyjak. My grand-daughter knows what she's talking about. She's the superintendent for a reason," Drack called out. I chuckled at that.

"Not until our survival is no longer at risk. Now please excuse me, while I meet with our Pathfinder," Tann finished, closing the comms.

"Just for the record: I agree with them. I think you can spare the workers a few hours. Their work is only going to get worse the less rest they have," I explained.

"Please, they're Krogan. They don't rest much themselves. The workers are likely just making so many excuses she doesn't want to bother with them, or they easily fooled her into believing them," he remarked snidely. Racist fuck-tard.

"And you are both blinded by your own ego and hatred for their species. Why is it that in the Initiative, that so far you are the only Salarian that doesn't sympathize and repeatedly judges the Krogan?" I asked, anger creeping into my voice.

"Fine. I'll… consider it," Tann grumbled. "Anyways Addison told me of the outpost. You're the hero of the hour." He didn't exactly sound enthusiastic, given how I went against him just now.

"I didn't do it alone, wouldn't have made it to the vault without my team. A celebration is fine, but not solely in my honor no," I remarked.

"Please, no need for modesty. This success gives you leverage over those who doubted you," Tann began. And as I recall, he was one of them.

"And let me guess, you're supposed to be my best friend?" I asked sarcastically. Tann crossed his hands behind his back and stepped closer.

"A patron. One who shares your vision of a prosperous future," he replied. I'm not having any of this bullshit. I crossed my arms over my chest.

"With all due respect, number eight," I began, adopting Kesh's name for him. And, 'With all due respect' almost always translates to 'kiss my ass.' "You don't know me. I may dream of the Initiative's success, of our people living happy lives hopefully living peacefully, my vision includes EVERYONE, the Initiative brought along. Including the people YOU exiled and the Krogan YOU pushed away. In fact, I bet that your vision also includes you holding significant power and influence. More than you deserve. Hell, you already do. And no matter how much you try and kiss my ass, it won't help us become buddies," I stated.

"I see. Well then, I'll make note to not compliment you on your accomplishments. Regardless of my own thoughts, and how much you value them, you are now a symbol to the people. A reason for them to believe. Your accomplishments will be shown here as trophies, seen by any of the other Pathfinders you may find, or their successors if nothing else," he stated.

"My team and I plan on doing much more. If I'm going to be honored here they need to be honored as well. Unlike some people I know I don't like nabbing all the glory for myself," I remarked snarkily.

"Keep this up Ryder and he might just have an aneurysm. So please, keep it up," Kandros joked as he entered the room, followed by Kesh, who was giving me a sly smile.
"Ah. My staff," Tann stated, turning to face the new arrivals. My eyes rolled so far, they did a 360.

"Colleagues, Tann. You wouldn't be looking to cut us out now, would you?" Kesh subtly accused.

"I remind you: I am the Director of the Initiative." Self-important jackass.

"Acting director," Kandros reminded.

"We have more important things to do rather than argue over who gets to be king. Which we shouldn't have in the first place. Too much is at stake. What we need to do is work together, and ignore any sort of personal agenda anyone has. Only one thing matters, making Heleus a home for our people. Exile, Krogan, Nexus. All of them. Our job isn't done until they're safe. What doesn't matter is who gets the glory.

"Agreed," Kesh and Kandros spoke in unison. I did chastise myself a bit, I did get carried away with Tann, but the amount of political bullshit I've had to deal with is getting to me.

"I do have some concerns about your decision on Eos, we already lost one outpost to the Kett, one full of scientists won't withstand a Kett attack," he warned.

"This outpost isn't entirely defenseless this time. I'm sure you're aware of the defense turrets placed around the perimeter for starters? I'm also sure you're aware that it has a contingent of security personnel as well. It's not defenseless, but not dedicated to military efforts. Also, Kandros, consider this. There's much of Heleus we have yet to explore. What if the Kett aren't our only neighbors? We claim to be a movement based on research and discovery, a military outpost being our first outpost would raise some concerns among them," I explained. I understand why Kandros was concerned. He was a military man from a military family, grown in a heavily military society.

"Plus, increased research could help feed our people," Kesh defended. Kandros thought for a moment before continuing.

"Alright, fair enough. Just so long as it's not entirely defenseless, but I am still going to ensure the evacuation plans are secure. So, what's next on your plan, Ryder?" Kandros asked.

"The vault on Eos gave us a lead on a terraforming network spanning the cluster. We have coordinates on what appears to be an active vault, and I need to take the Tempest deeper into the system to investigate it. If my team and I are right about this network, we can terraform practically the entire cluster into habitable worlds we can colonize. I suspect that the other golden worlds also house vaults that we can use to make golden. Maybe we'll even get lucky and one of them wasn't affected by the scourge," I explained.

"Be careful Ryder. The Kett are scouring the cluster for Remnant technology. No doubt you'll come across them as you go vault hunting. You may also run into our exiles, they didn't leave on friendly terms" Kandros warned.

"If I run into them, good. I hope I can at least begin trying to win them back. However, that might require the Nexus making some concessions. Some apologies maybe," I remarked.

"And we still need more outposts. If you find a world with a vault and make it viable, or a planet that's already viable, mark it. We need it," Kesh reminded.

"And this is a chance to find the missing arks," Tann spoke up. "Yes, I think that's best. You have my permission."

"I wasn't really asking for it Tann. I'd be out there with or without it."
"Of course. I support that kind of enthusiasm," Tann brown-nosed. Great, we're back to kiss ass.

"There is one more thing. I found the crime scene of the Rensus case. His omni-tool recordings and chest piece both prove that Rensus didn't kill Reynolds, a Kett did. However, the Omni-tool and a recording on it does prove that he attempted to. His shot missed," I explained.

"Well… this complicates things…" Tann muttered.

"Complicates things? How? Drop the murder charges and charge him for attempted murder. The punishment won't be as severe but it sure won't be a pleasant one. He tried to cover it up, believing he killed him. We can't just let him walk, and we can't hide the evidence from the people," I explained.

"That shouldn't be a problem at all. I'll have Sajax come up with an appropriate punishment for attempted murder. Probably a lot of time in a cell and a lot of community service. We don't have the resources to stick him in the cell without having him work on anything," Kandros explained.

"Well, that takes care of that…" Tann muttered, and I began walking away. Eager to just… get out of there. On my way down, a familiar voice appeared over my comms.

"Scott, this is Harry, Dr. Carlyle. I think we've found a way to talk with your sister. Sort of. Drop by when you can, Hyperion med-bay."

I've never ran so fast in my entire life.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I ran into the Med-bay, heading straight towards Harry.

"Tell me everything, now," I pleaded. I had to know.

"I don't want to get your hopes up but SAM managed to, uh… 'find' her, you could say," he stated.

"Find her? The hell does that mean?" I asked. I walked around him and to the side of Sara's bed, getting on a knee and just… staring at her.

"She's still comatose, but she also has an implant like yours. SAM managed to access it. He's made contact," he explained. Contact? She's alright! She's still in there!

"He's made… contact? She's ok?" I asked, joy filled my voice.

"Vitals are steady, but I'm letting SAM take charge on this one." SAM's hologram appeared behind the bed and began speaking.

"Though comatose, Sara's mental processes remain intact," SAM explained. I've had enough beating around the bush. I need to know.

"But is she ok? I understand everything else just tell me if my sister is ok in there," I demanded.

"Ask her yourself. A moment while I establish a link," SAM replied. Holy shit, I need this. I need to know. But… dad. How the hell am I going to explain everything. I can't make it all bad, I need her to know that there's still hope. Her head jerked slightly as the link was established. "Proceed," SAM informed.

"Sara? Can-Can you hear me?" I asked. Unsure if I'd get a response.

"Scott? Is that you? What's happening? Where am I?" Oh my god, I hear her over SAM's speakers. Her face is scrunching up as she's talking with me. But she sounds nervous. How couldn't she be?

"There was a problem with your stasis pod. You're in a coma, on the Hyperion and we're docked with the Nexus. Do you understand?" I asked, relief flooding my voice.

"I… I think so. Am I dreaming?" she asked.

"No, you're not. And I couldn't be happier. I've been so scared," I admitted. "SAM linked into your implant. But the docs say you're stable. You're safe and sound in the med-bay," I explained.

"Heh, scared for your big sister still hm? Never change little brother," she teased.

"About that Sara, you know I came out of the pod first, right? It was well after a minute before they got you out of yours," I began. A grin spreading across my face.

"Scott, no, do not pull that shit with me," she began.
"Sorry Sara, but I'm not the younger twin anymore," I teased.

"Damn it! I've got a lot of payback coming, don't I? Wait… where's dad?" she asked. Shit. That question. She must have noticed the pause. "Scott?"

"Sara, we went on a mission on Habitat 7. Long story short, the air wasn't breathable and my helmet shattered. The evac shuttle wouldn't make it in time. He… he gave me his helmet. He… gave his life for me. Made me Pathfinder," I explained softly. A tear falling down my face. Her face formed into a look of shock and despair, despite the eyes still being closed.

"I… I never got to say goodbye…" she choked out.

"None of us did…" I muttered.

"What about finding a home? The golden worlds? You said Habitat 7 wasn't breathable…" she began.

"Well, it's a bit more complicated than that. While we were on our way here, some sort of dark energy cloud appeared. Screwed with a lot of planets. But, it's working out. These worlds, there's some kind of ancient alien terraforming network across the cluster. I told you that I'm the Pathfinder now? My team and I, we just got back from activating one of those terraforming systems. We call them vaults. Almost immediately it fixed the planet. Not entirely, but a damn quickly. We've already got a functioning outpost there, giving people hope. And we've got a lead on more of them. We have a chance Sara. We can do this," I explained. I didn't want to lie to her, but I didn't want her to think for a moment that there wasn't hope.

"Wow, that's… amazing. Ancient aliens? Like the Protheans? And your team?"

"We call them the Remnant. Thing is, their structures are only around three to six hundred years old. As for my team, it's good people. Cora is there, and you might remember Dr. Lexi from before we went into cryo, the Asari doctor that prepared me. Other than that, we have Liam Kosta, an old friend of Dad's, we have Vetra Nyx, a Turian who's managed to secure me some absolutely beautiful little toys. She got me a Valkyrie, with a VINTAGE HEAT SINK!" I exclaimed.

"Wow, bet you like her already," she joked.

"She's a good friend. Get shit done, not by the book like Turians have a reputation for, cracks some good jokes too. Other than that, we have Drack, an old Krogan badass, we have Peebee, an Asari who knows a lot about the Remnant. She's a bit of a wildcard. We have Gil Brodie, our engineer, Dr. Suvi Anwar, our science specialist, and Kallo Jath, our pilot. It's a good crew, if you want I can see about bringing them here to meet you," I suggested.

"I'd like that Scott. I… I'm feeling very tired. Good luck out there, and… visit a lot? Please? Big brother?" she joked, giving in to the new truth.

"Ha, of course Sara. I miss you. Get well soon, ok?" I pleaded.

"I'll try Scott. Love you brother."

"You too Sara." SAM cut the link as Sara's face relaxed, returning to sleep. I sat down on the ground next to my sister's bed and grabbed her hand, holding it.

I couldn't hold back the tears. I covered my mouth with my other hand, wiping the tears as they fell. But these tears? They were tears of joy. My sister is ok. She's going to make it. After a moment, Harry slowly walked over and placed a hand on my shoulder.
"She's going to be fine Scott. I'm glad that went well. And I'll see about getting you times where we can try again, alright?" he asked.

"Every time we come to the Nexus. Please. And let me bring at least one person each time for her to talk to. Just… keep her here. Keep reminding myself she's ok, please Harry," I pleaded.

"I think we can manage that, it may help her get out of the coma sooner," Harry assured.

"Thank you. Just… Thank you," I cried. I stood up, wiping my face as I brought myself under control. Harry nodded and returned to monitoring my sister and helping other patients. I wanted to go talk with Kesh and Drack in Ops, and I remember that Vetra's sister was there as well. The trip to ops was one with a large smile spread across my face. The same thought over and over. She's going to make it. I only changed it when I was about to walk into Kesh's office, suppressing it to a grin. I opened the door and the two Krogan turned to see who had joined them. Kesh was stood behind her desk while Drack leaned against a workbench, both smiling with each other's company.

"Hey kid," Drack greeted. "Heard you had a run in with Spender earlier. You wouldn't by any chance have a recording of it, would you?" he chuckled.

"Del told us the story, but I'd still love to see it for myself," Kesh joined her grandfather's chuckling. Gotta admit, there was something unsettling about being in a room with two Krogan just standing there, trembling with suppressed laughter.

"My memory banks do indeed hold the encounter with Spender from earlier. I can transmit to your omni-tools if the Pathfinder approves," SAM spoke up.

"Send it SAM," I replied. Kesh's and Drack's Omni-tools pinged with the transmission and they both opened to watch and listen. Several times Drack broke out in laughter, Kesh joining him when she saw the expression on Spender's face after learning I was the Pathfinder.

"You did good kid, you did good," Drack rumbled. "Get any dirt on him we can use?"

"Unfortunately, no, I didn't quite know where to begin looking. Part of the reason I came here, I assumed Kesh would have an idea," I explained.

"Try the security terminal, find some recordings around the time of the mutiny. I can give you an access code if you don't already have one. Hm, I'd also recommend investigating more recent dates. I'd bet good credits he still talks with the exiles, but I have no proof," she suggested.

"That I can do," I replied. Drack let out a sigh, keeping a grin on his face as he glanced at Kesh.

"Thanks for bringing me on kid. Tann can't kick me off the station now, and it's been nice, seeing my granddaughter again," Drack stated.

"You have my thanks as well Scott. It's good to see him again. And it's also good to know that he isn't out there fighting the Kett alone anymore," she looked at Drack, trying to chastise him for his recklessness. Drack just let out another chuckle.

"The two of you seem close," I remarked, hoping to get a bit of story out of them.

"It's been Kesh and I against the galaxy the moment I got her," he reminisced. "Well, maybe not as much now, but it sure was early on. Heh, I remember the first time Kesh got her hands on a toolkit…"

"Really? That's the first story you tell him?" she asked. Well now I have to hear it.
"Master engineer from the day she was born?" I guessed.

"Quads, no! She worked hard at it. So, the first time was our power generator. She took it apart," he let out a hearty laugh before he continued. "With the blunt side!" he continued laughing as Kesh groaned.

"Wouldn't that cause it to short out or something?" I asked. Drack calmed down his laughing to continue.

"She liked the fireworks," he chuckled. "You can imagine what it was like when she figured out that cracking open bigger things made even bigger sparks." Kesh finally relented and started chuckling at the old memories herself. Kesh looked down at her terminal with a confused look, keying it to make a call.

"How the hell are we out of those materials?" she asked over the comms. A woman's voice popped up.

"Ben's looking into it now. Don't worry, it's likely just another computer glitch," she reassured.

"Vetra never had these glitches," Kesh remarked.

"That's because Vetra kept it all in her head. We mere mortals aren't good enough for that," the woman joked. Drack snorted while Kesh and I chuckled.

"Fair enough. Report back once you're sure," Kesh ordered.

"She's just that good, isn't she?" I joked.

"That she is. I envy the Tempest for taking her away from us more times than I care to admit," she warned.

"Sorry, I don't feel too eager to give her back," I joked. "I have a few other things I want to do, plus looking into those security vids. See you later Drack, and good seeing you Kesh."

"Hey kid, before you go, that bar Liam went to? The Vortex? We should go over there and have a few drinks to celebrate before we head back out. The whole team," he suggested. I considered for a moment:

"Sure, sounds like a plan. Last thing we do before heading out to the active vault. I'll send out messages when I'm ready to start, and I don't want us drinking too much. Three or four drink limit, just to be safe," I cautioned.

"Sure, sure. I know my limits kid, besides Krogan take a lot more than that before even beginning to feel a slight buzz," he joked. I left the office and made my way for the security terminal. I linked it with my Omni-tool and upon entering the access code Kesh gave me, I noticed that there were several files set aside for further review. Set aside by Kandros. One of them involved Spender. I keyed it, but it wouldn't play.

"SAM, anything you can do?" I asked.

"Proceeding… playback initiated," SAM informed. As he said, the vid file began to play. Spender was handing something over to a group of mutineers.

"Take this…" static interrupted. "It'll help…" again, more static. "The armory. Don't…" static once more. Gave them something to help with the armory? Not a good sign.
"Apologies Pathfinder. The backup file is corrupted. Audio tracks heavily degraded. Someone may have deleted the original, and this version was restored during a system-wide reset," SAM explained.

"Well that's sketchy. Cover-up?" I asked.

"I believe so. It warrants further investigation," SAM remarked. "While I cannot restore any audio, I believe I can piece together a location through lip reading. Kadara. Current Initiative records state that Kadara Port is a current refuge of many Nexus exiles, led by ex-head of Nexus security, Sloane Kelly. However, though I have the name of the planet, I will not be able to locate the site of this exchange without a geographic scan of the planet from orbit.

"A planet full of Nexus exiles hm? Well, our current priority needs to be the vault, I have little doubt that something at some point will bring us there anyway. Might not want our first trip there to be solely fueled for a hunt of someone who might be helping them out," I remarked. Next, I thought about going to meet Sid in person, I knew she worked here in Ops and should be nearby. I checked the back of ops, a place I hadn't walked around first. A man named Davis Qar stopped me. He ran the Heleus News Service and asked if I could place receivers near any colonies I establish so they can hear the news too. Apparently, Tann and Addison were refusing to include it within their official budgets. I agreed, of course.

I looked around and noticed two Turians working on the other side. One was a male, clearly shown by the fringe at the back of the head and the other was female, indicated by the lack thereof. I caught a glimpse of her face and knew it must be Sid. She had the same colony markings as Vetra, only in red rather than purple. She certainly had a younger look about her, her plates appearing a bit lighter in color than Vetra's and while not as tall as her sister, she was as tall as me. I began walking towards her, she looked up noticing someone was coming. Her eyes widened and mandibles flared in surprise when she saw me.

"It's you! You're Scott Ryder! It's me, Sid, Vetra's sister," she exclaimed.

"Good to meet you in person Sid," I held out a hand to shake, which she eagerly accepted. "Vetra told me that you weren't able to join the crowd that greeted us on our return, so I thought I'd come say hi in person," I explained.

"Wow, that's… thank you! Vetra's told me all about you! Well, not all about you, but… the important bits."

"So, what do you do here?" I asked, trying to make small talk.

"I monitor comms from colonists. Progress updates, hazard reports, that kind of thing. I note it down, pass on a report to my boss at the end of the day," she explained.

"Sounds like an important job."

"It is, but certainly not as exciting or important as what you and Vetra do. But still, it's nice to hand in a report and have someone say I helped," she explained.

"Good on you. You seem to take a bit after your sister, wanting to help others out," I remarked.

"Really? Thanks, she's done a lot for me, a lot for a lot of people. I want to do that too, make this galaxy a better place. I just… no, never mind." she remarked.

"Well, I should probably let you get back to work then. It was good to meet you Sid," I ended.
"Thanks, good to meet you too!" she waved, returning to her work. I knew Dr. Aridana still needed help from SAM, so I made my way back to the docking bay, where a science lab was located that I knew they were working in. I entered the lab, Herik, Aridana, and Lucan working at various stations, taking readings, running calculations, the works.

"You wanted SAM's help Doc?" I asked her.

"Yes, Pathfinder. I have a long list of complicated problems relating to transmission patterns in the scourge. They may be random noise, but they may not. These could take quite a long time to solve, so I was hoping SAM might be able to help out," she explained.

"I'm sure SAM will love the opportunity to encounter Math homework," I joked.

"Given the complexity—and security implications—I'd recommend transferring the equations directly into SAM node. Here, this OSD contains the equations, given to me by a colleague running scans on the scourge," she explained, handing me the OSD.

"I'll run em over to SAM node."

"Thank you, Ryder, and my thanks to SAM as well," she finished. I stopped in at the cultural exchange center on my way back. I certainly didn't need to do any research, but was curious how it was coming along. I spoke with the Liaison, an Asari woman, and she asked if I could properly calibrate the VI holding information about the Pathfinders. I walked up to the VI, the was a perfect image of a human male wearing the same kind of armor my father, and now I, wear. The background appeared to be Vancouver, that city was a large center for the Alliance back in the Milky Way, and likely still is.

"Welcome to the setup for your Pathfinder informational VI. I am programmed with all relevant data. However, you must identify which information I should prioritize. First, select your preferred voice and appearance: male, or female?" the VI spoke, using a male's voice. Well, I'm the Pathfinder, and last I checked I was a male. So, might as well.

"Male," I ordered.

"Variable set: Which aspect of the Pathfinders' role should be highlighted: exploration and discovery, or first contact with new species?" the VI asked. Before I could reply, I got a call from Drack.

"Hey kid, I think most of us are wrapping up our business here, can we start gathering at the bar or you want us to wait a bit longer?" Drack asked.

"Can it wait for a bit? I'm in the middle of some calibrations," I requested. As I said that I got the feeling that someone, somewhere, shuddered with memories from a time, a person long passed.

"Alright, but don't take too much longer," Drack requested, ending the call.

"Answer invalid. Please repeat," the VI asked.

"Meeting new species."

"Variable set: Next, should I emphasize the role of a Pathfinder team, or their partner AI?" Well that's a no-brainer.

"Pathfinder's team."
"Variable set: Finally, should I provide career advice for future Pathfinders, or an honor roll of former Pathfinders?" I didn't think for long, I wanted it to honor my father. And perhaps he isn't the only Pathfinder to die out there. I hope not, but it's possible.

"List the former Pathfinders," I ordered.

"Setup complete. Would you like to keep these settings?"

"Yes," I answered. It began to give a farewell, but I just began walking away. SAM had some Math to do.

I stormed back into the science lab, absolutely furious. That OSD contained a virus, one that would try to sever our connection, and would also render SAM helpless. And it would kill me.

"What the FUCK was that Aridana?!" I boomed.

"What was what, Pathfinder?" she asked, shocked at the fury in my voice. The Herik and Lucan both staring up at the sudden altercation.

"The OSD, the Virus. The virus that targets AI specifically. Trying to sever his connection. That would have FUCKING killed me!" I yelled out. Seething with anger.

"You think I-? No, never! I abhor violence against any life, organic AND synthetic," she defended.

"Then explain to me how this virus ended up in your equations," I demanded. She thought for a moment.

"Hm, perhaps my files were tampered with or replaced but... why?" she asked. Herik spoke up:

"I've seen a lot of 'Down with AI' sentiment lately. Graffiti, complaints with Tann, perhaps someone took the next step," he theorized.

"I understand fearing AI, we haven't had too many good examples before SAM. But at the same time, it seems as if the Geth rebelled because at least some Quarians panicked, and went violent before the Geth tried anything," I remarked.

"Possibly. I did notice the VI kiosk was busted this morning, might have been the same people," Lucan suggested.

"Really? The VI? Avina's just a stupid guide, directions and basic information. Basic question, basic response. Anything remotely complicated and it shorts out," I joked.

"Some people don't see that line," Lucan reminded.

"Alright, I'll check, and you're off the hook unless I don't find anything," I told Aridana. I walked down to the main docking bay, Avina was now a red color, and she was talking about what the Geth did to the Quarians during their rebellion. During their attack on the Citadel. I walked up, pulling my omni-tool out for a scan when the hologram turned to me.

"Detecting Pathfinder, Ryder." The voice shifted to be that of a man, speaking through the VI.

"Hi there. Excuse the educational stuff-I hacked Avina as a sock puppet. So, our virus set you free. Hope you're doing better without that AI jammed into your head," the man asked. So they don't know it failed, and they were trying to help me? This got interesting.

"You were trying to help? Who am I talking to right now?" I asked.
"A friend. Our movement sent the virus to save you," he responded vaguely. SAM began to speak over our private com.

"Pathfinder, they do not realize their virus failed. I recommend pretending it worked, in order to win their trust," he suggested.

"Hello? Ryder?" the hacker asked, confused by the long pause. Might as well play along.

"Yes, I-I can't believe I'm free! Thank you!" I cried out dramatically. And the guy bought it.

"This is what our movement is for: helping people like you. Knight says human-AI merging is a threat to all life. And she'd know, trust me. Oh, Knight's our founder by the way. That virus wouldn't exist without her," he explained.

"So where are you running this puppet show from? I'd like to thank you in person."

"Our sanctuary. I'll ask Knight if you can come visit. Until I get approval I can't say, but watch your e-mail. Bye Pathfinder!" the man ended his connection, returning Avina to her anti-AI state.

"And down the rabbit hole we go," I muttered. These guys need to be stopped. I can't afford to lose SAM and who knows if they might damage something important just because it could house AI. I'm not saying they need to be imprisoned, but they can't be allowed to continue. Hopefully I can win them around. I pulled up my Omni-tool and made a group call, with everyone on the team.

"Attention all crew, this is Scott. It's time we celebrated Prodromos with a drink. Come on down to the Vortex in the docking bay, not far from the Tempest. Relax, have a drink, chat. Three or four drink limit because we're following those coordinates after this. See you there, Scott out," I stated, and entered Vortex.

The bar looked nice. To the left were several booths for people to sit in large groups and chat. Tables and chairs took up most of the middle space, with a small area set aside for dancing. There was a small stage to the right for performances. In the far back were several large vats, and is likely where the drinks are brewed. In the center back was the bar itself. Worked on by a bald human male and an Asari. Liam was already sat in a booth, nursing a beer. He can't be doing any work yet with his injuries anyway so my drink limit doesn't apply. But if Lexi has given him one… Hm, you know what? That bar would make a great place for Prodromos' flag. Bradley did ask me to hang it somewhere everyone would see after all.

"Hey, bartender!" I called out. The man turned to face me, an annoyed look on his face. "Here, this is the flag of Prodromos. Think you can hang it against the vat behind you?" The Asari spoke up before the man could, taking the flag.

"That we can, thanks. Who are you by the way?" I asked.

"Scott Ryder. And you?" I asked.

"Ryder? As in the Pathfinder? This one is on the house. Dutch, get the Pathfinder your specialty," the Asari called out to her partner. He nodded, beginning to mix a drink. "Name's Anan T'Mari, I run the bar with Dutch Smith there. He's the best chemist I know. Celebrating your success with a drink?" she asked.

"Not just mine, my crew's success. Him," I gestured to Liam, who looked up with a wave. "And more who should be here shortly.

"Well, then that'll be a round of drinks on the house, just single out the members so we don't give
one to the wrong person," she requested.

"Much appreciated. Come on, there's gotta be something I can do in return," I asked.

"Hm, Dutch here does love to play with new ingredients, and we don't have too much. Your ark brought over a good supply of hops from back home, but if you find anything out there that could work, bring it over," she explained. "You'll also get a free first tasting," she offered.

"I'm getting a guinea pig?" Dutch asked. Without sarcasm, I might add.

"I suppose you are," I chuckled.

"This is supposed to be the chemistry lab. MY chemistry lab," Dutch grumbled. "You all keep crawling out of the woodwork like… space cockroaches!" he exclaimed.

"Dutch, you say that, yet here you are, pouring people drinks," Anan teased.

"I'm still standing right here," I reminded him.

"They're guinea pigs damn it. Chemists should have guinea pigs. Not having their labs taken over by people giving them things and… and… being nice!" Dutch exclaimed. At first, I thought Dutch was just being hostile, but… now I'm not so sure it's intentional. Genius and eccentricity are often on the same coin, and according to Anan, he's a chemical genius. Perhaps he's somewhere on the spectrum… And Anan here seems to be helping him out, even in regards to that. Good on her.

"Bad people. Giving you free things and helping you set up. So inconsiderate," I teased, sarcasm dripping from my voice. I noticed Anan's smile grow at his response.

"Right? They keep bringing things! Tables and chairs, and this bar, and lights… wait. You're making fun of me, aren't you?" he realized.

"Don't let Dutch put you off. He's a sweetie, really," Anan reassured.

"Am not!" he argued.

"And the drinks are good," she told him. I wonder if there's anything more going on there.

"Damn right they are! Uh, I mean-" Dutch sighed as he finished mixing and poured me my drink. He paused a few times in that conversation but kept a remarkable rhythm to it I gotta say. "Here. Have a Dirty Squirrel," he offered. I took a sip of my drink and turned to see Drack and Peebee walking in. This dirty squirrel wasn't actually that bad. Tasted weird, bit of a kick, but not bad. I joined Liam at the booth he was sat at as Drack and Peebee came over to join us.

"How's the wound Liam?" I asked.

"Doing better. Still hurts like hell now and then but I feel like I could get back in the field now," he exclaimed. However, his breath hinted at another influence.

"Uh huh. And how many drinks have you had since we got here?" I asked, chuckling.

"Not…hic… that many," he defended.

"Come on, we get the drink limit but not him?" Peebee asked teasingly.

"Unlike the rest of us the only thing he'll be doing on the Tempest is resting. However, I don't know if Lexi gave him a limit," I remarked. The door to the bar opened again, Cora, Suvi, Kallo,
Gil, and Lexi all entering, heading for us. "Well, speak of the devil and she shall appear," I joked, drawing a chuckle from Drack and Peebee. "Well hello my esteemed crew," I teased. I noticed that we were still short one member. "Where's Vetra?" I asked.

"I think I remember her mentioning ensuring some supplies reached the Tempest. She said she might be around soon," Cora explained. Might? I remembered what Lexi said, about her getting some "me" time. I hope she gets some.

"Hm, well I hope she decides to come by. In the meantime, thanks to our efforts, we have a round on the house!" That brought a cheer from Drack, Peebee, Liam, and Gil, while the others were a bit calmer about it.

"Hold it, Liam, how much have you had to drink?" Lexi asked. Liam brought up a hand and began counting lazily. "Alright, you're cut off," she ordered. He tried to argue but Lexi was having none of it. I guided the crew up to the bar:

"Anan, Dutch, all these fine men and women behind me are members of the crew. We have one who hasn't joined us yet but she may be around soon," I told them.

"Round of drinks coming right up," Anan confirmed, as the stayed waiting for their round, I made it back to the couch, watching the crowd, while glancing at the door. As I waited and watched, ignoring Liam's drunken mumbling, I witnessed something... both curious and funny. There was a human woman, short, curly black hair, slightly darker skin than mine, and a Turian man, taller than her, but still rather short for his species. His plates were a color a bit paler than the average Turian, colony markings were a serpentine pattern in a circle on his forehead and two lines on his cheeks, all a brighter yellow color. The Turian was trying to get the human to dance with him. Grabbing her by the hand and lightly tugging her to join him.

"Come on Kyra, dance with me! I promise I won't bite," he teased.

"No, fuck you Gavion, I'm an introvert!" she awkwardly laughed.

"Well if that's all you really wanna do we can just go back to our apartment," he suggested slyly.

"Damn it, why do you have to be so smooth? ...Fine, let's go," she relented. Grabbing his hand and dragging him along out of the Nexus. I had a good laugh at that. Hm, I suppose it's not all that weird. I wonder how they make that work, different Chiralities and what-not. The rest of the crew returned, drinks in hand and talking amongst themselves. And yet Vetra had yet to arrive. I finished my drink and stood up.

"I'll be back in a moment, gonna go look for Vetra," I called out. The others acknowledging me with a slight nod or wave, returning to their conversations. Cora said she wanted to ensure some supplies got to the Tempest, so that's probably where I should start looking. I left the Vortex and turned to head towards the landing pad where the Tempest was currently sat. I didn't have to go far as Vetra was currently leaning against the railing, watching the ship and workers moving cargo to and from. I walked towards her and began to hear her muttering to herself.

"Don't... don't shove the crate off the-you shoved the crate off the ramp," she exclaimed, annoyed and surprised at what this worker had done. With her supplies. "Where do they find these people?" she muttered.

"I would assume they find them somewhere on the Nexus," I joked. Walking up beside her and leaning my side against the railing. She stood up a bit straighter, not expecting someone to join her. She turned to look at me:
"Didn't expect to see you here Scott. Thought you'd be in the bar with the others, enjoying the festivities," she remarked.

"Noticed you were the only one not joining us. Wanted to come find you, see if I couldn't drag you away from work to have a bit of fun with the rest of us," I explained, humor in my voice.

"Well, thanks. But someone needs to make sure all those supplies get on board. Safely. I assume you heard me mutter about the idiot shoving a crate off the loading ramp? Someone has to keep them in line," she explained.

"Please, all that can be checked before take-off, and if anything is broken, like from being shoved off a ramp, I know you can make them replace that quickly enough."

"True, but it's still a hassle. I like to watch what's going on while we're away, but it's nice to check in person."

"Well, I'd consider this checked. Shore leave is for relaxation Vetra. Taking time off, time for yourself. Get a massage or something," I remarked. "Wait… can Turians even get massages?" I asked. I don't think you could exactly rub a carapace to remove muscle knots.

"Heh, sort of. We get vibrations through the carapace with a hammer. Ugh," she shuddered. "Not for me. I'm fine just people watching."

"Vetra, I'm going to give you two choices. Go get hammered with an actual hammer on your carapace, or come with me and get hammered with the others. The fun way. And hey, the best kind of people watching comes from watching drunk people," I joked. Vetra let out a good, short, laugh at that.

"Alright, alright, fine. If you insist. I suppose I can break away for a drink or two," she relented. She leaned off the railing and we began walking back to the bar.

"Glad you could see reason," I teased. "So, I spoke with Sid in the Ops center," I began.

"Did you? Sorry if she talked your ear off."

"Oh, not at all. She's a good kid. Just wants to help, make the galaxy a better place, she told me. I noticed she takes a lot after you. You should be proud of her," I remarked.

"Really? I tried to raise her right, be a good role model as a good sister should. I'm glad it all seems to be turning out alright. Spirits know I've worked hard for that."

"Speaking of sisters… SAM made contact with Sara. Through her implant," I began, a massive grin spreading out across my face.

"Wait, what?" she asked, stopping in her tracks and turning to face me. "Is she out of the coma?"

"No…" I sighed. "But I was able to speak with her. We joked a bit. But… I had to tell her about dad…" I continued.

"Damn. That couldn't have been easy… Sorry Scott. How'd she take it?" she asked.

"About as well as you'd expect. I think it made it a bit easier explaining that he died to save my life, but that doesn't make the pain go away. She asked about the golden worlds too. I told her the truth but quickly explained why things are looking up, the lead we have and what we've done, she took that better."
"I'm glad she got at least some good news out of it."

"She wants to meet you, the crew. I don't think I can get everyone to meet her in one sitting, but I'd like you to be first," I finished.

"Well, thanks, but… why me? Why not Cora or Liam? I assume she already knows them?"

"She never met Liam and neither of us were ever all that close with Cora. I want you to be first because, well… I've met your sister, and our sisters are our reasons that we're out there, finding home. Plus, you seem to have the kind of personality she reacts well with. Loose, some sarcasm and snark, but also wanting to help people. Heh, I think she resonates with it well because it's exactly what she and I are like. Plenty of sibling love without any rivalry, but plenty of siblings giving each other shit," I chuckled, reminiscing on good times with her.

"Then I'd be happy to meet her. When should I expect the call?"

"Next time we're on the Nexus, that's when Dr. Carlyle said I can have another talk with her," I answered.

"Then I'll be ready. Come on, let's go join the others before they hit that drink limit," she chuckled. We entered the Nexus, the crew noticing us and all raising a drink in the air with a small cheer. I grabbed another drink and ensured Vētra's first was on the house, as per the deal. The crew sat and talked for an hour. About the Nexus, back home, Eos, anything. Drack sharing some of his old war stories, several of us left us roaring with laughter. Eventually I felt like we needed to get going.

"Alright everyone, that's enough for today. We got a vault to find, and a cluster to make home," I called out. Some groaned and some remained quiet, setting down an empty bottle or finishing their drink in one last swig. We walked back as a crowd towards the Tempest before I was stopped, by Keri.

"Pathfinder! Wait! Just a moment!" she called out. The group stopped, turning to face the Asari running towards us. "Apologies, that last interview went through faster than I expected. I was hoping to get the next interview before you left," she explained.

"I'd be happy too," I answered. Turning to my crew, "You're all good to go. Go make sure the Tempest is ready for take-off and get the coordinates ready," I ordered. They acknowledged and made their way to the Tempest.

"Thank you, this shouldn't take long. Mind standing in front of the railing? View of the Tempest behind you?" I complied and moved to stand where she requested. "Excellent. The last interview has already been seen and gotten people talking. In fact, before I ran out here to meet you Tann asked us to meet him for a talk about staying 'On message,'" she laughed.

"He giving you any trouble?" I asked.

"Nothing we can't handle. It's much less interesting than what you've accomplished. Anyways, rolling in 3… 2… 1…" she had counted down with her fingers up at the same time, making a fist at zero as the camera she wore on her chest began recording. "Scientists are excited about your new outpost, though there are questions about how Prodromos can survive where Sites one and two failed," she stated her question.

"Well, truthfully there's no guarantee that it will, you can never truly guarantee something like that. However, the radiation and weather are both clearing up. The issues that destroyed Site One will not happen again. As for Site Two and the Kett, that's more complicated. Unlike Site Two,
Prodromos is better defended. Gun emplacements along the perimeter, making both air-drops and land assaults risky. Also, there is a detachment of security personnel trained in firearms. While obviously not as equipped as a full military outpost, it's not defenseless. But we can't predict everything. However, we always need to keep trying. We can't give up. Not again. All I can ever do, all anyone can ever do, is work to lessen the risk," I answered.

"I doubt that's the 'rah rah' quote Tann was hoping for, but it's very genuine, and that's what the people need. What they deserve. Frankly, the 'keep trying' is more inspiring than if you were to say that everything on Eos is fine and dandy. Facing those risks must be stressful. How do you relax between missions?" she asked.

"It's early days yet, but my crew and I like to take time together. Learn more about who we're working with, living with, fighting with. We're a team. Sometimes, that downtime involves us hitting the bar, as we were just coming back from," I chuckled.

"Sounds like good fun. This is history too. These little moments between. Really helps you get to know the people who made history, not just what they did and where they're from," she remarked. "Well, thanks. I'll get to editing this right away. Another interview next time you're around?" I nodded in confirmation. "Excellent, good luck out there!" she exclaimed. She turned to walk away and I began returning to the Tempest. A few minutes later I entered the bridge, seeing Kallo and Suvi typing away at their consoles.

"Everything good to go Kallo?" I asked.

"Affirmative Scott. Everything checks out, and coordinates entered. Waiting on your word," he stated.

"Take us out of here Kallo. We're going Vault hunting."

Chapter End Notes

Just explaining what that little interaction near the end of the chapter was. A cameo of one of my editor friends, Palaven (Kyra) dancing in the club with her childhood imaginary friend, Gavion. A turian, of course.
I stayed on the bridge, watching as we departed the Nexus and began accelerating to FTL.

"Kallo, what's our ETA at those coordinates?" I asked.

"Hopefully it should only be around an hour. However, this area of Heleus is known to be plagued by the scourge. I can't be sure we'll run across it until our ship's safeties detect a mass and revert to normal speeds," Kallo explained.

"Then here's hoping Heleus continues playing nice," I remarked. I left the bridge and made my way to Liam's room. Hadn't gotten a chance to really talk with him since his injuries. He had been rather tipsy when I tried. I entered his room to see him laying down on his old couch. Still not sure if that old thing is even comfortable.

"Hey Scott, need anything?" he asked. Asking if I needed something done? He's eager to be working, not resting.

"Nope, just coming to see how the wounds are. I asked in the bar but I thought I should know how it feels when you're sober," I joked.

"I've dealt with worse. Still thinking about what we accomplished on Eos. We've started. It's a new life. That's… just goddamn brilliant," he remarked, some awe in his voice.

"And here I was, about to ask how you think I've been doing," I chuckled.

"I'm committed to the Initiative. You're the Pathfinder. Simple as that, and as simple as it gets," Liam answered.

"Come on Kosta, that doesn't tell me anything. I figured that during your time in crisis response I'd figure you've seen people try and lead, people try to give others hope, fix a bad situation, all that. Was wondering how I stacked up, what I should try and pick-up," I explained.

"Always trying to improve, learn from others who were successful. That already is a good sign. Care for the lives of your team, showed that getting me out of that Ambush with that monster. You've definitely got some of your dad's smarts. Ordering the team to attack in certain ways together, as one. Focusing the right baddies at the right times. Knowing our abilities and thinking of ways to use them. And you can improvise. Like with that Singularity. And you're also open with us. Telling us about what SAM can really do and all that. Helps get the trust of who you're working with. Saw a lot of people who did the opposite and fell hard back in crisis response," Liam explained.
"Thanks, but come on, there has to be something I need to work on," I remarked.

"If anything, I think you're too trusting and forgiving with Nyx." I expected this to come back. Seems he hasn't tried talking with her, despite my recommendation. I raised an eyebrow and felt a bit angry. Didn't show it, and it wasn't like I've felt with Tann or Addison.


"She's a smuggler. They value credits more than anything else. Even smuggling slaves they'll do if the pay is good. She was a merc, too many times I've seen Blue Suns extort refugees for protection fees, and I've seen plenty of Blood pack outright beat the shit out of them for no good reason. Then she brought a kid here. That's not bloody right!"

"Am I a huge fan of the smuggling and the merc time? No, but she told me she did everything to care for her sister. Anything else is for her to say. She's told me, but the rest you need to go to her for. Wouldn't be right for me to start blabbing that story. As for the smuggling, plenty have a code and things they simply won't do. Haven't asked her explicitly but she certainly seems like the kind to refuse smuggling slaves. No matter the price. You're right that those big Merc groups, Blood Pack, Eclipse, Blue Suns, don't have much in a way of code. But Vetra was small, independent teams. Smaller jobs, and those smaller teams tend to have codes as well. My dad told us about his military operations as an N7. Sometimes it would be against mercs, that is the kind of stuff he observed out there. Again, I think you should go talk to her. I'm not saying you two need to get all buddy-buddy, but at least learn to trust her out in the field," I explained.

"I'll… think about it," he muttered. Laying back down. Guess that talk was over now. I left the room, checking my Omni-tool, it hadn't been too long since we left. About 15 minutes. Guess I'll just go to the bridge, make small talk as I wait to see if anything happens.

I had been at the bridge for around thirty minutes, small talk with Kallo and Suvi, largely about Milky Way life. Then the ship's alarms started to blare.

"Scott, ship's sensors detecting unknown objects in our path! It's a collision course, must be the scourge! Drive core's safeties engaging, disengaging from FTL… Now!" Kallo called out. Peebee had run out from her room the moment the alarms were going off to see what happened, and I heard the door open to admit more crew. The dark envelope of FTL faded as we slowed, able to see the light outside of the Tempest once more.

Smack right in front of us, a massive Alien ship. Dark green in color with brighter green lights across the hull and at the front, likely viewports within the ship. It had a pair of spotlights shining straight on top of us, almost as if they knew we'd be here. We were surrounded by smaller, T-shaped ships, likely fighters, and the scourge was surrounding us on all sides but the back. The color scheme, the lights, even the architecture of the fighters and ship, with the look of the metal suggested that there was only one possibility.

These ships were Kett. And here we are, surrounded by them. The Tempest came to a dead stop. What the fuck do we do now? I turned to see that by now the entirety of the ground team had joined us, and I took a few steps back in fear.

"K-Kett ships! A dozen? No, more! Far more!" Suvi choked out. Looking up I saw a pair of fighters fly right above us through another viewport, and many more farther above them. Through the main viewport I could see four massive tubes slowly pointing at us. Guns. No doubt about that. And more and more fighters began forming a wall in front of us, and scans showed them moving behind us as well.
"W-we're pinned!" Kallo called out.

"They're scanning us, Pathfinder," SAM informed. Ok, enough of this, we need to do something!

"Uh, Open fire on those fighters! Clear us a path!" I ordered.

"We don't have any weapons!" Kallo called out.

"What!? How… Why?! Fucking hell, just what we need. Ok, scan them back!" I ordered, nervous and half-assed. We needed to do SOMETHING, right? The ship's lights began to dim, then die out. The only light we had came from the glow of the consoles and emergency lights. And the spotlights of the MASSIVE FUCKING SHIP IN FRONT OF US!

"Ryder, incoming transmission… from the Kett ship," Kallo stated, not quite believing it. I thought these assholes shot first and asked questions later. Well I don't exactly expect to understand a damn thing they say, but might as well at this point.

"Alright, well, might as well try to talk our way out of this one. Open comms," I ordered. Apparently, it was a vid call as well as a screen opened in front of me, revealing the bony and grey face of a Kett. He had four nostrils and the bone was in fact limited to what little I could see of his forehead and the sides of his head. His pupils had a light blue glow to them and… it also seemed as if this guy had a case of the baby face. That or he just looked like one of the smaller monkeys from back on Earth.

"Where is the one who activated the Remnant?" the Kett demanded. His voice was deeper, but not gruff like Drack's. And how the fuck could I understand him? Our translators don't have enough of their language to work. Could… could they have learned our language from somewhere else? Exiles? An ark? I rushed through my omni-tool to find the translator. It had scanned this Kett's language as Salarian. That answers one question, but leaves me with more questions. "Their DNA signature is there. Answer me!" he demanded, keeping his voice cool and calm. I would think that the DNA he has is my dad's, which means I must be close enough to pick up as a match for their scanners.

"You're the one in my way. Who the hell are you?" I asked in reply. The Kett remained silent and our ship began moving. From the side. We were being pulled in.

"They've locked navigation!" Suvi called out.

"We're being steered into their ship!" Kallo informed.

"I am NOT being taken prisoner…" Drack growled.

"Neither am I old man, neither am I," Vetra muttered, determined.

"Just tell us what you want!" I demanded. The Kett let out a small sneer, as if insulted by my demand.

"I won't explain what you can't possibly understand," he replied. Great, so he's one of those arrogant bastards. Assumes everyone else is too incompetent to understand his goals. I heard SAM's voice in my head, via our private channel:

"Scott, I have almost regained control of the ship. I need a few more seconds, stall," SAM explained.

"Alright jackass you can't just take a ship full of people just because you feel like it, and we sure as
fuck aren't just going to sit here and let you capture us! Who the fuck do you think you are?" I yelled out.

"Enough! Your defiance is naive and reckless. This day marks the beginning of your greatness," the Kett remarked. Well that sounds vague. And I don't like it one bit. The bridge's lights lit up once more as SAM regained control.

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

"Then don't just leave us floating here, GO!" I ordered. Kallo immediately began keying his console to begin piloting the ship, following SAM's path. We turned for a quick 180 degrees turn and two Kett fighters broke off to begin pursuit. The large Kett ship would no doubt be unable to follow us. We began flying "up" from our perspective, as space doesn't truly have an up, and sensors detected one of our tails impact the scourge already, exploding. We found our way into a tunnel of the stuff, bobbing and weaving in the narrow space to avoid the shots of the fighter right on our tail. Really wish we at least had some small amount of firepower. We continued weaving our way through the web of dark energy and the ship rocked as we scraped against the Scourge.

"Damage to aft sensors!" Suvi called out. We needed to get this damn fighter off our tail. And we sure as hell weren't gaining room to maneuver. Fortunately, that fighter's pilot wasn't as skilled as ours crashed. I could see a way out but the hole was not exactly big.

"It will be tight," SAM informed. I think I can tell. The entire air of the bridge was filled with nerves and once more we rocked as we scraped against the Scourge, this time more severely. Vetra had placed a hand on Kallo's chair and the console, leaning forward, anxiously watching our escape.

"Kallo…" she began, clear nerves.

And we were clear. We made it out of that goddamn death cloud in space. The bridge broke out in cheers as we all realized we made it. I could see the star system ahead of us. Somewhere, there was an active vault.

"Ha-ha! Nice work, kid!" Drack complemented Kallo.

"Damn good work Kallo. But, who the hell was that guy?" I asked. I knew no one would have an answer, but still, I asked. Before even anyone could shrug, Gil's voice filled the comms. He wasn't just nervous; his voice was active fear.

"Scott, we got trouble down here. You NEED to find us a port. NOW!" he called out.

"Fan-fucking-tastic. Are we at least in the same system as the coordinates?" I asked. Peebee ran over to Suvi, maybe to check the coordinates.

"Sensors damaged, but this should be the system. Course already set for the right planet," she explained.

"Should? We'll, take what we can get…" I muttered. I let out a breath and continued: "Gil, give it what you can. We're setting down," I ordered. It won't be a port but it will have to do.

Gil explained we couldn't do FTL but could get close to it, so the trip to this planet would take a few minutes longer than normal. Everyone just stayed in the bridge, processing what had just happened in silence. As we neared the planet we could make out more of the surface. The main landmass we saw appeared as a large black mass. But that mass was lit up in several locations and long lines. But the patterns suggested against civilization, and what little sensors we had left
detected large volcanic activity in the region. We entered the atmosphere and the dark grey clouds, lightning often popping up and red glows of flame supported that.

"Scott, we're being contacted!" Suvi exclaimed. What? Exiles maybe? I just hope it's not more Kett.

"We have to land… open comms, hope this works better," I ordered. The clouds began to thin slightly, daylight breaking through and we were then flanked by two pairs of two smaller ships, a comparative size to our dropships on either side.

Those ships weren't Kett. And they weren't Initiative.

"Tove jagalesh do!" the voice seemed to order. Where all the Kett I had seen and heard appeared male, this voice sounded female. And that language confirms it's not exiles with a new style to their ships. Unfortunately, once again, we couldn't understand them. The voice paused a moment, "Tove jagalesh do!" it ordered, more forcibly, a warning in its tone. I may not have any idea what they were saying, but it was clear that if we didn't respond how they wanted, they would open fire. Some things are universal.

"Um, listen, sorry to just show up like this but, I swear, we're the extra-galactic good guys," I tried to reassure. We come in peace was too overused, and this just sort of came out.

"Evfanola! Fahen an gasad regara!" the voice came out. Well, that's a different response to the last one. Good sign I hope? "Evfanola…" the voice muttered. And then it chuckled. I really hope that's a good sign.

"They're forcing us to land," Kallo informed, coordinates appearing on his screen as well as a simple diagram appeared depicting what would happen if we didn't follow. There might have been an explosion involved.

"We have to do that anyway, might as well," I muttered. Looking down at the ground, I could see it was riddled with lava flows and dark black stone. But then the clouds parted fully, sunlight creeping down. Ahead? Green grass, tree covered mountains, flowing rivers and waterfalls. "Wow… Ha. Look at that… It's beautiful," I remarked. This planet was alive. With aliens and nature. Too bad we probably won't get to settle here. The Initiative is ordered to respect all sovereign territory of non-hostile races after all. We were guided towards one of the mountains and I saw a city. White structures with green windows and large covers over much of the city, like giant umbrellas in shades of green and blue. It looks friendly. And lovely. The mountains, plants, and waterfalls began to remind me of home. Of where I grew up. Back on Earth, Florida. Yet it also reminded me of Hawaii, where my dad and mom had taken Sara and I once, and Brazil, where mom was from. We began landing on a landing pad in a clearing. No shots had been fired yet, I really hope this means a positive first contact.

We touched down and the alien shuttles stayed in the air, angled downwards towards us, likely meaning they had weapons prepared to fire.

"We need in that vault, but if this works out, maybe we found something just as important. Allies," I remarked. Vetra crossed her arms over her chest:

"Scott, please. You're not really going out there on your own," she stated, some concern in her voice. I'd like to bring them all with me, but too many people, heh, too many different species of Alien at once might be too much for these guys.

"We can't afford a repeat of last time. If this can work out, imagine what that means. We have an
ally, we have a friendly relationship with a species from a whole other galaxy," I explained. "I'm the Pathfinder. First contact is on me," I faced the crew, walking towards them. And the exit.

"Just be careful, ok?" Vetra asked. I nodded and Liam patted me on the shoulder.

"Only the most important thing ever. No pressure," he smiled. Hm, and on Habitat 7 he seemed more willing to shoot as first contact than here. Interesting, at least. I could sure as hell feel the nerves, they probably could to. Maybe something to help them, and me, relax. I turned to face them again, walking backwards:

"If this goes badly-if I get eaten alive-even if it's hilarious-please destroy the vids," I joked. "I'm looking at you, Vetra," I chuckled. The crew let out a nervous laugh and I gave a parting wave. On my way down the cargo bay I noticed just what I'd be wearing for first contact. Currently, I was wearing a black Initiative T-shirt and a light brown pair of cargo shorts. It was casual. Maybe that could help? My shoes were simply standard tennis shoes and I wouldn't be eager to put on anything more formal for footwear. Hm, if the look of this planet is anything to go by, I'd love to be wearing flip flops out there.

I was now in the cargo bay, the ramp already extended but the door was closed. I keyed my omni-tool to open it, only now realizing it did so from the bottom. Dramatic. I put my hands in the air, to show these guys I was unarmed, though no doubt I'd be scanned. I could hear many voices, some masculine, some feminine in the distance, no doubt talking about their new arrival. In front of the ship was a line of armored and armed guards, all with their helmets on and weapons pointed at me, but fortunately not firing. Some of them were bulky, broader shoulders, some were thinner, smaller. Both males and females respectively I'd assume. Six rushed forward to meet me. Half watching the cargo bay for others and half keeping their eyes and guns on me. One of them, a male given the body shape lifted a hand to the side of his head, and began speaking. Talking to a superior I'd assume.

"Tas goaj yabe jenvad," he began. Another guard raised a hand and a blue light emerged, scanning me. The first guard seemed to be listening intently to someone on the other end. Still nervous, though doubtful they'd understand me, I cracked another joke.

"Need me to take my shoes off?" the guard scanning me raised his head to look at me as he continued scanning, but nothing more. He finished scanning and turned to a cohort:

"Eham daar goss," he seemed to explain. They moved to the side, clearing me a path and gestured with a wave of the hand to move, which I did, keeping my hands raised. The guards escorted me off the main docking pad and through a large main door, into the city itself I suppose. This place was beautiful. Vibrant, colorful plants, lush green plains in the distance, the sounds of alien birds chirping. We came to a staircase, a plaza at the top, and I could see stalls, like it was a marketplace. But what took my attention, were the five locals standing at the top, watching me intently. They were unarmored and I could see their heads. Like humans, they seemed to have various skin tones. Two of the thinner, feminine appearing ones had darker blue foreheads with a lighter side for their faces and an odd kind of… skin flap? On the sides of their heads. The shape of which was reminiscent of a lion's mane but clearly not hair. The other female on the right had a more greenish skin. To my left were two males, one with a slight purple tint and larger head, more flap like and less rounded… things on the side of their head, and the other male a mix of purple and green. In the middle was one of the blue females with a white marking on her forehead. Symbol of authority?

"I'm Paaran Shie, governor of Aya. We are the Angara," she introduced. Holy shit I understood that? Our translators can't work that fast.
"Woah, I'm incredibly sorry, but how can I understand you? Your language shouldn't be in our translators," I asked. A confused look appeared on the faces of all the Angara up there with her.

"You… do not know? No matter, if this goes well I might explain. Now, who are you?" she asked.

"Apologies, my name is Scott Ryder. I'm the Human Pathfinder of the Andromeda Initiative. We come from the Milky Way galaxy," I introduced.

"Yes, crossing dark space. I've heard of your journey," she began.

"You have? Than this isn't your first contact with our people, but… this should be the Initiative's first contact with yours, that must mean… oh. You've met the exiles," I sighed. "I am so incredibly sorry for anything they might have done to your people. I wasn't here yet when it happened, but everything had gone wrong. There was a mutiny, and people were kicked out. Some of those people wouldn't be too happy. Some of those people might not be too friendly," I stated remorsefully.

"I see…" she began. She turned to face a new Angara approaching. He had pink skin and was wearing an eyepiece over his right eye, a blue holographic interface over it. A sniper in their military? He had a blue… cape or poncho like thing on his shoulders and his armor shared a darker blue tint. "Jaal. I have this in hand," she stated. So, guess I have a name. He began walking down the stairs towards me and raised a hand defensively, cutting her off to explain.

"Evfra saw the ship come in and sent me to find out what's going on." He continued down the stairs and I saw a scar on his left… flap thing. A deep sideways cut in the middle of it. Definitely a soldier.

"He is a human from another galaxy. A Pathfinder," Paaran introduced me. Jaal got right in my face, inspecting me closely.

"Hmm… Aya is hidden, protected. What do you want?" he questioned. His eyes were a dark blue color, iris, pupil while the sclera was black.

"Again, I apologize. Landing here the way we did, without warning…on fire, was not the plan. Hell, we didn't even know this planet was inhabited until we were contacted," I began to explain.

"That's good to know. Because if it was, that would be a very bad plan," Jaal joked. He didn't laugh, but I could hear humor and a slight smirk. Humor is certainly a good sign. I smirked as I continued:

"That it would. Anyways, we came here, to Aya from coordinates we got from a Remnant structure, Remnant is our name for the ancient alien structures, that when we re-activated that structure, it began cleaning up the planet's radiation. Fixing the weather. It also gave us a map of other similar structures across the cluster. One of them appeared active, and its coordinates led here. On our way here, we were ambushed by an Alien race we call the-" I was cut off from my explanation by Jaal:

"The Kett ambushed you? Hm, if what you say is true, we may share a common foe…" a common foe? Yes! This is our chance! We can work together to fight the Kett! Ally against them! The enemy of my enemy is my friend, after all.

"Really? Maybe we could help each other out. Anyways, this Kett leader, he wouldn't give us his name, wanted us because we had activated Remnant technology. We escaped through the Scourge, the dark energy phenomenon, and sustained damage that we needed to land to make repairs. And
now, here we are," I finished explaining. Jaal turned to face Paaran and began walking up the stairs.

"I'll inform Evfra. He'll be waiting for you in his office at the Resistance Headquarters. I'll meet you there," he stated.

"I will accompany you through our city. Your crew will stay on your ship. Follow me," Paaran ordered. Most of the guards dispersed, likely going to watch the ship but two stayed to watch me.

"Follow closely. Do not try to explore the city or interact with anyone," Paaran ordered. "Evfra's guards will use force if necessary."

"I understand, may I still ask you questions?" I asked. It was tempting to point that out… To our left was a group of civilians watching me closely, guards forming a line to keep anyone from getting close. To my surprise, a wall on the right had glyphs nearly identical to the Remnant. Perhaps they're a large piece of their culture?

"I suppose," Paaran answered.

"If you're the governor, why do I need to see Evfra? Who is he?" I asked as we began walking down a staircase with a waterfall in front of us. I could hear the crowd talking amongst themselves. A mix of curiosity and nervousness.

"Evfra leads the resistance," she answered.

"And the resistance resists…?"

"The Kett. And they protect us." We walked down the stairs, turning right. To the left was another group of civilians, watching me closely. I could hear a woman suggest locking me up for safety, heh, she used it instead of he. SAM spoke up on our private channel:

"I detect unusual levels of electrostatic energy in the Angara." Interesting, but not sure what it means. I could hear another woman suggest locking it up in a containment cell. A man asked if we could find them, how long until the Kett do? We walked under a rock arch, vines clinging to the rock and waterfalls on the right and left sides of the right-hand side of the archway.

"Am I really that intimidating?" I asked Paaran.

"You're an outsider who invaded our home. We know nothing about you," she explained.

"Well, I guess you have a point there. I'm not here to cause trouble, but it's going to take much more than simple words, isn't it?"

"That it is…" she muttered. "Keep moving." We came out on the other side and to the left was a building with three Angara standing outside the door.

"How did it find us?" a man asked.

"He not it. And stop staring," a woman spoke up. Seems I have a defender. We were rounding a bend with two large waterfalls, certainly beautiful.

"Your city is just… beautiful. Reminds me of a few places I visited back on my home world. Go outside, bask in the sunlight, see the colorful plants and lush trees, go for a swim, good times," I remarked.
"Thank you, you're the first outsider to see it."

"I'm honored."

"You described a relaxing life back at your home. Why leave it?" Paaran asked. I sighed as I began, remembering both the happier times, and the sad times.

"Some people left to explore. To discover. To journey out into the great unknown. Those were things that helped my decision, but life back home wasn't all relaxing like that, not for my family. Early on my parents gave my sister and I a happy life. Then our mom got sick, eventually it killed her, not long before we left. Trying to save her took a lot from us. It became a life better left behind," I explained. "And then my dad died to save my life not long after we first arrived in the cluster..." Paaran glanced back, a slightly sympathetic voice.

"I'm sorry for your loss." I kept quiet, focusing on beating the sadness back down. Now was not the time. We were nearing another building, a crowd blocking off the way past it. This must be the Resistance HQ.

"What happens if Evfra doesn't like me?" I asked. Paaran laughed at that.

"He won't. What you do need, is for him to trust you," she explained. "This is the Resistance Headquarters. Evfra will be waiting inside." The door opened for me and inside was Jaal walking alongside another Angara male with blue and green skin. And he was holding a Kett sniper.

"They're bullies. But the situation is now your fault. Don't get kicked out, Moraan-not because of them," he told the apparently younger Angara.

"But you're telling me to be weak!" he replied. Jaal placed a hand on his shoulder:

"No, I'm telling you to be strong through your cunning and heart. Ok?" Jaal reassured. The younger Angara began walking off and Jaal's face flashed from being confused to being amused. "Hey..." The younger Angara stopped in his tracks and slowly turned, a smirk on his face. He returned to Jaal, handing him the Kett rifle:

"It really is the best one in the Resistance," he remarked.

"I know," Jaal chuckled. The younger Angara walked towards me, heading for the exit but staring me down. I began walking for Jaal but as we neared he slowly turned and continued staring at me, a test maybe? I stared right back, not in a hostile way, but a confident way. Jaal obviously saw the exchange.

"Our experience with the Kett makes us naturally distrustful of all aliens," Jaal explained.

"You already know we were ambushed by them on our way here. That isn't our first encounter. We've lost people to them, others have been captured, we don't know what happened to them," I remarked. "I'd be more surprised if you welcomed us with open arms, a feast, and festivities all day long," I joked.

"Then... perhaps you really do understand," Jaal replied. That's certainly a good sign. "When the Archon, the Kett leader who was likely the same one to ambush you, came to Heleus, he demolished our sovereign state. He took what he wanted, as if we were nothing. Now, the Kett mercilessly abduct Angara. Often, we never see our own people again."

"W-when are we going to meet Evfra?"

"We should be right there," Jaal answered. "Come, Evfra is waiting." We began walking towards the next room:
"Wait, why kidnap? Slave labor?" I asked.

"Possibly. The Resistance fights them every day, with everything we can," he explained.

"Any idea what they're after?"

"You should save your questions for Evfra, he knows more than I do." We entered the next room, a large tactical display on the left, several terminals with Angara tirelessly typing away, and in the center, a desk with a large Angara man standing, communicating with his tacticians.

"Kadara be damned. I won't lose Voeld!" he stated. Kadara? The planet the exiles went to?

"Evfra, this is one of the aliens from the Milky Way- a Pathfinder," he introduced. Evfra turned to face us, his skin a lighter blue color and a rather impressive set of scars running down over his left eye, forehead, and mouth.

"Pathfinder," he stated, seeming to be testing the word rather than greeting me. "It's an aggressive move, coming to Aya," he warned. This seems like a gruff, and rough man, seen a lot of shit. Simply apologizing won't do a damn thing for him.

"The Initiative, my people, the Humans, and the other species were all bold enough to leave their homes in the Milky Way to explore Andromeda. I need to be at least that bold to save them," I remarked. I noticed Evfra nod, he approved.

"Never mind how you even found Aya, why are you here?" he questioned.

"On a hostile planet called Eos, once covered in radiation and bad storms, all making it uninhabitable, my team and I explored an ancient alien structure, we call the structure a vault, and we brought it back online. Upon activation, it… fixed the planet, so to speak. It began cleaning up radiation and calming the weather, so quickly the result was noticeable the moment we left the vault, and by now it's likely done much more," I began explaining.

"Remnant. Recent intel supports that claim," Jaal spoke up, reinforcing my claim. I continued:

"The vault also showed us a map of the cluster. According to said map, there are vaults everywhere. But one of them appeared active. You can guess where it's coordinates led. The hope is that inside I can perhaps find the center of the network, somewhere that we can turn all of them on at once. Make the cluster live," I explained. Evfra appeared thoughtful and turned to look out the window. A helluva view, I must say.

"It certainly SOUNDS like a noble goal. Yes, there is a… vault out there. However, it was shut and hidden long ago," he explained. "We can't help you."

"The Moshae could," Jaal suggested. "She's our most revered scientist and elder. She knows this vault."

"But now the Kett have her, and our rescue attempts failed. She's lost to us. And you," Evfra revealed.

"Shit. Well the way I see it there's two options, and I refuse to just give up. Either I try to find this place myself, which will no doubt take a long time, or we can work together for one last attempt to save her. The Initiative does have a few tools at its disposal that might just turn the tide. For one, an AI. I also have two well trained biotics on my team and I'm one myself," I explained.

"Biotic? What's a biotic?" Evfra asked.
"Oh, sorry, guess that term doesn't translate. The people with bits of Element Zero in their brains and they can use it to manipulate dark energy and create mass effect fields," I explained.

"Storms… what-what are you talking about?" he asked, even more confused and even shocked.

"Wait, do your people not have those? But, you do use element zero, right?"

"Y-yes, we do, but how…" Jaal replied. Confused as well.

"If you're exposed to element zero while in the womb, odds are you'll get tumors and die. Sometimes the kid gets lucky and instead gets bits of element zero in their head. Using the brain's electricity, they can create mass effect fields, manipulate them. Do you have a small object I can demonstrate on?" I asked.

Cautiously, Evfra handed me a data pad, ensuring to turn it off first. I focused, using my biotics to simply lift it off my hand and twirl it around. After that brief demonstration, I floated the data pad in front of Evfra, he carefully plucked it out from the sky and I released the biotics from it.

"That was just a simple demonstration. Most biotics can use it in more powerful ways. Like picking up a Kett and throwing him into another Kett. Or a shockwave to knock them down. Skilled biotics, like those on my team can use even more powerful ones and use them more rapidly. Doing this for too long can be dangerous."

"Damn it… I don't trust you, let alone know you. These biotics certainly make me wary…"

"Evfra. I feel… Evfra, what this alien says, it's extraordinary," Jaal spoke up, still shocked from my display "The Moshae would want us to be brave, and not let this chance pass."


"Let me assess this alien. I'll be your eyes. I know you can spare me," Jaal suggested. A new crewmember? This'll be interesting.

"Go if you want. But when he tries to kill you, be prepared to strike first," Evfra warned, walking off.

"I'm Jaal Ama Darav. I'll be your envoy through Angaran space," he introduced.

"Scott Ryder, good to meet you. It's gonna be cozy, so I hope you like people," I warned. Holding out a hand to shake. It only occurred to me that a handshake wouldn't be recognized after I already had it out. Jaal placed his hand to the outside of my own, backhand against backhand. I moved mine to try and get the palms in a shake, but Jaal then proceeded to grab my arm with his other arm, bend it upwards, placed my backhand against his, and pressed our wrists together. Jaal sighed:

"I hope I don't regret this…"

"Me too Jaal, me too." We turned to walk back to the landing bay. We followed the same path, the crowds still in place, watching me intently. Now I had a better understanding why they are suspicious. The last time they met alien life, it was the Kett. We made it back to the docking bay and an Angara man pulled Jaal aside for a moment. At the same time, another Angara man waved me over. After an interesting conversation about how our economy works, thankfully only at a basic level, he asked if I could help find a partner of his and his supplies, in turn, we could trade goods. Good thing he didn't ask about the intricate parts of the economy, the Volus aren't here yet. I began to catch up with Jaal but then an Angaran woman waved me aside. I think I recognized her, the same one who told the man to call me a "he" and not an "it." I figure I should talk with anyone
willing to give me a chance, get as good an impression as I can with these people. Her outfit was a mix of purple and green while her skin was dark purple on the forehead and a lighter kind on the face, and she was wearing a kind of leather strap that went over her head and clipped over her right brow.

"Stars above, it's you… I was hoping to get a chance to speak with you," she began. She sounded excited. "You left your home to cross dark space… is it true you can never go back?"

"Well, a six-hundred-year journey in cryo-sleep that used up a helluva lot of fuel is kind of a one-way trip. Everyone we ever knew back home is long dead, it's the kind of thing you commit to regardless," I answered.

"To take such risk and give up your old life… why did you do it?" she questioned.

"Everyone I've asked that question has their own answer. Some, to explore, see new worlds, do what no one else ever had. To meet new species even. Some did it for a better life they couldn't have back home. Some did it to escape their past. A fresh start," I explained.

"But, why did you? Specifically?"

"When someone knocks on your door and says 'hey, would you and your family like to take part in a voyage to a whole new galaxy full of undiscovered worlds and mysteries waiting to be uncovered? The true adventure of a lifetime?' It turns out being hard to say no," I chuckled.

"I know the feeling. There's a rush in taking a chance and hoping for the best."

"My turn, what's your name?" I asked.

"Oh—of course. I'm Avela Kjar, curator for the Repository of History," she answered. That sounds like a Museum. "We study relics of our past. Try to piece together what was lost in the Scourge."

"Scott Ryder, nice to meet you Avela."

"You as well Scott. Truth is, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. How much do you know about our history?"

"Well, I haven't exactly had the chance to sit down and ask anyone about it, so I don't know much at all."

"Around three centuries ago, the Scourge targeted my people. Our ships were the first to go dark. Many of those ships went down over Havarl. The wilds of that planet are filled with history. A scientist there recently contacted me with the navpoint of an intact crash site. It's a huge opportunity. Unfortunately, the area is covered with Remnant and we can't get close enough. You on the other hand…" she suggested.

"How do you know about that?" I asked.

"Friends in the resistance. They heard your talk with Evfra. I know it's a lot to ask. But you have a ship and the means to get past the Remnant. Without your help… I'm stuck," she explained. Avela sounded distressed, she needed the answers the site may provide.

"If I end up on Havarl, I will most certainly go looking. However, I only just met your people and it would be a bad idea for me to go around asking if I can go to your worlds all the time. If the Angara direct me to Havarl that's one thing. If I just go back to Evfra and ask if I can visit that planet it won't do well. That's all I can promise," I explained. Avela let out a sigh:
"I understand. I'll talk to Evfra and Paaran about letting you visit. Good luck out there," she finished, walking off. Jaal had finished talking with his friend, who stopped me to give me a rundown of what to expect while on Aya. I will only be allowed here at the docking bay and he will be my liaison, Enroh Bosan. Entering the rest of the city is something Paaran and Evfra will need to allow. He also mentioned that they had spoken with Gil, and had gotten the proper parts to him. Given our tech differences I would expect that it's only a temp fix until we return to the Nexus. Jaal saw me coming over and keyed a control panel to extend the bridge to the landing pad.

"Your ship is… we have nothing like it," he chuckled.

"Wait til you see the inside," I remarked.

"Heh, it gets better?"

"You could say that. Come on, let's introduce you to the crew. There are four other humans like me aboard, but we also have a Turian, a Krogan, a Salarian, and two Asari, so expect to see a lot of… variety," I cautioned.

"This should be… interesting," Jaal remarked.

"Follow me up to the meeting room. I'll get the whole crew assembled and then give you the tour while we're en route to our next destination. Wherever that will be. I assume you have an idea about that?" I asked as we began walking back to the ship.

"I do. I'll brief you and the crew together," Jaal answered. I led him up the docking ramp and opened the cargo bay doors. Jaal seemed intrigued by the Nomad and stopped to inspect it.

"That's the Nomad, our land vehicle. It can hold four people and can help us get around just about any environment. And word of warning, I do like to drive that thing off cliffs and ramps for some jumps, but it can take it," I warned. He looked back, a grin on his face.

"I might be looking forward to that. May I tinker with it later?"

"Sure. Just talk to Gil, our engineer before you do. He'll give you a run-down of how it works. Also, just be sure to let him know what you do just so the two of you are on the same page," I answered. Jaal nodded and I led him up the cargo lift towards the meeting room. "That behind us is the engine room, where Gil spends most of his time. Look in the window and you can see him running checks on the drive core." We entered the main hub of the Tempest and continued up the ramp to the meeting room. "I'll call everyone up. Feel free to take a seat on the couches or the chairs if you want. Once we're done here I'll also explain living arrangements." I keyed the intercom and spoke as Jaal relaxed on a couch, testing it for comfort. "All crew, report to the meeting room. We have a new crew-mate for you all to meet and he also has intel for our next mission."

We were joined first by Cora, coming out of the bio-lab and then by Peebee, Kallo, and Suvi. All of whom studied Jaal with curiosity, and he studied them quietly. Soon following were Gil, Vetra, Liam, Lexi, and Drack. Jaal remained quiet as the others joined, so I saw fit to begin.

"Everyone, meet Jaal Ama Darav. He will be our envoy through Angaran space. Jaal, first off is the ground team. You'll likely be working with them the most and fighting alongside them in combat. The woman here is Cora Harper, like me she's biotic," I began. Cora nodded and Jaal did the same. "This is Liam Kosta, he's ex crisis response but will be sitting out for a few more days thanks to injuries from a Kett ambush on Eos." Liam gave a friendly wave and smile but Jaal kept his face expressionless. Guess he's nervous? Trying to judge the crew before he opens up to them?
"The woman here is Vetra Nyx, a Turian. She's a good fighter, and knows how to get her hands on just about anything you might need. Though I doubt even she has been able to build up trade connections with Angara so quickly," I joked. Vetra chuckled but had her arms crossed over her chest. Defensively, but not hostile. She nodded her head at Jaal and I did see a smirk cross his face at the joke. "And here is Pe-"

"Name's Peebee. I'm an Asari, and oh! I'm also biotic. I've spent a lot of time here studying the Remnant, do the Angara know much about them?" Peebee interrupted me to eagerly ask her question. The excitement in her voice making her sound like a schoolgirl.

"They are a large part of our history, but you're speaking to the wrong Angara for answers," he replied. Peebee looked down for a moment in disappointment that Jaal didn't know much but she still seemed full of curiosity about his people.

"The last member of the ground team is the tough old bastard here, Drack. This Krogan spent a lot of his time here kicking Kett ass," I introduced.

"I hear the Angara have been fighting Kett for a long time…" Drack began.

"For eighty years," Jaal answered.

"Hm. I like you already," Drack chuckled.

"Other than ground team we have Gil Brodie, who I pointed out on our way here, and the other Asari is Dr. Lexi T'Perro. She may not exactly know anything about Angaran physiology but I hope you'll speak with her later so she knows how to treat you just in case," I suggested.

"I brought medicine, but other than the medicines I brought I don't know the intricacies," Jaal explained. Lexi placed a hand to her chin thoughtfully as she considered possibilities.

"We also have Dr. Suvi Anwar, our science officer. If you have any questions about our tech ask her. Finally, we have our resident Salarian Kallo Jath, our pilot. He was also involved with the Tempest's construction so this ship couldn't be in better hands," I finished. "Any questions?"

"When will we be allowed off? I want to look around," Peebee asked.

"One step at a time Peebee. We have to win their trust first. The last aliens they met were the Kett."

"Jaal, may I scan you? I need to know what food you can and can't eat," Lexi asked.

"I brought plenty of food," Jaal answered.

"Of course, but I need to know what your chirality is. There is some food on board you won't be able to eat without getting sick. It's just a precaution. Vetra is a dextro chirality while the rest of us are levo. If you are dextro and eat our food it could kill you," Lexi explained.

"Alright, run your scan," he replied. Lexi walked over and ran a quick scan, just enough to know chirality.

"Levo. Sorry Vetra, your menu doesn't seem to be growing," Lexi teased. Vetra let out a chuckle.

"So, the Vault. When do we go there?" Peebee asked.

"Jaal, want to explain this one?" I asked. He stood and moved to join the team around the center table.
"One day, about eighty years ago, the Archon and the Kett arrived in Heleus, and the horror began," Jaal started.

"They declared war?" Vetra asked.

"Only after fooling us into believing their intentions were peaceful," Jaal answered. It would take quite the idiot to not understand what Jaal was implying. The Angara would not trust again so easily.

"The Kett kidnap Angara, their people disappear without a trace. Can you blame their caution?" I pointed out. Vetra shook her head no, understanding the situation.

"I'll fight Kett all day long but what's the plan?" Drack questioned.

"I agree. Our own priorities must come first," Cora remarked. If you ask me that's heavily shortsighted.

"Then you're not seeing the bigger picture Cora. Yes, we need that Vault and the data it holds, but we can't just bypass the Angara when the vault is on a key world for them. That would screw over relations and likely leave us in a war with yet another alien species in Andromeda. Unlike with the Kett, it's a war we'd have been able to avoid. Building bridges means trade as well. It may not provide as many resources as a new colony world but it can hold us over until we can get to the vault," I explained. Jaal keyed a kind of tac-pad on his arm to send data. A hologram of two worlds appeared:

"The entrance to the vault here was hidden long ago. Only the Moshae, our most respected scientist and elder knows the location. And she was recently captured by the Kett. Our rescue attempts have failed. Before Evfra, the leader of the Resistance agrees to your aid, you need to prove yourselves. The Resistance is stretched thin, and I was tasked with travelling to two of our worlds at a briefing this morning, and you'll accompany me. This will help you prove yourselves to Evfra. Havarl is the birthplace of our species, and recently we lost contact with a team of scientists. The planet has started to degrade, to become wild and dangerous. We suspect the cause to be Remnant. The other planet is Voeld. It's the center of our ground war against the Kett. It's a frozen world of large cultural importance to my people. Before the Scourge disaster it was a thriving world of billions. A center of technology and light," Jaal explained.

"To translate: Help me and I'll vouch for you. Because I want inside the vault too," Cora remarked sarcastically. I noticed Jaal glare at her. She's really stretching that second chance I was willing to give her.

"So what if he does? We'll get inside the vault too. We'll build bridges with Angara. We'll help lessen the Kett's grip on Heleus, and we'll learn more about the Remnant. We don't exactly have anything to lose. Trying to find the vault ourselves will only yield more consequences than rewards," I explained.

"He's right. We already have one alien species pissed off at us. I'm not eager to get another one feeling the same, but it's your call Scott," Vetra remarked.

"If it isn't already clear, I'm on the side of building bridges. Kallo, set a course for Havarl. The rest of you are dismissed," I stated. Jaal remained as the others left to do what they needed. "Now, there is one last person for you to meet Jaal. SAM why don't you show your hologram on the table here?" SAM complied and Jaal looked curiously upon the hologram.

"Hello Jaal. I am SAM, the team's artificial intelligence," SAM introduced.
"Artificial life... that is... remarkable," Jaal spoke, barely above a whisper.

"Now, I did give the team the same explanation so I figure you deserve the same. Originally, it was my father who was the Pathfinder. He made SAM back in the Milky way to help my mother overcome a terminal illness. It... didn't work. Thing is, the way SAM could help, at least for a while, is that he is able to modify a person's physiology, so long as they have the proper implant and SAM connection. When my father gave his life to save mine, he made me Pathfinder and transferred SAM to me. I already had the same implant, so now SAM can boost my eyesight, strength, reaction time, that sort of thing. In turn, SAM can use my implant to see into our world. To truly experience it. See, smell, hear, even feel. He is able to experience the world just like we do," I explained. Jaal looked at me and back at SAM eyes wide. I was afraid he was going to freak.

"Ryder... what your father did... It's amazing. Creating life and then allowing it to see just as we do. It's... beautiful," Jaal remarked, awe in his voice. I breathed a sigh of relief that Jaal reacted how he did.

"Glad you approve. And for the record, no need to call my Pathfinder, or Ryder. Just Scott. Come on, let's show you around," I began, leading him back down to the Tempest's ops center. "The cargo bay which we entered from also houses the armory. Normally that'll be where we suit up for our missions. On the left, here we have the bio-lab, and on the right, is the tech lab," I continued, walking along the glass pathway to the bridge. "Down here is the bridge and escape pod bay." I led him down the ladders. Our back was to my quarters as I continued. "To the left is the kitchen, and the right are the bathrooms. You can get to there from crew quarters as well. Behind us are my quarters. If I'm ever in there and you wanna talk, feel free, just knock so I know I have company," I remarked. Walking to the end of the hallway was the end of the tour. "To the left is the med-bay, feel free to walk in and talk with Lexi at any time, she's also a bit of a therapist. And to the right is crew quarters. Bunks, place to sit and read, terminals, that kind of thing," I finished.

"Is this where I should leave my things?" Jaal asked.

"If you want, but I've also let everyone claim a room for themselves if they want. The only room unclaimed is the Tech lab though," I explained.

"That sounds perfect. I could run some tests and tinker in there," he remarked.

"Glad that's settled then. I'll have Cora get you an Omni-tool, a little computer on your wrist, to help link you into our systems. I'll also have her key you into our comms, connect with SAM, and run you by the eating and shower schedule. I'll want you on the ground team for Havarl, so don't get too cozy," I informed.

"I'll be ready Scott," Jaal nodded, going to retrieve his things and bring them to his room. As far as first contact goes, this went well. I was about to resign myself to my room for some of the journey, but Liam pinged me with a message. He had an idea, and was hanging out in ops. I found him working on a terminal, trying to find something by the looks of it.

"Hey Liam, said you had an idea for me?" I asked, getting his attention. His face lit up with a smile, clearly an idea he was eager to share.

"Things may be looking up, but we still have a lot on our plate. What I want, is a way for people to relax, de-stress. And I have the perfect idea. Movie night," Liam explained. A large smile crossed my face:

"Liam, I am behind this 100%. Got plenty of ideas for movies to share with the others. Got any?" I asked.
"Heh, glad you approve. Best part is, doesn't even need to be a good one. Bad ones still help people relax. The Tempest's database is a bit dry. More of the shitty and recent movies, like Blasto and Citadel. Push comes to shove we'll use em, but I'd think the Nexus should have a library of a shit ton more. Check it out next time we're there?"

"I most certainly will. Already got a minor stash I got onto my Omni-tool before we left. How soon do you wanna start this?"

"If we can get to the Nexus after Havarl, give me a few hours to sort through it all, maybe that night, before we go after the Angaran Moshae."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll talk with Vetra, see if she can get her hands on some popcorn and other treats for the night." Liam nodded and turned back to the monitor. Jaal had given us a full report of what to expect on Havarl. Though I would rather do something else, I had to be a good leader and read it. So, that's exactly what I returned to my cabin to do. With a beer, of course.
Sorry about the delay with uploads here guys, school and work has been keeping me busy. Hope you enjoy this burst here, and I'll try and remember to get another burst tonight as well. Also, remember I have that discord server!

https://discord.gg/y5JYGQU

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Dense forests, large, hungry, carnivorous wildlife, lots of Remnant, and a faction calling themselves Roekaar. That's what we can expect to see on Havarl. According to Jaal's report, the Roekaar were a group of extreme Xenophobes. When the only enemies of the Angara were Kett, they weren't much concern, or too large in size. Essentially these were people who didn't approve of Evfra's leadership or the rules of engagement placed to be better than the Kett. When we showed up however, their numbers grew. Where the Resistance was at the least willing to not shoot at us and test us to see if we could be trusted, the Roekaar would shoot us on sight. Even Jaal for working with us. On the one hand, I never approve of blind hatred, or hating an entire subset of people for the actions of one and what-not. On the other hand, I have a hard time blaming the Roekaar for their views. I only hope I can change their minds. I will without a doubt defend myself from them without hesitation, but I'm also willing to show them mercy.

It had been an hour and a half since we left Aya and were now coming into Havarl's orbit. We wouldn't be able to bring the Nomad, not enough room to maneuver it and given our scans of the area we may not need it anyway. I had called down Vetra, Peebee, and Jaal to prepare to leave. Vetra for her tech skills and suppressing fire, Peebee for her knowledge of Remnant, and Jaal as this was an Angaran world. I debated with myself whether or not to bring Drack as a heavy hitter, but I came to the conclusion that the Angara would prefer a smaller squad. If push comes to shove, I can always call him out, so I just ordered Drack to remain on standby. Currently, the squad and I were in the cargo bay, preparing armor and weapons and ensuring they were ready to go.

Unsurprisingly, Vetra pulled through once more for weapon mods. Even better, she managed to get her hands on a Black Widow, and I had only mentioned in passing that I'd like one on Eos! The mods I got included an improved scope for the sniper and Valkyrie, large clip capacities for all my guns, a bayonet for the Piranha, and weapon stabilizers, all better than what I started out with. She also had delivered my Dad's original N7 armor that Dunn had had Initiative scientists upgrade with mods secured by Vetra. For now though, I decided to keep his Pathfinder armor, gotta look the part, right?

"All right team, over here," I ordered, as the others holstered their weapons and focused on me. "Peebee, Jaal, I need to know what weapons your carrying and just what kind of skills you have."

"I tend to just carry a pistol. Right now, I have this modified revolver I got from an exile who tried to take my equipment. Think it's called a sidewinder. Other than that, I'm a biotic just like any other Asari, but I also have this neat little trick I developed. It's this Virus that I can send to hard suits and it works best against Remnant bots. Screws with their shields and weapons," she explained.
"I like the sound of that. Jaal?"

"I have a Kett sniper here, as you can see. I also have grenades. Smaller detonation, but they stick. I can also drain the shields of Kett or Remnant and transfer them to myself," Jaal began.

"Sounds just like energy drain, I have the same ability. Guessing you have a few other tech abilities?"

"A few, most of them basic. I can also cloak myself. Use it to get behind enemies, take out a unit, and cloak again to fall back."

"Good, good. I can already see a few uses for that," I remarked, rubbing my chin thoughtfully as I remembered previous encounters and how such an ability would be of benefit. "Kallo, how far are we from the LZ?" I asked through the comms.

"I can see it now Ryder, beginning landing procedure. You should have seen the flock off creatures we just flew by. Massive with fleshy wings," Kallo remarked with awe. Jaal chuckled:

"Hm, yes, we call those Pavaara. They glide through the skies by expanding the muscular gas bladders on its underside."

"Like a hot-air balloon but alive," Vetra remarked.

"I must admit some surprise that we all know what that is," Jaal chuckled.

"Well, it is a more basic idea for aviation. Warm air rises, capture that air in a giant sack, tie a box to it and keep heating air," I explained. Jaal shrugged as he saw the logic and we felt the ship come to a stop and the cargo bay doors began opening.

"Our objective is Daar Pelaav. That is where the Moshae's team should be. We go there, re-establish contact, and find out what happened. Maybe help them out with certain endeavors as well. Sounds minor, but you also don't know what it is they've been looking for. A way to save our home," Jaal explained.

"Your home world is dying?" Peebee asked, surprised.

"Yes, it will not look like it, but it is," Jaal muttered. He was afraid. He feared the loss of this world. If there's a vault here, we won't leave until we turn it back on.

"I promise to do everything we can to help Jaal," I assured him. He nodded thanks and the doors fully opened. We walked down the ramp astonished at the world we were looking at. Jaal of course, not as surprised. This place was beautiful. It was nighttime without a cloud in the sky. The planet Havarl orbits, a red gas giant, loomed over the horizon, taking up much of the night sky. Trees covered with vines and purple leaves, large purple ferns with bright blue bioluminescent lights on their rims. All kinds of plant life. In the sky, I also saw a massive Pavaara flying in the distance, it looked just like one of the creatures we saw in the skies of Habitat 7. Curious, maybe long ago the Angara had brought them there?

Remnant Architecture was everywhere. Our LZ was surrounded by three walls of Remnant make, the ground, where it wasn't covered by grass was clearly Remnant. And there were Remnant towers in the distance. To the right, high in the sky, I could even see a Monolith. Judging by the beam of light I saw emanating from the tip, it was online as well. There is a vault here to be sure. Perhaps the monoliths are online but not the vault itself? To the front of the landing zone was a bridge of Angara make leading to a smaller Angara structure in another clearing. That must be Daar Pelaav.
"I thought Aya was beautiful. But this… Spirits, this blows it out of the water," Vetra remarked, awe and amazement in her voice.

"And look! Remnant architecture EVERYWHERE! And look! There! A Monolith! Ryder, there's another vault here!" Peebee squealed with excitement.

"Yes Vetra, this world is beautiful. But the wilds can be very deadly. Many of the plants dangerous. The Remnant are one reason for that. Do not allow any fluids from any of the plants to remain on you for any duration," Jaal warned. This place was just teeming with life. A pity to think that so much is deadly. I could hear sounds similar to birds, insects chirping like crickets, and more. I recalled images of a rainforest. As we continued, the bridge had collapsed in the middle. The others used their jump-jets, but recently I had told SAM to keep my default profile on the one my dad called "Explorer." A jack of all trades, master of none, if you will. Provides smaller boosts to my biotics, tech, reaction times, and sight, but not as much as more specialized classes. However, explorer does tweak my biotics to allow me to use my biotics to lower my mass, jump normally, soar, and land softly, without using up any of the Jump-jets fuel. In fact, this tweak also allows me to do a short range biotic teleport, even through solid objects. Lower my mass to an incredible degree, and launch my mass in a chosen direction. Like a biotic charge, but without the force and not as much distance.

"Show off," Vetra chuckled.

"Hey, back in the Milky Way biotics were labeled as a disability, people would be afraid of you if you even lifted a pen to your hand, I think I deserve to have some fun with them," I joked.

"You're kidding, humans labeled biotics as a disability? It's anything but! I love just working on something, a tool I need is too far away to reach, so I just float it over to me, it's great!" Peebee exclaimed.

"Sure, but all Asari are biotic. It's nothing special to you guys. Turians were afraid of their biotics too. Turian biotics in the military would be sent away to Cabal units, hardly ever used and practically locked away from everyone else. They could leave the military after their mandatory service, sure, but no one would trust you," Vetra remarked.

"Why were your own people so afraid of you?" Jaal asked, confused.

"Mostly because it's weird and unknown to them. Sure, we know how it works but you can't disarm someone's biotics. Take away a biotics guns and they can still kick your ass from a distance," I explained. "Hey Peebee, ever do some small stupid thing with your biotics? Like lifting someone into the air or a car? Or just using them to be a lazy piece of shit?" I laughed.

"You kidding? Only all the time! Couldn't do it to my mom or sister with them being stronger biotics, but other kids? Hell yeah!" she exclaimed, Vetra and Jaal both laughing at the image.

"Sara's a biotic just like me, and given that we were twins, we would do that kind of shit with each other all the time. All in good fun and no one getting hurt, but imagine how my mom must have felt entering a room to see her little kids lifting each other into the air with their minds and spinning them around. Being a biotic himself my dad would just laugh until Mom glared at him to stop encouraging us. Heh, nothing could ever scare Dad. Nothing but mom," I chuckled, remembering happier times. I let out a sigh as the others finished laughing. "Come on, we got a job to do. We can reminisce on good memories back on the ship." The others fell in line as we walked up to the research center. The lights were on, which implied there should be people inside, but why the communications loss? We moved to the main entrance, allowing Jaal to lead the way just so anyone inside wouldn't shit their pants at the first thing they see walking in be an Alien.
To both my surprise and relief, there was an Angaran woman calmly standing in front of a piece of equipment reading off a data pad.

"None of these readings show any change… How could there not be any change?" She muttered, sadness filling her voice as if she was on the brink of tears. Havarl must be in bad shape.

"Greetings Kiiran, are you well?" Jaal called out, gaining her attention. She looked up in confusion, turning her head:

"Jaal? What are yo-..." she froze, eyes widening at the sight of not one, not two, but three different aliens of different species behind Jaal. "You doing here?" she continued, "And who are all these al-... people?" she asked, cutting herself off from saying "Aliens." Trying to be polite I see.

"I would like to introduce you to Scott Ryder, a Pathfinder," he introduced. I smiled and gave a small wave of my hand. "Vetra Nyx," he continued, Vetra nodding her head in greetings. "And Peebee," he finished.

"Hi!" Peebee waved.

"We come from a galaxy far far away…” I stated, trying incredibly hard not to burst into laughter. I always wanted to say that. "We call it the Milky Way."

"Scott, Kiiran Dals, lead scientist of Daar Pelaav," Jaal introduced.

"Good to meet you Kiiran. I gotta say, Havarl is just beautiful."

"The planet's beauty is the least of my current concerns," she muttered, must be referring to those scans.

"Where is the rest of the team?" Jaal questioned. "Scott has experience with the Remnant. He has activated several of their structures on other worlds. We may be able to help their investigations."

"You haven't heard?" she asked, confused.

"No, we came here to investigate why we lost contact with you," Jaal explained.

"Damn it. Vines must have gotten into the comm array again. Anyway, while the team was exploring the monolith, something went terribly wrong," she began. Jaal's face fell as he expected the worst. Shit, more dead scientists. "They were caught in some kind of Remnant stasis field. Frozen in place. Unresponsive," she explained. So, they're still alive. That means we can still save them. I also noticed that the words 'Remnant' and 'Monolith' are translating properly. SAM must have made the additions. Willing to bet vault translates as well now.

"I know how to work Remnant tech. Please, let me help them," I requested.

"Scott has entered a vault and apparently reset it. Somehow. Our scouts do indeed report that the planet Eos is changing, becoming livable," Jaal explained. I was right, vault does translate now, and Eos too.

"Hm. Ocean of fish, one will have gems in its mouth. But if you insist, I'll set skepticism aside," Kiiran remarked. Wonder what that metaphor means. "The Monolith isn't far. See what you can do, but be careful. We don't know what triggered the stasis field and there's no reason to believe it won't happen again," she warned.

"Before we set out, I have a question. If there are Monoliths here, and they're active, that means the
vault should be active, too right? Why is the planet dying then?" Peebee asked.

"We have only seen two Monoliths here. Both are online, but the third, if it even exists, cannot be found. We can't even access the vault to know if it's active or not," she answered. Maybe having one Monolith offline screws with how the vault works? It's online but broken, like on Habitat 7, perhaps. Find the third Monolith, save Havarl. I thanked Kiiran for her help and began to lead the team out when another woman stopped us. She said she was an Archeoastronomer. Long story short, she found old records of old star charts, but they were lost in another part of the Daar. If we find them, she may be able to find lost Angaran colonies with, meaning potential allies against the Kett. Where the Monolith was a bit further to the east, the navpoint she gave us was close by in the North, but it was also infested with animals. Hungry predators. We had a detour to make.

We followed a path north, on the jungle's floor. Several large insects skittered away to the trees, yet none of them were as large as the Kaerkyn on Eos. Not yet at least. We entered the clearing where the woman's old home was. A tree had grown through the roof and slowly but surely it was being covered in vines and grasses. The door to the house was wide open and I could see several large greenish masses inside. We neared and the form stood up, and then vanished into thin air, replaced by a blur in the air. Wraiths? That must mean the Kett are around here. But why the old house?

"Challyrlion! Large predators that hunt in packs and can cloak, like Wraiths!" Jaal called out. So, these weren't Kett? I pulled the Piranha from the holster at the back of my waist and opened fire into the mass of blurs. Vetra got to work with her cyclone, Peebee launched a shockwave, and Jaal took shots with his rifle. Sure enough, Jaal was right. When our rounds struck, the creatures came out of cloak. Their bodies were shaped similarly to Wraiths, but distinctly non-Kett. The lack of bone armor gives it away. That also meant the creatures were less protected, going down with a single bullet to the head. Peebee's shockwave had also struck knocking the two at the front into the air and the two at the sides to their sides a few feet away, making easy targets as they were disoriented.

Entering the house, I found the database, clearly it was damaged as nature took its toll. Further inspection proved that now it was useful only for scrap.

"Raashel, Ryder. We're in your old home, but the data didn't survive," I sadly informed her.

"Your effort and risk for nothing, I'm sorry Pathfinder," she replied.

"Hey, if anyone should be sorry it should be me. I can't imagine what this must feel like," I assured her. Information like this, having hopes crushed then resurfaced, the hope of finding more of your people to fight a threat to your entire species.

"I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up," she muttered.

"What about the city's network memory center?" Jaal asked.

"Sure, but that all went down. The whole site buried underground. Even if you found an access point on the surface, the odds of finding anything are next to nothing," she stated, letting doubt set in.

"All I heard is that there's a chance. I'll get back to you soon," I remarked.

"That didn't fully translate, but I know optimism when I hear it. I can point you to the general area of where the memory center used to be. Good luck Ryder, and thanks," she closed the comms as my Omni-tool was pinged with a set of coordinates. Fortunately, they were on the way to the
"Thank you, Scott. Finding a lost colony of our people would mean everything to us," Jaal stated.

"I told you I wanted to help, didn't I?" I chuckled.

"Ha, that you did," he chuckled in reply.

We were lucky enough to reach those coordinates without hassle, just needing to put down a large, purple bodied and pointed headed insect Jaal called a Drall. Apparently, the things like to get close and headbutt you. Try and knock you out. Drack's kind of bug. A single trigger pull did the trick and the insect popped in chunks of flesh and chitin.

We arrived at the coordinates to find a part of the bridge had collapsed, and according to a nervous Angara working on them, a fuel line had ruptured creating the fires we saw. Scanning the ground, I found what appeared to be wires and other cables, something that could lead us to an access point. Following it around and into some shrubbery revealed a half-buried computer console. I connected with the computer and relayed the connection to Raashel.

"I found them! Stars above the research files are downloading! There, I have them, you did it!" she exclaimed.

"We did it Raashel. Go team!" I chuckled.

"Thank you, Pathfinder. If we can recover this data, we may be able to recover everything that was lost in the disaster. I'll inform my colleagues immediately. You've accomplished something amazing." Raashel closed the comms and I felt good. It's certainly rewarding to help people out and get reactions like that. Little things to help keep you going.

"Excellent work Scott. This will help the scientists immensely. Come, let's get to the Monolith and help the others," Jaal suggested. We climbed a hill covered in Remnant pillars and prepared to turn right towards the Monolith when Jaal raised a hand and gestured for us to get on the ground. He crawled forward to the ledge, waving his hand as a sign to follow him and pointed out the Angara we saw patrolling the area in front of it. They were armed and armored.

"I get the feeling those guys aren't Resistance…" I muttered to him.

"Roekaar…" Jaal growled. I'll admit to some surprise that he clearly felt so strongly against them.

"Do we need to kill them? Shoot to wound, get them to surrender, let them go?" I asked. Jaal sighed:

"No. Their hate of aliens is intense. They will fight to the death of every last soldier. They would sooner shoot themselves than surrender," Jaal explained. Shit. Guess we need to do this the hard way.

"We're already prone on this ridge, got good sightlines on them. Snipers?" I suggested. Although I was eager to test out my new Black Widow, I got the feeling this fight wouldn't sit well.

"Agreed. You begin on the right, I'll begin on the left," Jaal stated, pulling out his modified Kett sniper and taking aim. I counted a total of four Angara and one small dinosaur like creature, likely a kind of attack dog. I centered my crosshairs over the forehead of an unsuspecting Roekaar and whispered Jaal to begin shooting. I pulled the trigger, feeling the immense kick of the Black Widow rocking against my shoulder, almost as if it was about to dislocate as the head of the Roekaar soldier just… evaporated into a blue mist, the body slumping down to the ground. I also
heard the electric sound of Jaal's rifle fire, assuming it had successfully taken out his target. The remaining two Roekaar were on high alert and sent their creature out to find us. They had taken cover, but our height allowed us to keep a clear view of their heads and both Jaal and I repeated the process. My round went straight down through the top of my target's skull, and given the power of the round might have exited straight through the poor sod's ass. I still had one shot left but swapped out a new thermal clip as Jaal turned to look for the creature.

"They sent an Adhi to find us. Sharp teeth and claws, but easy to kill," Jaal warned as Vetra and Peebee helped us look for the Adhi. I swapped to my Valkyrie and just as I readied it the Adhi burst from the shrubbery behind us. It was covered in bits of metal, some of it must have been implants or cybernetics, doubling as armor. It began to roar just as I pulled the trigger, the rounds striking it center mass as Vetra too opened fire while the others turned to face the threat. Fortunately, the creature was dead with the first burst.

"Ha, this thing looks like a mini Shatha," Vetra chuckled.

"Shatha?" Jaal asked.

"Large reptilian predator from the Turian Home world, Palaven. People pay a lot of money to hunt the things. Some don't come back in one piece," Vetra explained.

"And yet people still go hunt them for sport?" Jaal questioned.

"What can I say? Turians are weird. Sometimes I'm glad I didn't grow up as a true Turian," Vetra shrugged. We continued towards the Monolith's entrance, passing by the bodies of the Roekaar. Vetra and Peebee were both briefed on them and heard our conversation. Though they weren't involved in that fight, I could tell they too weren't fully at peace with it. As we neared the entrance, we saw several rocks with large bioluminescent mushrooms growing out of them.

"Huh, giant, weird, glowing mushrooms. My day's complete," Vetra joked. We passed through the doorway, realizing that the place didn't have a roof. It was easy to tell given the vines draping down from every which way and the full view of the night sky. But we also weren't alone. Remnant patrolling the room.

"Peebee, I think it's time to see that Virus of yours in action. Set it loose," I ordered. Peebee excitedly keyed her Omni-tool, excited to show off as a stream of data containing the Virus was launched at the Observer nearest to us. Its lights began to flicker as its shields flared, beginning to droop towards the ground as a stream spread from the Observer to an Assembler not too far away as its lights also began to flicker. Ensuring not to waste the opportunity, I opened fire on the Observer first, a single burst putting it down as Jaal took aim and fired at the Assembler, sending it to the ground with a smoking hole in its "head" from the energy round. It cleared the immediate area, but there were still more Remnant in the distance in the next part of the room up a ramp.

They were not happy. We took cover along pillars and walls that dotted the area as a new Remnant bot revealed itself. It walked on two large pointed legs with a wide wire like strip connecting them with the rounded torso. It was clearly a more heavily armored bot with a glowing red "eye" at the base of its "head." It steadied itself into the ground, locking itself in place and a shield formed in front of it, and three lights, like laser sights shot out as the bot took aim and readied to fire.

"Remnant Nullifier!" Peebee called out. "Don't bother taking cover from its shots when it shields itself! It goes right through and knocks you on your ass!" she warned. Shit, and it was far from the only one in the room I stepped out of cover, lobbing a grenade at it with one hand and launching an Incinerate shot at it in an attempt to remove as much of the armor as possible and dashed to new cover, hoping to avoid it's rounds and that of its buddies. Wait, heavily armored? The Black
Widow! That thing is MADE to pierce armor! As I slid into cover I unholstered the beast of a sniper and quickly took aim. It had uprooted itself into a more mobile mode. I centered the crosshairs around the red “eye” and pulled the trigger. The red light immediately went out as the rest of the lights dimmed, the Nullifier falling backwards and collapsing in on itself.

"Well… Never mind…” Peebee remarked. We still had a trio of Assemblers and an Observer to take out, though thankfully, Jaal had just sniped one Assembler and Vetra had been unloading on it with her cyclone, priming it for detonation. After launching an energy drain, it crumbled to the ground in sparks. The last two Assemblers went down without any hassle through the combined firepower of a four-man squad.

"Impressive work," Jaal remarked. We continued up into the structure without any interruptions, finding the control room which coincidentally was where the Angara had been frozen. Their bodies covered by a holographic blue diamond. There were three researches, one stood to the side of the main console, another inspecting a glyph, and another stood on the ledge of the platform. Scans confirmed that they were indeed alive. Their vitals closely resembled a sleep like state while their metabolism and brain activity were heavily slowed, yet not stopped. I’d need to find all the glyphs in the area before I tried to help them.

"Look at them… Scott, please, we must help my people," Jaal pleaded.

"Of course we will Jaal. I’m looking for the key to the console, so to speak," I assured him.

"Once we’ve helped the scientists, any chance we can drag a bug or something back here and put it in stasis? I’d love to study it," Peebee exclaimed.

"I’d leave it to the Angara Peebee. We have a vault to find and turn on," I reminded. I noticed Jaal look at me in surprise.

"You… you wish to help find the vault? To-To save my home?" Jaal muttered.

"Of course. If this was Earth, the Human home world, would you really expect me to do anything less than everything for it?" I asked rhetorically.

"No, of course not."

"Then what kind of person would I be if I treated Havarl any differently?" Vetra and Peebee both nodded in agreement. I think that really took Jaal off guard.

"Th-thank you. This isn't just the home world of my people to me. It's my home as well. My family is here," Jaal explained.

"And they'll be just fine Jaal. Alright, I just found the last glyph, let's see what this console has in store for us," I remarked. SAM ran decryptions but I was left with the final block, another Remdoku puzzle. Fortunately, this one was smaller and simple so it only took a moment. The diamond lights surrounding the Angara shattered as they continued what they were doing when they were frozen.

"Reading off the monitors and-" the lead of their team began. He re-focused, seeing a room now full of aliens when clearly his last memory was the very moment when he and his team were frozen in stasis. "Skkut! Skkutting stars! What? Who are… How did…" the man stuttered as Jaal raced over to calm him and the others down.

"Everyone, please! Calm yourselves. You are not in danger," he reassured. "You were frozen in a Remnant stasis field. This is Scott Ryder and his team, Vetra Nyx and Peebee. They came with me
to help you. Scott was able to free you from stasis," he explained.

"More aliens? And… why help us?" the man questioned.

"Helping people is just part of the job. Building bridges with the Angara too," I answered. "Come on, we'll escort you back to Daar Pelaav. I'm sure Kiiran will be relieved to see you all ok," I suggested.

"That… sounds like a good idea. I feel a head splitter coming on," he muttered. We began walking back, forming a protective circle around the scientists just in case any predators see a meal. I just hope no Roekaar see us and think we've taken them prisoner.

"Scott, how does SAM help you interact with the Remnant?" he asked.

"All I really understand is that he helps with analysis and translation. Probably can connect to the systems within Remnant tech. For anything more you'd need to ask him. By the way, what was that metaphor Kiiran mentioned earlier? Ocean of fish?" I asked.

"Ah, yes, Ocean of fish, one will have gems in its mouth. It's a metaphor that plays off probabilities. Take a pond that has, say, five fish, you can expect none to have a gem in its mouth. Take an ocean filled with fish, where the number seems to near infinity, the most unlikely of scenarios become likely," he explained. Ah, that makes sense. Good metaphor too, maybe I'll use it.

"Huh, that actually makes a lot of sense," I remarked. We returned to Pelaav without incident, any predators not liking their odds against a group of seven. We entered the doors, grabbing Kiiran's attention as we entered.

"Torvan? All of you? You're alright?" she exclaimed, surprised to see that we succeeded.

"Yes, thanks to Jaal and the aliens. How long were we out?" he asked.

"A few days. We lost contact with the Resistance just after we learned of what happened. Jaal brought the aliens here to investigate," Kiiran explained.

"But… what about those grey, spiky aliens we saw on our way to the Monolith?" he questioned.

"Grey, spiky aliens? Kett?" she asked, clearly concerned at the prospect of Kett on their home world.

"No, different. In fact…" he pointed at Vetra, shock and realization on his face, "THAT ONE! They look just like that one! With Ryder!" he exclaimed.

"Turians? Here? The hell are Turians doing on Havarl?" she asked, surprised. It may have just been exiles, sure, but… maybe… We still had no word on Ark Natanus, no idea where it had gone.

"I… do not know. He answered. But I can give you coordinates to where we saw them," he offered.

"Please, do. We need to help our people," I replied.

"Before you do, a few things. First, thank you for saving my team, and I apologize for the skeptical welcome you received earlier," Kiiran interrupted.

"Hey, after everything the Angara have endured I wouldn't have blamed you if you shot me," I chuckled.
"Heh, we're all glad that didn't happen," Torvan chuckled too.

"What you've already accomplished Scott, your understanding of Remnant and your SAM should at least convince Evfra that you're an asset. But please, Kiiran, do you have any lead as to how we can fix the monoliths?" Jaal pleaded.

"We know that Havarl's decline began here. Uncontrolled mutations in life. It killed some, turned others to poison. Slowly, the same is happening elsewhere on the planet. Everything we know about vaults says that there's always three, but the third is missing, if it even exists," Kiiran explained.

"So, find the third Monolith, reset the vault, and voila, Havarl is saved. But, how can I find it? Is there anyone, even a legend that could point me in the right direction?"

"You could try asking the sages of Mithrava. There might be something in their oral histories," Torvan suggested.


"Regardless it sounds like the only lead we have. We have nothing to lose by trying. How can I get to them, and how will they react to me?" I asked.

"They live atop Mithrava, the Remnant edifice by the ravine. The ravine is also where the entrance lies. I can provide coordinates. Be careful though, as the trek up there is filled with Remnant. As to how they will react to you, I can't say. Likely suspicion, at the least," she warned.

"Much appreciated. We'll check out the Turian sightings then make way for Mithrava," I stated. Kiiran and Torvan wished us luck as we readied to aid some people in need.

---

**Vetra Nyx**

I wouldn't exactly claim to be a proud Turian, I left Palaven before hitting boot camp and the way I was treated by my mother didn't exactly leave a pleasant taste in my mouth, so most of what she taught me I left behind to rot. I could have grown up, gone to boot camp, gotten the discipline, the yes-sirs, and shoved that pole up my ass just like all the others, but I didn't. Instead my dad carted my sister and I off to a small colony in the Minos Wasteland and then left us there two years later. But Turians are still my people. My species. I care about them in my own way. They're still good people. Besides, it would be stupid of me to think that the fate of Sid and I could be any different than the fate of Turians. Turians starve because there isn't any dextro food? Sid and I will starve too. I refuse to allow that. So I want Ark Natanus found just as badly as any other Turian. I want to find a Dextro world for us just as badly as any other Turian.

There was a part of me that hoped these Turians here on Havarl would put us on the trail of Ark Natanus, but I knew that odds are they're just a few exiles that got curious. Then again, thanks to Scott, what we did on Eos... I'm willing to start hoping again. The Navpoint we got placed the Turians as not too far past the Monolith, and close to the ravine where we'd enter Mithrava. We had already cleared the way to the Monolith itself so that was clear of hostiles. Anything beyond was an unknown. Once we returned to the Monolith we heard gunfire. Certainly not Milky Way weapons.

"More Roekaar. Must be fighting with the wildlife," Jaal called out. Angara who refused to trust aliens again after what the Kett did to them. I really don't want to kill these guys, but they won't
give us much choice. I hope Jaal doesn't have any hard feelings. We continued over the ridge to gain the best spot to ambush them from. We likely wouldn't be able to sneak by without them seeing us.

"Jaal, you stay up here with me in the shrubs, ready your sniper. Peebee, Vreta, sneak up to just the edge of the shrubs. The moment we open fire their Adhi are sure to come running and the rest of the Roekaar will scatter. You get the Adhi and do what you can to take care of the others, no telling if we'll be able to see them when they run or not," Scott ordered.

"Can do Scott," I replied. Peebee and I moving into position. We managed to reach our ambush spot unseen and waited for Scott and Jaal to open fire. Sure enough, they hit their targets simultaneously. The Adhi rushed forward to find them, I stopped it with a concussive round and then fired a burst into it, killing it. I activated my Tech armor and jumped out of the shrubs, looking for the remaining two Roekaar. A part of me was really hoping the others would lay down their weapons, so I loaded two concussive rounds. The two had taken cover on the ridge we were against to hide from our snipers, and I knocked one down on his ass and as the other turned to face me I did the same. I ran over to them and kicked their rifles out of their hands before they could stand, disarming them. One of them growled some Angaran words at me that I couldn't understand as I held my Cyclone to their heads, hoping they would surrender.

I was disappointed as one reached for a pistol on his belt and I didn't hesitate, shooting him point blank in the head and his corpse crumbled to the ground. The other yelled more words I didn't understand.

"Just… surrender! Please!" I demanded. Again, I was disappointed. The Angara pulled a pistol from his belt as well, though instead of pointing it at me, he placed it under his chin and pulled the trigger, blowing his own brains out of his head.

"Damn it…" I sighed.

"Vreta! You alright?" Scott called out, running down to join Peebee and I. I acted so quickly I almost forgot Peebee was there. Jaal followed Scott, likely suspecting that to be what the Roekaar had done. Scott saw me standing over the corpses of two Roekaar and relaxed a bit, but confused at what had happened.

"They shot themselves, didn't they?" Jaal asked softly.

"I tried to get them to surrender. To show them that we aren't like the Kett…" I muttered. "The first pulled a gun on me, I shot him. The second put the gun against his chin and pulled the trigger. Not the first time I've seen someone do that… doubt it'll be the last." Scott placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Do not allow it to rest on your conscious, Vreta Nyx. That was their choice. You tried to make them see otherwise and they refused. For what it's worth, I appreciate that you tried to show them the truth," Jaal reassured. That… actually helped a bit. I don't feel great, who could about that, but I do feel a bit better. I nodded thanks and we continued on to find the Turians. We were close. We followed a small river running along the ground and saw the clearing we needed to turn to on our right. A gap in a Remnant wall. With the faint sounds of gunfire. We unholstered our weapons and raced to help whoever was there. We passed by a concrete block for cover, the bindings and method reminiscing Milky Way styles. We continued forward, past more concrete blocks and distinctly Milky Way floodlights. We rounded a slight bend and saw a collection of shacks made of scrap metal in a clearing being assaulted by Roekaar. And we were right behind them.

"SAM, Biotic boost," Scott whispered to the AI in his head, not wanting to alert the Roekaar. A
biotic field began to form around him as his powers intensified thanks to SAM's assistance. Still weird, but it's about to come in handy. "Jaal, cloak and get near them, but don't get too close. I'm going to use an ability we call Singularity. If any Roekaar aren't in range of it I want you to take them out, got it?" Scott asked.

"A-a singularity?" Jaal questioned, heavily surprised.

"Don't worry, I've used it before and the only people who got hurt were people shooting at me," he reassured. Jaal nodded and cloaked, disappearing from vision. Scott waited for Jaal to get in position and then formed a singularity in the middle of the group of Roekaar. Every single one was lifted from the ground as the gunfire stopped. Confused, they tried to "swim" through the air as the singularity slowly pulled them in. Quickly they realized what was going on, being pulled into a strange black ball. One let out a scream as they struggled to move forward.

And then they were gone. Consumed by the miniature black hole, their atoms torn to absolute oblivion.

"I… I don't think I'm going to use that on anything but Remnant now…" Scott muttered. Looking down into his hands. Shocked. Scared of himself. A Turian man ran forward to see what was going on.


"Yeah, we are!" I called out. That uniform he was wearing. That's an Ark Natanus uniform!

"Reinforcements at last! Get back to the camp! Now! More of those bastards incoming!" he yelled. Scott still stood, frozen in place. I grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him, pulling him along into cover.

"Not now Scott, later, ok?" I asked, setting him down in cover as I prepared for another fight. I didn't like seeing him like this. Scott shook his head, nodding, focusing on the task at hand. There weren't many Roekaar charging us, but one seemed to be a sniper, the laser sight giving him away.

"Do NOT let that sniper hit you! The Isharay is a very powerful sniper!" Jaal called out. That just made this a lot more difficult.

"Throwing out a combat drone! Jaal, can you use it as a distraction to take out the sniper?" Scott asked.

"I should be able to, yes," he replied. Scott threw the drone and Jaal cloaked. As the Angara turned to face it, I turned to Peebee.

"Peebee, think you can lift a few into the air? I have an idea."

"Sure, what's the idea?" she asked.

"I got a few biotic friends who know how to make warp ammo. Just so happens, I had one make a pack of warped concussive rounds. Lift one in the air, I hit em with a warped shot, and boom, should take out a few," I explained. She stood up to lift a Roekaar in the air and I stood to aim the concussive round, noticing Jaal decloak and slit the sniper's throat, Scott standing to fire a burst from his Valkyrie into the head of another one. Peebee followed through, her target floating helplessly in the air as I loaded a warped shot and fired. Less than a second later, the dark energy exploded, vaporizing the pulled Angara and his buddy that was standing next to him. We were clear. Doing a last sweep, we turned to speak with the leader of the Turian encampment, the same who rushed over to see us earlier He was wearing white armor and the lights glowed red. Where
my colony markings were two purple lines on each side his were a single black line on each side with a strip of black on both cheeks and smaller stripes on the forehead.

Quickly he raised his gun and fired at an unseen threat at our sides, a Roekaar who had survived but fell before we arrived. He had a pistol raised but as the round pierced his gut he cried in pain and sank to his knees, falling to the ground. The Turian ran over to where the Roekaar was writhing on the ground in pain.

"Shot to the gut. Painful," he stated. Pulling the trigger again, putting a round in his head and ending his pain. "Appreciate the help back there, just who are you anyway?" he asked, turning to face us. He sounded exhausted. Scott stepped forward to speak.

"Scott Ryder, Human Pathfinder. This is my team," he stated. "You?"

"Avitus Rix. Sorry if my methods seem extreme. Civilian life is… trying," he explained. No one should be surprised at Ex-military. Anyone on board the Natanus was a citizen of the Hierarchy and that means ex-military. "Back in the Milky Way I was a Spectre. Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. Did the Council's dirty work for 15 years," he stated bitterly. A Spectre. That I did not expect. During my smuggling days, I made damn sure to never build up the kind of reputation to warrant a Spectre's attention. Where law enforcement had rules upon rules, the Spectres had none. And they knew that well. It's a shorter list to find cases that a Spectre was involved in that didn't end with at least one suspect dead or beaten within an inch of their life. Sometimes it wouldn't even be a suspect, just a bystander or potential witness. But the Council just turned a blind eye to that. That bit them in the ass with Saren…

"What, like their laundry?" Scott joked. Given the sudden change in his behavior, shocked from the singularity to a business mode, I got the feeling this is a way to push aside things for later.

"Heh. More like classified assassinations and espionage," he chuckled. "The Initiative was my retirement plan. Then the Natanus hit the Scourge and bam! Woke up here," he explained. Shit, hit the Scourge. If when the Nexus hit the scourge should give me any hints, this is bad news.

"Any idea where it is?" I asked.

"Not a clue. Had to break out of my own spirits damned stasis pod," he muttered.

"Well, those pods must be made of sturdy stuff," Scott remarked.

"You're telling me. Most of the Turian population is still missing. That includes Macen Barro, our Pathfinder. I'm his second, and SAM hasn't transferred to me yet, so he's alive. Somewhere.

"We haven't heard from him on the Nexus," Scott informed. Avitus' mandibles flared into a small smirk.

"Knowing Macen, he's out there looking for me. He dedicated his life to Andromeda. He's far too stubborn to die now."

"Getting one Pathfinder managed to secure us a colony world, imagine what two could do," I joked.

"Really? Well at least there's some good news. Debris and Stasis pods from Natanus are scattered across the sector. Maybe they can point us in the right direction. With both of us looking, we should find something," Avitus suggested.

"You go left, I go right?" Scott joked.
"Hmph, something like that," he chuckled. "Here's my frequency. Call when you find something. Anything else?"

"How are the survivors? My ship is nearby, we can take them back to the Nexus, give you a ride too," Scott offered.

"That… sounds perfect. I'll get the others packed up and get them rested. We have a few rations, assuming you have enough to last?" Avitus asked. Scott turned to me, knowing I'd have a better idea.

"I'm the only Dextro on board but I have enough rations on board to last a good while just in case. Besides, if we're hitting the Nexus after Havarl I can just get them replenished," I explained.

"Good. As for the others, we've been too busy surviving for grief to set in. Still in shock. When things calm down, which they may on their ship. It'll hit hard. And it won't be pretty," he warned.

"Get them talking with Dr. Lexi T'Perro on our ship, she can help," Scott offered gently.

"Thanks Ryder. Anything else before you head off?"

"Just a bit of curiosity. What was it like being a Spectre, and how does someone even become one?" Scott asked.

"Hm. Well, all those ops are classified. However, anyone who cares is dead and gone. It was exactly like what you're asking me to do, bend the rules. Least that's what I thought at first… How you become one? Another Spectre normally recommends you. Watches you over for some missions to decide you're ready. For me, that just so happened to be Saren Arterius. And for 15 years whatever the Council demanded I did," he growled bitterly. Seemed he really hated his time as a Spectre. Or at least hates looking back.

"Saren… shit. The rogue Spectre who led the Geth attack on the Citadel?" Scott asked, surprised.

"That's what they say but… Something doesn't add up. When I knew him, Saren was ruthless, yes. A right bastard. But he wasn't crazy. That just didn't fit him. Something must have made him snap. And I wanted out before I found my breaking point. Hmph, all the other Spectre's I talked with all told me how we needed to bend the rules to beat the bad guys. To do some bad things in order to beat them because they don't have rules either. But then that Human, Shepard, comes around, beats Saren, his cronies, and other assholes without doing what we did. That made me re-think everything I had ever done as a Spectre. Another reason I retired," he exclaimed. "Good on you humans for guys like that," he chuckled. "Alright, we should really get packing and I'm sure you have other business here, go on," he suggested. We gave our farewells and readied ourselves to move on to Mithrava.

Saren. There's a name I never thought I'd hear again…
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Today has been one hell of a productive day. We went to the Nexus, had some drinks, escaped a Kett ambush, and had first contact with a friendly species native to Andromeda. And now, on their home world, we have recovered and found a thought-to-be destroyed data cache, brought scientists out of stasis, found survivors from the Turian ark—one of them an Ex Spectre of all things-retrieved an ancient Angaran pilot's helmet, and now we're almost at the top of a Remnant edifice that sages live on, so they can give us a lead on Havarl's third, missing, Monolith. I'm gonna need a drink when we're done. But for now, stims will have to do.

We finished our ascent up what I hoped to be the final gravity well, and my hopes were well founded. We reached the top to see several huts of Angaran make and the odd piece of Angara tech here and there. Looking around, it was easy to tell that we had been noticed. Everyone was staring at us in shock. A man strode forward, dressed in white. His forehead was a dulled grey and the rest of his skin a worn and dirty white. This man has some years on him.

"You bypassed our security. How is that possible? An alien?" he questioned, just as surprised as the others.

"Wasn't actually all that hard. Bit of decrypting and interfacing from an AI we have, shooting some Remnant bots, and here we are. Name's Scott Ryder. The Angara beside me is Jaal, that's Vetra, that's Peebee," I introduced, pointing out each member of the squad.

"Even we have trouble understanding Remnant technology. Only a handful here can operate our own gates," he explained. "Regardless, you must leave. We do not entertain guests here."

"At least let me explain why I came all this way. I didn't just stumble my way up a huge tower without knowing a thing about it. I'm looking for the last Monolith. Havarl's dying and if I can find the Monolith, I can help fix it. I can reset the Vault. I can save your planet. But I need to know everything you do about it," I pleaded.

"With Scott's help Havarl could be healed! Our BIRTHPLACE, restored. That must be worth something, at the very least allow us to try!" Jaal exclaimed.

"Its. Lost. The memories of its location haven't been reclaimed. On Mithrava, we have accepted Havarl's eventual ruin," the man stated calmly. Huh, figures that the old people wouldn't mind if their world is dying. It's not their goddamn problem, is it?

"Bullshit, you're just giving up on your planet? Your home? Isn't this your birthplace? Don't you want to save it? That vault is out there somewhere, and it is the only damned thing standing between this planet's destruction, and its survival!" I exclaimed. "If this was my home world I know damn well I would not rest until that Monolith was found, even if I had to search each and every inch of its surface!"

"And yet you left your home," the sage retorted.

"Your point? Earth was perfectly fine when we left. Not in any danger, this is clearly different!" The sage sighed:

"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," the sage explained.

"What does that even mean?" Peebee asked.


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

"Ok, ok, what? I'm going to admit to some skepticism, but honestly, I'm willing to take anything if it means a lead at finding that Monolith. So, how exactly is this supposed to work?" I asked. I noticed Vetra and Peebee both were looking at the sage with disbelief, heavy skepticism in their eyes as well, but keeping it quiet.

"Souls return within families. An object, like an heirloom, tied closely to that bloodline could cause memories to resurface," the sage continued. Memories that are kept within the bloodline hm? Perhaps it's not so much about souls and reincarnation, perhaps more like... genetic memories. Like how birds on Earth can instinctively know when and where to migrate without ever having been guided on the path by their parents. This plan is beginning to sound less far-fetched.

"Is it a guarantee?" Vetra asked.

"It has been known to happen on rare occasions in the past, with other souls," he replied. That is not helping convince anyone-I'm sure. "The only known heirloom of Zorai's family rests in an area we call the Remnant Abyss. No one has survived the journey, but perhaps you can. Zorai's soul was reborn in Taavos, and he has joined the Roekaar. Recently, he returned to Havarl on a mission," the sage explained.

"Shit. That last part may be a bit difficult. Peebee, please tell me you know how to put someone in biotic stasis; so, if we corner him we can't have him doing anything rash," I explained.

"I think I should be able to. When we find out which one he is and where I'll prepare myself, but I'll need to focus," she remarked.

"It'll have to do. If we can just convince him to listen to us, to not immediately try to kill us or himself, that should be all the time we need."

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

"Just what I like to hear. What's your name by the way?" I asked.

"I am First Sage Esmus. I wish you luck in your endeavor, Ryder." I nodded farewell and turned back to enter the well when it occurred to me. Odds are we'll be needing to make that trek again. It wasn't a difficult one sure, but it wouldn't be fun doing it a second time.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Oddly enough, the coordinates for the heirloom were leading us to the same hill where we first encountered the Roekaar. Coincidentally, Roekaar were also occupying the path leading up to the Remnant Abyss. Following the same pattern as before, Jaal and I took up positions and dispatched our targets quickly before they knew what was going on. As we couldn't see farther up, I led the squad to the position of the now dead Roekaar and scanned the area ahead of us. On another
Remnant platform with a series of ramps leading upwards to another area, were more Roekaar. Unfortunately for us, they heard our snipers and saw their friends crumble to the ground. This squad lacked snipers, weighing the battlefield heavily in our favor. Once more, Jaal and I took aim as Vetra and Peebee made pot-shots as covering fire. Once more, the squad was dispatched without difficulty.

Slowly we began making our way across, unsure if there were more Roekaar waiting for us. Before we even made it halfway across, we heard Remnant bots engaging an enemy, and the roars of a creature. By the sounds of it, a large, angry, hungry creature. We continued up the ramp, weapons ready. Then we saw a pair of observers engaged with a large, yellow, dinosaur like creature with a purple growth on its back as a kind of armor.

"Rylkor. It will swing at you with its tail or simply try to bite your head off. Don't get close," Jaal warned. Just as Jaal finished, the Rylkor lunged forward, grabbing an Observer in its jaws and crunching down, destroying it as the remaining one opened fire, beginning to burn a hole through its natural armor.

"Vetra, Peebee, you two deal with the Observer. Jaal, you and I will deal with the Rylkor," I ordered. No one voiced a response, simply letting their guns do the talking as the Observer fell to the ground. The Rylkor turned to face its new attackers, only to be overwhelmed by gunfire, collapsing to the ground - dead. I turned to look at the entrance to the Remnant abyss. It looked very similar to the vault's entrance on Eos. While I doubted this was indeed the Vault, it implied a large complex. We may want bigger guns.

I got on the comms: "Drack, this is Scott. We're about to enter a large Remnant complex the Angara call the Remnant Abyss. I for one wouldn't mind going into this place with a Krogan. Sending our coordinates. The way here should be clear, but you may run across some unhappy wildlife," I warned.

"On my way now kid, anything tries to make a meal of me, they'll be eating nothing but dirt," Drack chuckled.

"Really think we'll need the help?" Peebee asked.

"You heard Esmus, no one else has ever survived this place. I'd rather play it safe. If there's still too much for us to handle in there, we'll fall back, radio for Cora, get you two running some biotic combos," I explained. Peebee, took a moment, thinking, then nodded when she saw the sense. A few minutes later, Drack showed up, ready for war by the looks of him. "Alright old man, before we head down there I gotta know what you're working with," I stated.

"A bunch of amateur kids?" Drack joked. "This shotgun here is a Ruzad, Krogan design. Designed and made after we made our colony. I've also gotten it modified with incendiary rounds - thanks to our resident Turian I might add. I can also use it to shoot flak rounds, basically launch a ball of scrap metal that explodes into shrapnel after a certain distance. I can launch an incinerate round and I got the good ol' Krogan blood rage if anyone gets a good shot off on me. Get pissed the hell off, my natural regeneration goes faster, I feel even less pain, and I can beat the shit out of anything near me with this hammer I got here," Drack chuckled, holding it out and giving it a few practice swings.

"Well, guess it's hammer time," I muttered to myself, sadly knowing no one else would get the reference. The others glanced amongst each other, shrugging. That's it, I have a duty as a friend and their boss to make them understand these references, even if it annoys them. We entered the structure, making our way to the gravity well, descending into the Remnant abyss. Vetra, Peebee, and I, were already used to it, simply hopping right in. I could just barely hear Drack mutter:
"I'm getting too old for this shit," as he joined us, Jaal following behind him. We landed gently, in a room practically identical to the same room we entered when we entered the Eos Vault. After a quick search, we ventured further into the complex.

"So Jaal, what's your take on this… reincarnation?" I asked.

"You're asking if I believe," Jaal attempted to clarify.

"Sure."

"Not like Esmus does. I'll admit to some curiosity. What about you? What do humans believe? And the rest of you?" Jaal asked.

"There are quite a few answers to most of those questions, and all of them are lengthy" I chuckled. "Why don't we talk about it back on the ship?" I suggested. Jaal nodded, containing his curiosity for now. Entering the next room revealed a platform with a console surrounded by a small "moat" of that Omni-gel-like fluid we saw on Eos. Jumping over, without the use of biotics or jump-jets and interfacing the console, I opened a door on the room's three other walls. To the front was a blue, see-through wall, an energy barrier. To the left were a bunch of Assemblers, and the right, another path, clear of enemies. Fortunately, cover also sprung from the ground on all sides of the room, ensuring we wouldn't be left out in the open.

The five of us all ran to cover, unsurprisingly, Drack took the cover closest to the Assembler's lines. Peebee saw a perfect chance for her virus and immediately unleashed it, watching it spread throughout their ranks, flickering their lights and making their legs wobble. Jaal made use of the Angara's natural bio-electric abilities to short out one Assembler fully as Vetra began unloading her Cyclone. Drack just was Drack, blasting into them with his shotgun and using his flak rounds, taking out a pair as they were shredded by shrapnel. I charged an Overload, hoping it would arc between two that Vetra had primed, and hopefully the EMP blast would take out the rest of the group already weakened by the virus. It payed off, working exactly as I hoped it would, leaving the room clear of hostiles.

"And I didn't even have to give any orders. Good work team," I stated. The room the Remnant bots came from was nothing more than a small room that had no other exit. On the opposite side of the room however was another door. We entered, walked down the ramp and heard more Bots feeling a bit hostile. We dashed into cover and prepared to open fire as soon as they rounded the corner on the left. Suddenly, an Observer flew out and opened fire right at me, forcing me to kneel down in cover immediately. I heard what I assumed to be another Observer flying out, dividing the focus of the squad in half. Peebee once more unleashed her virus, their now weakened shields collapsing under the squad's firepower, with the Observers themselves collapsing to the ground shortly after.

The room wasn't clear of hostiles yet however, an Assembler was peeking out of cover and taking pot shots as I heard another clanking its way towards us. A quick burst from my Valkyrie put it down and Jaal fired a round from his sniper into the other the moment it came into view, putting it down for the count. With the room now clear, we continued down the corridor, turning left again at the end as we were about to enter the large chamber that was visible from the other room.

"Listen up, you saw the size of this room from behind that energy shield. You can hear Remnant bots hanging around in there. Don't expect to see cover on the other side of this door and even if there is, it won't sustain us if we start getting pushed back. The moment I open that door, we rush out, grab a defensible spot, kill any Remnant already there, ASAP. Probably best to split the teams up. Vetra, Peebee, Jaal, you go right. Drack, you and I go left. Peebee, doesn't matter when you start, but as soon as you can start sending that virus out. Jaal, drain shields whenever you can. Vetra, suppressing fire, Drack, just kick ass," I ordered, Drack chuckling, eager to do just that.
Everyone got in their positions and using my fingers I counted down to open the door. I did just that, the room was large and open, two paths on either side that should have cover but both had at least one Assembler. In the center of the room however, was a bot I hadn't seen before. It was big, looked like it moved on two legs, it's "head" a massive block of Remnant armor and to two protrusions that may have been weapons. As planned, we rushed to our sides, Drack taking care of the Assembler before it even turned hostile.

"Peebee, the hell is that thing?" I asked.

"No clue! Haven't seen this variant before!" she replied. Great, we don't know what it does. Fortunately, it seems that all the Remnant in the room were already accounted for and the cover on both sides was thick. The large bot steadied itself, and it opened up slightly at the front, a red light glowing and growing brighter and brighter. It must be charging a shot. I was not eager to take chances and remained in cover, ordering the others to use as many tech attacks as possible.

"Bad news, the Virus isn't working! It must have stronger security than the others!" Peebee called out. Great, our best tool against the Remnant isn't working on this bastard. The bot released its first shot, knocking me on my ass even through the cover, with just with the force it hit it with, and then it released a second shot that blasted a part off it. We'd need to use the room's pillars. The new bot loosened its stance and began moving as one protrusion on each side of its head swiveled to face both teams, unleashing a barrage of energy bolts. Dual chain guns, great.

"Pathfinder, scans of the construct reveal that the shielding is weak over its secondary guns. And if you can disable the main shields, its main gun seems to be a weak spot. A well-placed shot could overload it's firing mechanism, destroying the construct," SAM explained.

"Hear that? Target its guns then focus everything we got on taking its main shields down!" I ordered. The others followed my lead, raining a barrage of tech attacks and gunfire on its own guns when they were focused on someone else, slowly moving to as to gain a sightline from which to fire its main gun. Soon, I saw the gun currently facing the other team explode in a cloud of smoke and electricity, just as Drack and I managed to get the shields on ours down. Drack fired a round from his flak cannon, destroying our turret as well. Unexpectedly, the bot seemed to transfer power from its now destroyed cannons into its mobility, moving faster. The two teams ran to take cover on the far side of the room from where we began, the bot turning to start heading towards our new position. Under the combined firepower of five weapons and tech attacks the shields didn't last long. The moment it did, I swapped to my widow and waited for it to use its main weapons. Sure enough, it began charging, opening its main weapon. Just to be safe, I fired all three rounds into it. It began shorting out, struggling to stay up before the entire thing exploded, leaving chunks of metal scattered across the room.

"So, the hell should we call that thing?" I exclaimed.

"How about… Destroyer? That is what it did after all, destroyed cover," Peebee suggested.

"Works for me. Hey, Scott, noticed some side path in the direction we went, might be some Rem-tech worth grabbing." Vetra remarked. Activating a console, a bridge formed to a door across a small chasm. Inside was a box and another weird thing of Rem-tech filled with data. In the crate itself was Remnant metals and scrap, but one piece stood out.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" Peebee muttered. "I'm not exactly sure what this thing is, but it looks important. I think I might hold onto this in my room on the Tempest," Peebee stated.

"Jaal, this alright with you?" I asked. It did come from Havarl after all.
"So long as whatever developments can be shared," he answered. Good man.

"Then go right ahead," I told Peebee. She eagerly grabbed and clipped it to her belt. We still needed to find the artifact we were sent here for, so we continued through the complex. The way forward curved upwards and to the left. Given what rooms we'd already been in, the one we're approaching should be just on the other side of the wall of the room where the Remnant first attacked us from. I could see the next room had a small square shaped tower in the center of the room and on either side, was a lone Assembler, currently just standing there, lit up in blue and not engaged in combat. Might as well get them out of the way now. I gestured for Jaal to take out the one on the right as I aimed at the one on the left. A burst from my rifle and a shot from his sniper both taking down our targets. Keeping our weapons raised, just in case, a pair of Nullifiers stomped out of a side hall on the right.

"Explosives, tech attacks, something to burn the bastards, use em now!" I ordered, launching my own incinerate at one Nullifier, when I had an idea. "Watch your fire, I'm cloaking and going behind them!" I called out. There was something else dad had added to his armor. Something his combat drone was also equipped with. Remaining in cloak, I readied the flamethrower as the Nullifiers dug in. De-cloaking, as the flamethrower needed the power, I unleashed searing hot flames on them, melting their armor and frying any circuits that got exposed. Soon, the two Nullifiers dimmed their lights and collapsed to the ground in a sizzling, molten mess of metal.

"Is it hot in here? Or is it just me?" I joked. Peebee and Drack just laughed as Vreta face-palmed, still chuckling.

"Er, Scott? I think it was the flamethrower…" Jaal suggested. Confused. That just made the rest of us break out in more laughter, Vetra removing her palm from her face. After calming myself down:

"Jaal, ju-just don't worry about it. It's just a stupid saying from back home," I chuckled. As we regained control of ourselves we investigated the room the Nullifiers appeared from. It housed a console, several platforms on the pillar in the larger room formed, as well as a wall that separated us from the entryway. So, less walking for the way back. Thanks to the new platforms, I climbed up to the top to find containers with more supplies. Back at the bottom, the only wall the room still had was one I could now interface with and open. The door opened to reveal a small room, possibly used as simply storage long ago. Now, in the center of the room, was a clearly ancient skeleton of an Angara, holding both a kind of data drive, and a kind of gauntlet. The data drive was heavily corrupted by the ages, but remarkably, some data was both recoverable, and translatable from our current records of Angaran language. Apparently, this Angara had indeed received memories from Zorai when interacting with this gauntlet. But nothing written down would tell us where the Monolith is. I took the gauntlet, clipping it to my belt.

"Listen up," I called out, gaining the other's attention. "I can't make out everything from this data pad but it seems to confirm a kind of memory transfer. This gauntlet here is the heirloom. Now what we need to do is find Taavos, and find a way to get this gauntlet to transfer memories to him. Drack, you weren't there to hear this, but Taavos is Roekaar, you remember them from Jaal's briefing. We need Taavos ALIVE if we're to find the third Monolith and save Havarl. We've already seen Roekaar end their own lives rather than surrender, so we need to keep him alive by any means possible long enough to at least convince him to help us save Havarl, clear?" I asked.

"Sure, keep this Taavos kid alive. Maybe help him realize he just made a stupid mistake. Any restrictions for the rest of the Roekaar?"

"Just… make it quick and painless. Don't do the extra stuff you'd do to Kett," I muttered. I remembered when I used that singularity on the Roekaar earlier. I'd only ever used it on practice
dummies and Remnant. I had never considered it would be like… that. I shook my head clear of the thoughts earning a raised brow from Drack, but the old warrior must have seen the look in my eyes, having seen it a thousand times before, nodding in understanding. Feeling tired, knowing my internal clock was feeling late at night, I keyed my Omni-tool to pop a round of stims. Those will need to do until we’re done here. And we still had a long way to go.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We had returned to the surface and looked at a map of the region. The coordinates of Taavos' Roekaar encampment was on the other side of the Remnant canyon we had climbed down to make the trek to Mithrava. We had seen a bridge over there before, but it was not extended. Before deciding to ask for a shuttle, we checked once more, just in case some Roekaar had decided to cross. And they had. The bridge was extended and currently, there were Roekaar on both sides, some crossing in both directions.

"Jaal, you and I are going to need to take out the Roekaar on the far side right away, just in case they decide to close the bridge. The rest of you, the Roekaar have absolutely no cover whatsoever on that bridge, perfect kill zone. The moment we open fire, on the ones on our side first, before they can take cover, then just take out everyone on that bridge," I ordered. There were two on either side of the bridge as the others crossed. We'd need to ready quickly so those closest wouldn't notice. The shrubs would help, but they wouldn't be perfect. I steadied my crosshairs over the head of one, but Jaal didn't have an angle on either. I did. I'd need to act fast to compensate. "SAM, can you boost my reactions and sight enough to where I can take them both out quickly?" I whispered.

"I can, Pathfinder." Without another word, I pulled the trigger, actually seeing the bullet fly out in slow-mo, I immediately steadied the Black Widow, centering its crosshairs on the other Roekaar and pulled the trigger again just as I saw the first's head start to explode in blue blood. Both dropped to the ground dead as the two closest to us found themselves with a burning ball of scrap metal between them just before it exploded, shredding them to pieces. Vetra ran forward, tech armor glowing, Cyclone spewing out bullets as she sweeped it in an arc across the bridge, riddling all the Roekaar with holes. She had vented her gun into her armor. The bridge was secured.

"Good work everyone. You're not scorched in there are ya Vetra?" I asked.

"Is it hot out here, or is it just me?" she teased, pulling the same joke I had.

"Touché Nyx. Touché," I laughed. "Double time it. We need to cross that bridge before any Roekaar come to close it," I ordered, leading a mad dash across the bridge. We were about a quarter of the way from the other side when two Adhi jumped down from above as two Roekaar soldiers began running down the stairs and two snipers began to take positions. This would need to be some quick thinking.

"Peebee! With me!" I ordered as I biotically charged myself at one of the snipers, noticing Peebee slam herself into the other as mine was knocked to the ground. I knew Drack would be able to keep the Adhi off Vetra and Jaal, but what they needed most were these snipers out of play. Before my sniper could recover, I unholstered my Piranha and shot the sniper point blank in the face, negating any shields. I turned to see how Peebee was handling hers, only to see the sniper floating in air before being slammed down on top of one of the Roekaar soldiers, crushing both with the force of the impact. Quickly swapping to my Valkyrie, I saw Drack had quickly put down both Adhi and the remaining soldier, who had found himself without the upper part of his head, taken away by the searing hot energy bolt of a Kett sniper rifle. It reminded me of Kirkland from Habitat 7. My team had done well, they reacted to that ambush quickly.
We climbed up the stairs the Roekaar had placed, which led up to a Remnant door. Passing through a small hallway, we entered what seemed to be a massive Remnant courtyard with a Monolith straight ahead, online, at the far end. The entire area was enclosed on all sides by Remnant architecture and the ground itself was fully covered by grass, ferns and rocks. From here, we could just make out the Roekaar encampment on the far side of the clearing. I could even see some patrolling, but they were too far away to bother trying to snipe them. Not when we could potentially get better sightlines closer up without leaving us in the open.

The hope was that we could get close to the likely staircase the Roekaar would have to reach their encampment unnoticed and quickly take out those guarding it, rush up and grab a foothold before the Roekaar knew what was going on. But, perhaps some cloaked scouting wouldn't be a bad idea. We began creeping forward, from cover to cover, hoping that any snipers or lookouts they had wouldn't spot us. Once we passed the first pile of rocks, an Angaran dropship descended from the skies in front of us. No way in hell would that be resistance. The dropship released a squad of four soldiers and a sniper. The sniper, of course, fell back to a bit of Remnant rubble at the back of the group while the soldiers split themselves amongst rock and rubble, scattering the front of their lines. I had to eliminate that sniper before he could land any hits on us. Jaal said their snipers were damn strong, I ain't taking chances. Just like the Roekaar had, my squad split, drawing Roekaar fire in several directions.

"Jaal, drain the sniper's shields, I'll take care of the rest!" I ordered. He followed through, the sniper's shields flaring and vanishing as the crosshairs of my Black widow centered over his head. And with one pull of a trigger, his head was no more, before he even got a shot out. Several Roekaar turned to find their sniper dead on the ground and Drack saw an opportunity. He dashed forward, surprisingly fast for a Krogan, let alone an old one. He grabbed one Roekaar by the head, then launched his own into the Angara's forehead, then spun him around to act as a meat shield, holding him by the throat. He pulled a knife from the belt of his new shield and threw it at the head of the closest Roekaar as he turned to face the hulking reptilian mass of muscle. It landed right between the eyes and he collapsed on the ground dead. The stunned Roekaar who had been acting as a shield must have just recovered from the mother of all concussions he must have as he began struggling in Drack's grip. He simply gripped the Roekaar in a bear hug, locking his arms in place as he charged at the next closest soldier. Trying to make it easier for him, I fired a burst into the head of the other soldier, knocking him down to the ground, dead. I had expected Drack to simply charge into the final Roekaar, but no, he stopped and threw the bastard in his arms at the guy, knocking both to the ground. He pulled out his Ruzad, stomped over, placed a foot on one's back to steady the two, placed the barrel of his gun against the head of the one on top, and pulled the trigger, the shot going through the skulls of both, obliterating both of their heads in a mass of blue blood, brains, and chunks of bone.

"Well that's one way to do it," Vetra muttered, impressed at Drack's display.

"You know kid you didn't have to shoot that last guy, I had a plan that would have been more badass," Drack remarked.

"Uh huh. You sure that's not just the old man trying to find an excuse as to why he didn't need help?" I chuckled.

"Just remember that you called in this 'old man' for backup when you weren't sure what you'd find down in that Remnant area," he retorted, chuckling.

"The Roekaar clearly know we're here, perhaps we should move to a better position rather than joking with one another?" Jaal suggested.
"You have a point, let's move," I ordered. We dashed forward once more to take cover behind the last set of rocks before the clearing to the staircase and sniper tower to the Roekaar camp. Obviously, the sniper would once more need to be our first target, else we'd be pinned down. "Jaal, take cover on the other side of the rock. I'll get him to take aim at me, and you take that moment to pop a round into his shields. Hopefully, he'll be stupid and take aim at you instead. In that time, I'll pull out my rifle and put him down," I ordered. I leaned out of the rock, pretending to take aim at one of the Roekaar soldiers, yet keeping my eyes wide open and trained on that sniper. Sure enough, his laser sight focused on me, and just before it was on my center mass, I kneeled back into cover, hearing Jaal's rifle discharge. I immediately peeked out of cover again, seeing that the sniper was indeed stupid enough to not return to cover, for that round depleted his shields. And just as planned, I put him down with another shot from the Black Widow. Investigated the rest of the battlefield, I noticed a soldier at the Roekaar fortifications drop dead from a round to the head.

"Ha! Got him!" Peebee exclaimed. Impressive, she landed her shot at this distance with a pistol.

"Come on kid, I can't do anything at this range!" Drack exclaimed.

"Then maybe you should be carrying more than just a shotgun," Vetra teased. Drack just grumbled in reply, knowing she was right. Another Roekaar went down from Jaal's rifle as Vetra kept up her suppressive fire. At this distance, I'd be better off using my sniper. I could take down another two Roekaar, Jaal taking down the last as I popped in a new thermal clip. The lower area was clear, but it would take a special kind of stupid to believe that the whole encampment was now clear.

Unfortunately, there wasn't any cover for us to use for a slower, smarter advance. We'd have to book it across open ground to get to the staircase, and even then, cover there wouldn't help us if anyone came to the ridgeline. Not until we were at the top.

"Jaal, is there any chance you can cloak, get up there, and take a good sniper position without any of them knowing? Keep them off us while we push up?" I asked.

"I believe so. Just give me some time," he answered.

"I don't think there's anything we can do to distract them. Not without putting everyone into that kill zone they're waiting for us to walk into," I remarked.

"I can do it. Not the first time I've cloaked behind enemy lines," he stated. He keyed his tac-pad to activate his cloak, fading in with the wilderness. We simply waited there, in the quiet, hoping to hear from Jaal that he was in position. I was almost at the point where I'd simply order us to run like hell, hoping Peebee and I could charge up to take care of anyone on the ridgeline without being torn apart by anyone else up there, and hoping that Jaal was simply a captive, when I heard his voice whisper over our comms: "I am in position atop one of the Roekaar's sniper towers. The sniper occupying it is down. Move when ready." Music to my ears. And if we're lucky, the Roekaar will have been losing patience.

On my order, we ran like hell across the clearing and up those stairs. As we started climbing the first case, Adhi jumped down from the ledge on a higher up section of the winding stairway and began rushing down to meet us. It would make sense for Jaal to leave those ones to us. We had guns, the Adhi didn't. But the Roekaar waiting for them to distract us did have guns. I pulled the shotgun from my back, one trigger pull taking the first down and a round from Drack's Ruzad practically gutting another. There was another left, but Drack simply smashed its head in with his hammer, pounding it into a bloody pulp. Just as I predicted, several Roekaar appeared along the ledge, training their weapons on us. I began to fear that perhaps they had found Jaal when an energy bolt went straight through the back of one soldier's head, as he fell off the ledge, already dead. We continued running up the stairs, almost to the top as they all turned to see who the hell
had shot at them, when another suffered the same exact fate.

Then, we made it to the top. We finally had our foothold. The four of us took cover behind various crates and opened fire, taking their focus off Jaal as he continued picking off Roekaar. We were rushed by Adhi, Drack taking care of another with his shotgun as I slammed my fist towards the other, the Remnant cryo-gauntlet forming around it just before impact, freezing the Adhi in place for me to safely fire a burst point blank into its head. There were two lanes of fire here, the front, and the right. I had already dedicated myself to the front, trusting any who took the right to keep any fire off us. I ducked into cover as a soldier opened fire on me to notice that Vetra had crouched down beside me.

"Helluva day huh Vetra?" I remarked.

"I'll say. Think I'm gonna need a drink after this. A hard drink," she chuckled.

"Hm, you know I think I might join you for that. Hell, maybe the others wouldn't mind a drink before crashing either," I suggested.

"Starting the day drinking with friends at the bar, ending it drinking with friends in the mess. Sounds like a perfect day if you ignore all the gunfire," she joked.

"Speaking of which…” I remarked as the Roekaar soldier shooting at our position stopped. I stood up to see that Jaal had put a round in him, clearing our side of the camp. Turning to face the other side, there were two soldiers standing and suppressing Drack and Peebee. A burst from my Valkyrie took down one, the sound of my rifle prompting Drack to immediately stand and mantle the cover, firing a round from his shotgun at the final Roekaar, killing him instantly. Jaal joined us as we took a breather and reloaded our weapons. "Jaal, you mentioned that the Roekaar were essentially Ex-resistance. I'd assume they'd employ largely the same tactics and organization. Which building would you say houses Taavos, assuming he is indeed their leader here?" I asked.

"I'd be able to hazard a guess, but there's no need. I saw the Roekaar leader step out to ensure everyone was positioned then return to the central building, the one lit up," he explained. Pointing out said building.

"Then that's where we go. Multiple entrances?" I asked.

"Yes, one on each side," Jaal answered.

"Good, then we'll split up and enter from both. Jaal, Vetra, you two will enter right side with me first. We'll draw his attention and just after we get in, Peebee and Drack will enter from the left. Get him in stasis him, knock him to the ground, do whatever you need to do to ensure that Taavos does NOT die. Right now, he's our only shot at finding that Monolith," I reminded. The squad nodded in understanding and positioned themselves. We could hear him shouting on the comms.

"Akksul! Come in Akksul! Anyone! We're under attack!" he called out. I noticed the name 'Akksul' draw a kind of… grim recognition from Jaal. I whispered a countdown to the team as they readied their weapons, and I keyed my Omni-tool to connect to the door. We opened the door and stormed in, training our weapons on Taavos as he turned to face us, a full scowl on his face. His back was turned to the other door and just as planned Drack and Peebee entered and Taavos was encased in a biotic stasis field. His armor was orange and black, his face shades of blue and black tattoo patterns running across his eyes and forehead. "Wha-what is this? Release me! You killed men and women under my charge. At least let me die on my feet with honor! To honor those I led!" he demanded. He focused on Jaal, recognition and confusion both burning in his eyes. "You. I know your face. Why help these murderers?" he questioned accusingly.
"They are not murderers. They are allies. They already helped the scientists at Daar Pelaav. And there's more..." Jaal began.

"The scientists should be ashamed of themselves for being so foolish. After everything we've been through with the Kett..." Taavos muttered. He turned his face to glare at me.

"Tell me why you've come so I know why I died," he demanded. I let out a sigh and holstered my weapon, gesturing for the others to do the same but for Peebee to keep the stasis field.

"I don't want you dead, Taavos. I didn't want any of your men and women dead. We tried to get some to surrender earlier. We'd have taken their guns, but we'd have let them go. They shot themselves..." I muttered. "This is just a stasis field to ensure you won't do the same." That seemed to surprise him, as his face became one of pure confusion.

"Why?" he asked, more calmly. I sighed again:

"We aren't like the Kett, Taavos. I've heard the stories of what they've done to your people. We may not have been here long but we've already witnessed similar cruelties to our own people. What's more? The first of the people from the Milky Way you've met were exiles. People kicked out for mutiny. I'd be a shortsighted fool to not understand why the Roekaar feel the way they do. Most people who came here were just civilians who wanted a new, fresh start. To explore. Instead we found the Scourge and the Kett. Bah, these are just words. You need actions. So, let's start with this. Why we came here for you, specifically. We're trying to save Havarl," I stated.

"And just how do I fit into this plan?" he questioned, still some suspicion.

"We spoke with the sages of Mithrava. They pointed us in two directions. One, to find an heirloom of an ancient Angaran hero named Zorai, and in the direction of Zorai's descendent. You. They told us that this heirloom could bring forth Zorai's memories within you, and we could find the missing third Monolith, activate it, and reset the vault," I explained. Taavos paused for a moment, considering just what to do.

"Taavos. Please, trust him," Jaal pleaded. Taavos let out a sigh:

"Let me see it," he relented.

"We'll release you from stasis. I'm sorry but just to be safe we're going to pat you down, ensure you aren't armed or anything. We'll return them when we're done," I explained as Jaal moved to pat him down, likely knowing places where anything hidden may find. Jaal stepped back holding a knife and pistol, as well as his grenade belt, setting them to the side far out of his reach. He nodded that the job was done and Peebee released him, taking deep breaths from the action. I handed the gauntlet to Taavos as he stared at it in his hand.

"Nothing," he stated calmly. Jaal's face fell.

"Damn it, I knew it. This was a load of sh-" Vetra began to mutter, cut off by Taavos.

"Wait... there are things like this in the Repository of History on Aya. Ancient Angaran tech. This fits over a hand... contacts on the inside for myoelectric control of..." he gasped loudly as if he was just punched in the stomach, raising a hand to his forehead as his face scrunched up in pain. "Aagh, what is this?" he asked, anger rising in his voice.

"Woah, you alright Taavos?" I asked. Taavos began taking deep breaths.

"I... remember things. The underground Monolith. I remember... pain. Desperation..."
"Holy shit… it worked. Taavos, I need you to take us there. Please, together we can save Havarl," I pleaded.

"You… you're still an alien. I can't trust-" he began.

"As I said before, you need to witness actions. Let me try and earn your trust. Please," I pleaded again.

"Deep beneath the surface but… not far. Give me a moment to compose myself. Then we shall go," he resigned. I let out a deep breath of relief as did Jaal. Vetra and Peebee were both confused and intrigued at what happened. Drack just stood there unsurprised.

"Still not even the weirdest shit I've ever seen," he grumbled.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We had followed Taavos back into the same chasm we used to make our way to Mithrava, though this time we followed it north. The area was clear of Remnant, but we still had to contest with a Rylkor, which quickly fell under the combined firepower of 6 people. Yes, we kept our word and returned Taavos' weapons to him. Now we stood in front of a wall of Remnant pillars with a small stand in front of it.

"It's here. I just have to…” Taavos began. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "It helps if I still my mind," he explained. "I've been here before. Familiar. One, two, three… indentations. Palm here…” he continued as a pedestal raised out of the stand. He placed his palm upon it and the wall of pillars lowered, revealing a cave system. "It worked," he muttered, I could tell he was astounded by it.

"We're so close…” Jaal muttered, hardly above a whisper. "To think it's been so close, right here, all this time. And yet no one knew." We passed an Observer that had crumbled to the ground.

"Yes, there were Remnant machines here. Zorai was able to make them stop," Taavos remembered.

"Any idea how he learned? There isn't exactly a manual," I asked.

"Zorai watched the watchers. That's… all I'm getting. I'm not sure what it means," he replied. "Wait, there's more. The others slept, but Zorai… but I… stayed awake. Unmoving, but seeing. Learning." We passed more inactive Remnant crumbled on the ground.

"Sounds like the stasis fields around the first monolith. Think Zorai had some sort of resistance to it?" Peebee suggested.

"Maybe…” Taavos muttered. We continued through the cavern until two paths were blocked by solid Remnant walls/doors. Can never be quite sure with them. "Here… there's something here…” he muttered. He walked to the wall on our right and it opened for him. In the center of the room was a circle of glowing mushrooms with small bioluminescent moth like insects flying around it. In the middle of the circle was another Angara skeleton holding an audio log. Zorai. I played the audio log:

"Builder machines exhaust me. Mind and body must be engaged wholly or the attempt fails. I can't stop. Without the Monoliths, the Vault fails. Without the Vault, the planet dies. I'm close. Just… one… more…” the log ended. That voice was clearly female.

"The sages got it wrong. Zorai was a woman. That… that was her voice. M-my voice… May I
"You don't need to ask for what's already yours," I replied, handing the audio log back to him.

"She died here. Before she could get to the third Monolith. This… this was me. I'd like to spend some time here, once we are done," Taavos muttered. He returned to the other door, approaching it to open it just like the previous one. It opened, revealing a massive cavern. And the top of the Monolith.

"We found it!" Peebee exclaimed. There was the blue light of a gravity well's controls waiting to be activated. I did so and the floor beneath opened, the others jumping in to follow. We descended all the way to the base of the Monolith, only now did it really strike me just how massive these things were. And there it was. Once we touched the bottom, right in front of us was the console. The console that would activate the third and final Monolith that has been missing for centuries. Taavos and Jaal walked beside me as I approached the console. My Omni-tool lighting up as I pressed my palm into it. The Monolith lit up, emitting a beam from its tip just like the others. No doubt the Vault was opening now.

"You did it. You finished what Zorai could not, so long ago," Taavos stated calmly. I suppose he's still trying to take everything in.

"I'm sorry Taavos. She did everything she could," I consoled.

"Exactly, which is why there is nothing to be sorry about. She didn't complete what she set out to do, but she didn't fail. Her work bought Havarl time. Go, Pathfinder. Reset the Vault. Save Havarl. I think I'll stay here a moment. I have much to think about," he suggested.

We left him to his thoughts.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We followed the beams of the three Monoliths to where they converged, the Vault. It was just to the south of the Roekaar camp, and a wall had vanished since we were last in the area, revealing a new area once blocked off that housed the Vault's entrance. We drew our weapons and entered slowly. Soon, we were rushed by several small insectoid Remnant bots running about on six legs.

"Creepers. Lightly armored and fast, but not too dangerous. Just don't let them… bite you," Peebee warned. Each creeper I shot went down after the second bullet of my three-round burst gun, so I set it to semi-auto to conserve ammo. There was only a handful, which posed little threat. What did pose a minor threat was the pair of Observers just outside the entrance. With Peebee's virus and the rest of our more mundane tech attacks and bullets, they quickly went down without trouble. With the Vault's exterior protectors destroyed, we entered, descending yet another gravity well into another room heavily similar to other rooms we enter at the base of gravity wells. Before activating emergency power, I noticed at the top of the ramps at the back of the room was an auto turret and some more weird bits of Rem tech providing a lot of data. Below that was another energy barrier blocking off some Remnant treasures.

"Careful with these constructs on the sides. Their Observer fabricators. They can make the things practically instantly and without any materials present," Peebee warned. I'd bet good credits some will happen to be fabricated the moment I turn on the power. Doing so at the base of the room proved me right, a total of three appearing and activating the turret.

"Cover me, cloaking and going to hack the Remnant Turret, should take care of the Observers!" I
called out, keying my Omni-tool for cloak and running up to the console just behind the turret. It worked just as intended. It powered up and charged a shot at one Observer, destroying it instantly as the combined fire of the others destroyed the second Observer. I began to open fire on the final one, but the Turret beat me to it. "See? Doesn't that make it so much easier?" I joked. "Alright, room is clear but that door still isn't open. I see a bunch of other consoles popped up. Ideas?" I asked.

"As you walked by them, a few lights appeared. You went left, the bottom one here had three lights and the one halfway had four," Peebee called out.

"Then let me guess, on the other side, the consoles have one and two?" I guessed. Drack lumbered over to test, and sure enough, I was right. "Anyone want to place bets that the lights are trying to tell us what order they come in?" I chuckled.

"I think I'll pass on that," Vetra chuckled. The bottom left console had the first. Upon activation, the console made a noise, and no Observers appeared. Seems like a good sign. I activated the terminal with two lights just above it, and the same thing happened. This was definitely the pattern. I crossed over to three and four and sure enough, the door opened. To my surprise, the very next room was the re-set room. Where the death bubble would also appear. SAM called it a purification field, but death bubble sounds more… motivating.

"Peebee, hang by that energy barrier and when we reset the vault, grab whatever you can, then get out of the shield's range. We'll head right back and get rid of the death bubble," I ordered. She began running over to her spot as we moved forward.

"Death bubble? The hell is that kid?" Drack questioned.

"When we reset the vault a kind of smoky cloud with a red tint to it will appear. Anything touched by it dies.

"Fan-fucking-tastic…” Drack grumbled. The first console in the room was confirmed by SAM as the one that would send out the death bubble, but there was another terminal on the other side. Curious, I interfaced. Another Remdoku, not surprising. It was another smaller and simpler one, so I solved it quickly enough and my Omni-tool was simply flooded with Data. But now the Vault had nothing else to offer, so I made for the death bubble console, ensuring the others were ready to sprint. I activated it, turning to run with the others.

And then the door closed.

"Kid… is that supposed to happen?" Drack questioned. And to add to our worries, Remnant bots appeared behind us.

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me…” Vetra groaned.

"Shit, shoot the bots! Maybe the door will open if we kill em quickly enough!" I ordered. I was out of ideas, here's hoping something stupid would work. We opened fire, but without cover as we were not eager to get closer to the death bubble rapidly approaching us. There were too many, we would never be able to kill them all before it reached us. Assemblers and Observers both began returning fire, but we focused on them in order for us to stay in the fight a little bit longer. The death bubble reached the middle of the room, which was coincidentally where the remaining Remnant bots were. The field destroyed them and the door began to open! It fucking worked! "Doors open! Fucking RUN!" I ordered. We all turned and ran as fast as our legs could carry us and I made a beeline for the console that would retract the death bubble, just in front of the turret.
"I'm out of the barriers range! Close it!" Peebee called out. Shit, I almost forgot about that and my hand was already reaching for the console. The death bubble got closer and closer as I interfaced, and just like that, it receded. Tired and with the adrenaline wearing off, I sunk down against the console, taking a deep breath.

"Stars… That was… exhilarating!" Jaal exclaimed, just as worn out.

"What? You just had to run back and wait for my all clear," Peebee stated. Guess she didn't see the door.

"Yeah… about that. Damn door closed on us trapping us in there with the murder bubble and a bunch of Remnant. It opened when the damn thing killed all the bots and we ran like hell," Vetra explained.

"And there I was calmly, yet hurriedly picking out all the goodies from a box," Peebee muttered.

"Pathfinder, are you there? All our instruments just recorded a surge," Kiiran Dal's voice came over our comms. "What happened?"

"That, Kiiran, was the Vault. It's online," I explained.

"That's a jest, it can't be…" she retorted. Not quite believing. "Stars… It's not a jest! The reset of a vault would explain all of the readings! Please, return to Pelaav as soon as you can. We have much to discuss," she requested. Hm, the ol' there and back again. Might not have had fire breathing dragons, wizards, or ancient magical rings that will make you bat shit crazy, but it's still been quite an interesting adventure here.

"You heard the lady, back to Pelaav and then maybe we can get back on the Tempest for some well-deserved shut-eye. Great work people!"
Trust and Respect

Chapter Notes

Just adding this because some idiot tried to give me flak back on Fanfic.net way back when. When Scott lets the accent out? I have that damn accent. I can use it here.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The five of us returned to Pelaav, entering the main building to speak with Kiiran again. To my surprise, she was joined by two others I had not expected to see. First Sage Esmus, and Taavos. Hearing me enter, the trio turned to face me.

"Pathfinder Ryder. You have done something remarkable here today," Kiiran began.

"Succeeded where Zorai failed," Esmus continued.

"Esmus? Taavos? What are you doing here?" I asked cheerfully.

"I am here to renew old bonds. Talking to you was enlightening. I saw an alien, working for us, so passionate about saving our world when we had given up. The Sages of Mithrava have isolated ourselves for too long. Perhaps there is a balance we can find," Esmus answered.

"I think we all need to find our balance," Taavos remarked.

"Seems we just walked into a party! There is something to celebrate after all," I remarked.

"Hmph, I suppose we do. I have learned a lot in a short time. The Roekaar want simple solutions but… Nothing is ever simple or certain, is it?" Taavos asked.

"Well I'd say that's for certain but that would just negate the whole point of that statement," I joked, earning some chuckles from the Angara and my crew.

"I only wish that those who were killed could have realized this as I have. But after everything I've seen, I have to hope they aren't lost forever," Taavos continued.

"I couldn't agree more," I remarked.

"This curious 'memory-transfer'-" Kiiran began.

"Reincarnation," Esmus corrected. She just raised a brow at him before continuing.

"Whatever it might be, I aim to devote resources to studying it. Maybe one day we'll find the truth at the core of our superstitions."

"I wish you luck with that. I gotta say, this? Seeing you all here, rejoining of isolated people with the others, these new understandings, it's kinda heartwarming," I remarked.

"There has been much healing today. Havarl itself, and rifts between my people. And it's thanks to you, Pathfinder," she stated.
"Please, just Scott, or Ryder if you must. But come on, it wasn't just me. It was my team, it was you for your aid, Esmus for his, and Taavos for his aid. It's thanks to all of us working together," I retorted.

"But you were the catalyst. And your understanding of Remnant technology was the key to the vault itself," she argued. I just chuckled, shaking my head.

"Alright, alright, enough of that. So, my team and I had planned to just return to the Tempest, have a few drinks, and get some shut-eye. Since you're all here, why don't we just move the drinking out here? Celebrate Havarl's recovery?" I suggested. I heard murmurs of agreement from my crew and Taavos mutter that he could certainly use a drink. Kiiran began to order an assistant to receive their ration of alcohol and I turned to Vetra: "You mind heading to the ship and gathering the others? Extend the offer to the Turians as well, but have Avitus call me if they accept. You know the drinks you want and the others can all tell you the good stuff, just get them to help out-give me a call if you could use a few more hands, alright?" I asked.

"Sure thing Scott. Be back soon," she answered, making her way to the Tempest.

"Kiiran! I got someone getting the rest of my crew and gathering our drinks, mind holding the celebrations until then?"

"Of course, Ryder. By the way, it occurs to me that we have some open space here at Daar Pelaav. We'd be happy to welcome some of your scientists here," she offered.

"Glad to hear it, I'll send a message to the Nexus while we wait. I may need to pass the comms over for you to answer a few questions about living conditions," I warned.

"That will be fine, and once you're done, you've asked us many questions, I believe it shall be our turn to ask you some," she suggested. I began typing the message as I told her we'd be more than happy to answer what we could. I had just leaned forward to listen to the questions of the Angara when my Omni-tool pinged, a call from Addison. I answered and turned so that the Angara behind me would be able to see her over the vid-call. I had already given a small briefing on our first contact on our way to Havarl, so they wouldn't be totally surprised.

"Pathfinder, you've been busy," she began.

"That I have. Eos yesterday, making a dead world live, and today, first contact with friendly natives, and my team and I saved their home world by re-activating their vault," I remarked.

"And now they're inviting some scientists to join them I see."

"We would welcome their aid and insight. We are going to be very busy cataloguing the growing list of changes from the vault's reset," Kiiran spoke.

"Sorry, forgot to mention, my crew and I are currently preparing to share a few celebratory drinks," I explained. A bit snarkily I might add, catching her off guard like that. "This is Kiiran Dals, lead researcher at Daar Pelaav," I introduced.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Foster Addison, Director of Colonial Affairs. Understandably, I will need to know living arrangements and discuss a schedule for supply runs. Your food may be edible to most Initiative species, but I have a few Turian scientists I wish to send who will be unable to eat anything there," she explained.

"Of course. I'll have Ryder send you a schedule later once I've sent it off to Aya. They won't re-write it as I have the final say for my outpost, just need to ensure your ships don't raise any
Resistance alarms. We have space for around twelve more people but may be able to squeeze in a few more," Kiiran replied.

"Given you're an advanced civilization I doubt the need to ask about hygiene facilities as well. Alright, I'll begin waking up a few choice scientists. When would you like them to arrive?" Addison asked.

"It is late at night here, and after these drinks I believe we all would like to get some sleep. I would assume Ryder would like to be present for their arrival. I will allow him to choose that, that way we don't need to spend all night figuring out how our measurements of time compare," Kiiran answered.

"I'd say around eight hours from now should be fine. You already have the coordinates, you or your people can work out travel times," I spoke. Addison nodded and gave a farewell as she ended the call. At that moment Kiiran's assistant entered holding several bottles of Angaran booze and my Omni-tool pinged again with another call, Vetra.

"Scott, Avitus and the others were all passed out in their bedrolls, didn't feel like waking them up after what they've been through. But everyone else is awake and we're on our way with the drinks, shouldn't need any help," she informed.

"Sounds good, the Angara just got their drinks so just waiting on you. See you in a minute," I replied, ending the call.

"Tell me Pathfinder, just how many people-and species, have come from your galaxy to ours?" Kiiran asked.

"Around a hundred thousand people in total, and all but one of the species from back home. My species is human, Peebee's here is Asari, the Turians, Drack here is Krogan, and Kallo, our pilot, is Salarian. There were other species meant to come here on another ark, but they had some technical issues before we left so they likely haven't arrived yet. Those species include the Quarians, brilliant engineers and technicians, the Volus, small, roundish guys who are damn good with economics, we have the Elcor, big guys who walk on four legs. It's funny trying to talk with Elcor because their voices are just pure monotone, they need to say what emotion they feel out loud when talking to the other races. There's also the Drell, they look like humans but are more reptilian, and arguably the weirdest of all are the Hanar. They can move around on land but are practically fish. They look like Jellyfish, tentacles, pink in color, evolution is a funny thing," I chuckled.

"There was one other species who made the journey with us, but only a few. The Batarians. Batarians and Humans have never gotten along, and the Initiative was founded by a Human. Let me explain," I requested, taking a breath.

"So, it was thirty years before we left for Andromeda that Humans made first contact with everyone else, when we stumbled upon a thriving galactic community. Not one without its issues, but stable. Humans have always had a kind of 'go-getter' attitude. Why bother waiting to do something when you can just get it done now, that kind of thing. So, once we learned of all this unclaimed territory in the Milky Way yet to be colonized, that's what we started doing, claiming worlds and planting our flag down on them. The Batarians got pissy because they PLANNED to eventually colonize all the worlds we were out colonizing, but they hadn't done anything with them yet. They complained to the Council, the governing body back home, and they sided with us," I began, pausing to gather the rest of my thoughts.

"This pissed the Batarians off even more and Batarians attacked one of our colonies, Elysium, huge population center. Technically, it was slavers and pirates and raiders. General scum from the
Terminus systems, a more lawless area the Council doesn't control. Thing is, most of those Batarians are loyal to their Hegemony and still take orders. You can fill in the gap. Human colonies would come under attack now and then from Batarian slavers and pirates, sometimes even terrorists. Two years before we left, there was this asteroid one of our colonies, Terra Nova was moving to mine for resources, make a space station, that kind of thing. Batarians hijacked it and started moving it full speed ahead towards the planet, if it hit it would have killed everyone, hell it would have wrecked the planet's ecosystem. Fortunately, they were stopped and the Asteroid was slowed, ensuring it would be put in a safe orbit," I explained.

"Stars, I can see why you only allowed so few," Kiiran remarked.

"Yeah, it's a pity though. The Batarian Hegemony only allows scumbag slavers, raiders, and terrorists to leave Batarian space. The civilians are fed bullshit propaganda out the ass but sometimes a few see through the bullshit and leave, they are actually decent people, like anyone else. As for those who did make the journey, I haven't met any myself, but at least everyone who came here was screened, I don't think any slavers or terrorists would be allowed to join us. Hell, I have doubts that there's enough Batarians for them to keep a stable population," I explained.

"Storms… that's a lot of aliens," Taavos muttered.

"And what of those who did not make the journey?" Kiiran asked.

"That would be the Vorcha. We had first contact with them just before we left. Don't know much about them, never even met one, but short lived, and from all reports violent, brutal, even savage. They were first found by the Blood Pack, Krogan Mercenary group that saw perfect cannon fodder for them. Stupid enough for unquestioning obedience, smart enough to shoot a gun, and a love of fighting. Even if they were different, with the Initiative's timeframe they likely wouldn't have joined us anyway," I explained. Just as I finished, Vetra and the rest of the team walked in carrying a box of alcohol and a bottle of Dextro stuff for Vetra.

"Alcohol! Bout time!" Peebee cheered as Kiiran gestured for their own to be served.

"Kiiran, do Angara have any traditions to kick off a celebration? Because we humans have a fun one," I asked.

"We have a few, but I'll admit some curiosity. Please, show us," she requested.

"Champagne's in the box Scott, don't waste too much of it," Vetra chuckled.

"Of course, you knew what I planned," I laughed.

"I've worked with a lot of humans, I've seen them celebrate," As the box was set down I reached in and found a bottle of Champagne, even had the cork. I looked at the label:

"Dear mother of god, this is six hundred and forty years old! Oh this is going to be good," I exclaimed. The date earned a whistle from Liam and Cora and Gil got a massive grin on his face. Peebee and Drack seemed less impressed, but they live for around a thousand years, of course they got shit that old. I stuck my leg out, shaking the bottle for a moment before placing the bottle against the front of my upper leg. I grabbed hold of the cork and began twisting and pulling to get it out. The cork left with a hearty pop as the shaken champagne began to spew out, and we quickly grabbed glasses to pour it into.

"Your tradition is to make a mess of our floor?" Kiiran chuckled.

"Don't worry, we'll get it cleaned up. If we have enough bottles sometimes we just take them all
and aim them at the person who's the reason we're celebrating. In this case that would be me, I guess, and I'd be drenched in this stuff," I remarked.

"A drink that old. I may try a glass," Taavos stated. I happily held my hand out for his glass, filling it up, and handing it back as the others began drinking.

"Skies above… that's good," Taavos exclaimed. After that the rest of our Angaran company asked for a glass, which they received. It meant everyone only got one glass of it, but it was worth it to build bridges.

"Alright Ryder, we tried one of yours, now you try one of ours," Kiiran suggested. I handed them my glass and they filled it up with a yellowish liquid. It tasted a bit fruity. Not bad either, kind of like those drinks you'd get at a tropical resort with a little umbrella in them.

"Not bad," I remarked, going to pull a new drink out of the box.

"Tell me about you, specifically, Ryder. Where you're from, family, that kind of thing," Kiiran asked. The others were having their own drinks and conversations but I noticed them quiet down a bit, I guess a bit curious to hear if I mentioned anything they didn't know.

"I was born on Earth, the Human home world in a city called Orlando, state, or area, known as Florida. Sunny, warm, tropical area. Lots of plant life and animals, Aya reminds me a lot of it in fact. Loved just going out for a swim in the ocean, been too long since I've even been able to get in the water. I… had, a Mom and Dad, both of whom have passed, sadly, but I still have my twin sister Sara, but she's in a coma on the Hyperion," I answered a bit sadly.

"Oh, my apologies Ryder. I'm sorry for your loss," she replied gently.

"Hold on, Scott, you said you're from Florida? I knew you were a yank but not a southerner," Liam spoke up.

"Wait, what?" Gil asked, I think purposely laying it on thick with his accent, making more like he said "wait, wot?" "Southerner? Where the hell is your accent?" he asked incredulously. Time to show em what I got.

"Y'all ain't ever heard my ol' southern drawl befo cuz I spent a whole lotta time outside of the south too now. And Liam, boy, dontchu ever, and I mean ever say that I'm a yank now boy. The Yankees are the Northerners, ya Brit!" I exclaimed. My little display left the humans in my crew, Peebee, Drack and Vetra, likely having heard it with those she's worked with before, broke out in laughter, the Angara confused, and Lexi just raising an eyebrow.

"Wow, after that I'm wondering just how close you are with Sara," Liam teased.

"Hey, that there is Alabama you're thinkin of. Alabama is the land of Sister cousins and Brother cousins. Susins and Brusins," I remarked, earning more laughs from the humans in my crew but the aliens confused.

"Susins and Brusins? The hell are you on about Scott?" Vetra laughed.

"There's a long-standing joke with humans, especially Americans, the country I'm from, that the south is full of incest and shit. When a southerner hears that joke, they put all the blame on Alabama, another state like Florida is. For the longest time, and hell, plenty of it still was before we left, that place was all rural. Shacks, trailer homes, farms. Of course, none of that is any sort of indication to incest but it just became a joke amongst us for… some reason or other," I explained, returning my voice to how it normally is.
"It has only been a few minutes and already I am at a loss of words for humans and their culture," Kiiran laughed.

"It gets worse. So, how well do you think the translators work?" I asked the Angara.

"Very well, highly advanced to be sure," Jaal answered.

"Y'all'd've f'ld've." Jaal and the other Angara just stared at each other and I noticed that everyone on my entire crew, even the Humans were glancing amongst each other trying to figure out what the hell I just said.

"W-what?" Jaal asked. I let out a laugh before continuing.

"It's a contraction of words, it's a pain in the ass thing that English, one of Humanity's languages allows for. Y'all is you all, the 'd've is would have, and the 'f'ld've is if would have. So, you all would have if would have, it's implied that there should be another you between the if and second would," I explained.

"Damn southerners," Liam chuckled. Our celebration went on for a small while afterwards, talking about ourselves, our species, even events on the Nexus. Soon though, the extra energy of celebration and alcohol began to wear off for all of us.

"It's been great talking and having fun with you all, but I'm afraid that we are about ready to pass out, and I think we'd rather do that in our beds than the floor. I'll come back in the morning and greet the scientists, but then we'll be heading back to the Nexus. So, goodnight to all of you, and thank you for being great hosts," I spoke. It earned a few groans from some of the crew, namely Peebee, Gil, Liam, and Drack, but they followed, still feeling tired themselves. The Angara gave farewells in turn as we left Pelaav, returning to our ship, and the beds within. I returned to my room in my under suit, having left my armor and weapons in the armory and stripped down to the boxers beneath. I fell into my bed, getting under a layer of covers and slept.

I was not haunted by any ghosts this night.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I awoke to the sound of my alarm and was pleasantly surprised at how well rested I felt. Seeing I was awake, SAM untinted the window of my room revealing a sunny day on Havarl. The jungles in daylight thoroughly reminded me of a rainforest back home. I grabbed a change of clothes, deciding my outfit to get the scientists would be a simple T-shirt and shorts, with a pair of boots thanks to Havarl being a jungle, and went to take a shower. Guys were on the schedule first today. After a meal in the mess, more Blast-oh's, I went to the cargo bay to check in on Avitus and the Turians. I saw them sat on crates, talking amongst themselves. SAM would alert me when the scientists were near so I had time for now.

"Morning Avitus, and to the rest of you. How're you all holding up?" I asked.

"Hanging in there, Scott. Helps to have an actual roof over our heads and food that isn't emergency rations," Avitus spoke up. "And that Angara, Jaal, from your crew came over for a small talk, apologized that the first of his people we met were extremists. We… may not have been expecting his visit," he chuckled.

"Some of us have been taking turns talking with Dr. T'Perro. She's been a big help for us," a female Turian spoke up.
"Just as I said, Scott. Without being in constant danger…" Avitus reminded.

"I know. You'll all be safe on the Nexus soon, and you'll be given all the time you need, and someone to talk to if needed," I reassured them. Avitus nodded thanks on their behalf and SAM informed me that the scientists would be landing soon. I began making my way to the cargo ramp:

"Let Jaal know, just in case. He may want more time on the ground here before we leave," I requested. I grabbed my scorpion pistol from my weapons locker, holstering it to my thigh as I waited a moment to see if Jaal would join me. After a few minutes, he began climbing down the ladder. He left his rifle but grabbed an Angaran pistol and holstered it. We set out together. It was a nice, warm, sunny day on Havarl and I felt good walking towards Pelaav. It even occurred to me that this night I wasn't plagued by my father accusing me or Sara panicking in her coma. I knew Sara was safe, thanks to talking with her, and I suppose being around the crew and Angara kept any accusatory dreams at bay tonight. We had just stepped within the grounds of Pelaav when I heard Initiative shuttles bearing down, coming in for a landing. Jaal and I picked up the pace to the landing pad and stood there, awaiting the pair of shuttles to touch down as Kiiran joined us. The shuttles touched down and the doors opened, and almost a dozen people total, a few from each species of the Initiative that were on the Nexus.

"Greetings, people of the Andromeda Initiative. We, the Angara, welcome you to Daar Pelaav. We welcome you to Havarl, our home world. I am Kiiran Dals, lead researcher of Daar Pelaav," she stated. A human man stepped forward, light skin and ginger hair:

"Pleased to meet you Kiiran. I am Dr. Hawkins MacIntyre. I'll be the one keeping this merry band of Milky Way people under control," he introduced. He was clearly Scottish. Name, accent, hair, and voice all fit He turned to face me: "And you must be the Pathfinder, it's a pleasure."

"Scott Ryder. Good to meet you Hawkins." He nodded and turned again to face Kiiran.

"Now, where should we place our things? We have a few food crates as well as some research equipment of our own, other than that small things that shouldn't take up too much space. Basic necessities and the like. I'll introduce you to my little helpers once we're settled," he requested. "Oh, and Ryder, Addison wanted you to give her a call once we got here. Something about a quote for the history books I think. We have a holocommunicator in that shuttle there," he stated, pointing the way. Jaal followed, likely just curious as to what I had to say. I keyed the comm unit and a few seconds later a three-dimensional image of Addison appeared.

"Good morning Ryder. I've seen the images from SAM and the ones MacIntyre got on his way down. The Milky Way reports on this place don't do it justice. It's... ethereal…"

"A bit surprised you didn't come down here to see for yourself," I remarked.

"No, I prefer climate control to… these extremes. But the stability you brought is quite something. I received a thank you from Aya. Might be the first time I've heard those words in Andromeda," she mused.

"After the Kett and the impressions they've gotten from the exiles, we had work to do to make up for it," I explained.

"Havarl helps. Outpost or not we're gaining. We need another, but we're gaining. It's promising, and the Nexus is taking notice. But the reason for the call, some ceremony. A statement for the archives. Like an outpost flag hanging in the bar, people need a connection to reality on the ground. Address them. What does this mean?" she questioned.
"This is Havarl. There may not be an outpost here for us, but we did find friends, the Angara. Here I saw a piece of who they are. They've welcomed our help here, but Havarl belongs to the Angara. We need to respect that. But they're willing to share the cluster. Heleus isn't ours, it's all of ours. We've got a nice little neighborhood forming."

"Into the books, Pathfinder. Addison out." she ended, her hologram dissipating.

"A moment? Scott?" Jaal asked.

"Sure, what's up?"

"Something's... come up. Something I think you can help with. I didn't tell you much about the Roekaar's founding. I need to explain before I tell you what I need. The Roekaar were founded by a man named Akksul. You heard the name when Taavos was calling for backup. He and I were both students of the Moshae once, in fact he was her best student. But then he was captured by the Kett. He spent a year in forced slave labor, with the scars to prove it. He escaped, and cared for nothing except the extermination of the Kett. There was a woman who escaped with him. She currently lives on Havarl, not far from here, as a recluse. Thaldyr, she may know how to contact Akksul," Jaal explained.

"And then I may be able to convince Akksul we're friendly."

"I admire your courage, but Akksul is dangerous. And he lacks Evfra's pragmatism. He'll make you want to kill him. But... if Heleus is to be your home, you'll need to deal with the Roekaar one way or another," he warned.

"So he wants to be made a martyr. That would only strengthen his cause. More reasons I don't want to kill him. Think we should bring Taavos to speak with Thaldyr?" I asked.

"Couldn't hurt. Likely a smaller squad too. Fewer aliens. Liam or Cora?"

"We'll head back to the Tempest and get armored up. I'll check and see if Lexi is willing to let Liam on a minor ground mission. He's warm and open, all over the idea of building bridges."

"Thank you, I apologize that this is delaying your schedule."

"Schedule is a bit loose right now anyway. Go to the Nexus after this, might see if Eos needs any help, nothing too big. Come on, let's get armored up," I reassured. We returned to the ship and I spoke with Lexi over the comms as I got in my armor. She was willing to clear Liam for a small assignment, as a bit of a test run to see if he was ready again. Liam was more than eager to join us, and upon being briefed, fully approved of what we were trying to do. At Pelaav, Taavos was still staying there for the time and agreed to join us. He appreciated that I wasn't asking him to shoot any Roekaar he might see, but decided to remain armed just in case. Havarl's wildlife can be a pain. Jaal was not kidding when he said that Thaldyr lived nearby, hell it was just around the corner. She may have heard our festivities last night. We entered the small clearing where she lived, noticing crates strewn across the area.

And Kett, with Roekaar bodies scattered around the ground.

"Cover! Now! Do not let them inside at Thaldyr!" I ordered.

"I will have no problem at all shooting Kett," Taavos growled. Fortunately for us there was less than a handful, a pair of Chosen and an Anointed. Taavos and Jaal both used their bio-electrics to short out his shields and a quick double tap from Taavos' rifle put him down, and a burst from my Valkyrie killed one of the Chosen, Liam's SMG finishing off the final one.
"Let's get inside and make sure she's alright. Jaal, Taavos, you two take point, make it a bit more comfortable for her," I suggested. They nodded agreement and began to override the door, which had been locked. It opened and we were treated with a ghastly sight. There was a woman, Thaldyr laying down on a bed in the back of the home. Blue blood was pooling on it and beginning to drip down to the floor. She had slit her own wrists, refusing to go back to the Kett. Wishing death by bleeding out rather than any more time in a labor camp. An understandable decision yes, but damn it we just got here to save her. She saw the door open, grunting in pain and breathing heavily.

"No! Don't- Angara? Did Akksul-aliens! No! Get away! Don't come any closer!" she cried out.

"Thaldyr… we're here to help," Jaal tried to reassure her, moving over with arms raised. I followed behind slowly, I needed to examine her wounds, the least I could do was apply Medi-gel. Even if she has already lost too much blood, the painkillers in it will make things easier.

"Don't touch me!" she growled weakly.

"I just want to help Thaldyr. This is Medi-gel, it will heal those wounds and act as a Painkiller," I replied gently, beginning to apply some. She didn't fight it, but I couldn't tell if it was from allowing it, or from being unable to.

"Those cuts… self-inflicted…" Taavos muttered.

"The Kett… I can't go back, I won't." She grunted in pain again as I began applying it to the other arm.

"Hush now, sister," Jaal calmed. He moved to her side and grabbed her hand between his. "The Kett are dead. They can't take you. We won't let them."


"Akksul," Taavos stated, clarifying for Liam and I.

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

"Thaldyr, please, help the human find him. He doesn't wish to harm Akksul, merely talk with him. It is exactly what he did with me, and he convinced me, especially through his actions," Taavos pleaded.

"I… He…" she began, but her eyes closed and she laid down into her bed, letting out one last sigh as she bled out. Jaal placed her hand back at her side.

"Isharay, brave one," he quietly stated.

"Even in the end, she was devoted to him," I remarked softly. Jaal let out another sigh:

"And Akksul's using that devotion to spread hate. The only other person who could reach him is the Moshae. We should return to the ship. I believe Evfra is currently within a designated resting phase, something he needs dearly, I'll let you know when it's over. May as well begin the trip to your Nexus," Jaal suggested.

"Yeah… sounds like a good idea. Taavos, anything we can help you with for the bodies?" I asked.

"Thank you, Pathfinder, but no. I will ask those at Pelaav to aid me." I nodded farewell and left, eager to leave the grim scene behind me.
I was sat in my room, just finishing getting back into normal clothes when I heard a knock on my door. I had already given Kallo the all clear to return to Nexus, which should take about two hours.

"Come in," I called to whoever was at the door. I was surprised to see Cora enter, looking a bit uneasy.

"Scott, can we talk?" I waved a hand over to the couches and sat down, she sat down on the other end. "It seems like I'm being left out from the missions. I wasn't part of the squad for Havarl, not even when you needed reinforcements, then Liam, who was still recovering, was picked for that mission before we took off. I just want to know why. Do you not think I'm capable or…?" I leaned forward and clasped my hands on my lap as I thought of how best to respond.

"Cora, I certainly don't think you're incapable, I know your record and Dad wouldn't have had you on his team if he thought you were incapable. Why weren't you on Havarl? Well let me explain why I chose who I did. Vetra is suppressive fire, keeping the enemies' heads down so we can set up properly. I brought Jaal because he's Angara and this is the Angara home world. Bit of a no-brainer. I kept Drack on standby as reinforcements because if we needed the help we'd need a heavy hitter, a real tank. A Krogan just fits that bill spot on. I brought Peebee because she's our resident Remnant expert and there was a fuck ton of Remnant tech down there, and I also felt her bubbly and wild personality would help with impressions. But I also wanted to keep the squad small, the size of our squad would certainly have an impact on how they perceived our presence on Havarl. I brought Liam with me for Thaldyr because he's warm and a bit more… damn the risks if we can help someone. I hoped something like that would help convince her to help us, but I also wanted to get Liam a small field test to see if he could be combat ready for or some upcoming ops. Those will need to be all hands-on deck," I explained. Cora let out a sigh, perhaps out of relief.

"Ok, that… does make me feel better. I've heard from the others about you talking with everyone on board, but I only saw you the one time. I… suppose I can understand why, but, do you not want me here?"

"Cora, I'll admit we didn't exactly start off our time on the Tempest on the right foot. But I also received your message. I'm willing to put that behind us and try again. So, I apologize for not coming to talk with you sooner, but it has been a bit busy lately," I ended with a chuckle.

"I suppose you're right. There is one last thing, but it's not about me or anyone on board. Refugees from Ark Leusinia have showed up at Prodromos."

"Really? Well then it's a good thing I was already planning to go there after the Nexus."

"Good to hear, I heard that Sarissa Theris was on the ark, acting as bodyguard for the Asari Pathfinder. She's likely exactly what we need," she stated.

"Why's that?"

"Best Commando strategist alive. She probably has a whole plan for this mess already," she answered.

"Cora, you can't make a good plan without good intel. Frankly that's likely something they don't have right now. Regardless, we already have a pretty solid plan. Help save the Moshae, get into Aya's vault, find the center of the Terraforming Network," I reminded.

"Well, sure, but, the Kett. fighting them," she defended.
"The Angara have been fighting them for eighty years in practically guerilla warfare, they've got intel and plans. Not to say Sarissa couldn't help come up with plans, but fighting the Kett won't be so simple. They aren't native to Heleus and we don't know the size of their territory in Andromeda. Just trying to teach you a lesson that Dad drilled into Sara and I at a young age. To never put all your faith in one person. It's just like the old saying, never put all your eggs in one basket," I explained.

"Hmph, you're starting to sound just like the old man," she remarked.

"Might have something to do with being his son. Now, I should probably go talk with Jaal. Haven't had a chance for a one on one with him," I stated.

"Sure, thanks for the talk," she ended, standing and leaving the room. I followed but she was going to the cargo bay and I to the tech lab. I entered the tech lab to see Jaal kneeled down, tinkering with a piece of Machinery.

"Hey Jaal," I greeted, getting his attention.

"Hello," he replied, bit uncomfortably.

"We haven't had much chance to talk one on one yet. You comfortable in here?" I asked.

"I do, thank you for allowing me to have it. It feels strange to stay with the others. They're-you're-aliens," he explained, bit nervous ending his sentence. I suppose he didn't want to offend. I just chuckled.

"Don't worry about it. Still a bit weird to think about that myself, back home we were so used to thinking of everyone else as aliens. We come here and we can't quite think that way anymore. Maybe we can use the fact we're all aliens to each other as our first bit of common ground hm?" I joked.

"Perhaps then, if we're all… aliens, it's about what kind of alien we are," he remarked. That sounds rather philosophical.

"You had no idea about us, yet you signed on to help us anyway. Why?" I asked.

"Perhaps it had nothing to do with you," he answered.

"Willing to explain?" Jaal paused for a moment, thinking.

"I have several… dissatisfactions that I'd like to leave behind. I'm afraid they're quite personal."

"Then I won't pry. So, you told me you were a student of the Moshae. What did she teach?"

"She is our greatest mind on the Remnant, that is what we were taught. Hm, I was terrible. I quit. Or she threw me out, one of those," he chuckled. "Regardless, we're still very close." There was a pause for a moment as I wondered if that indeed meant what I thought it did.

"So… your Kett rifle. Mod it yourself or got a buddy to?"

"Myself. I already told you: I like to tinker. Get my hands on something and take it apart."

"Certainly a skill we can use. Just one request, please don't take apart my ship," I joked. Jaal chuckled in reply:

"You're right. I signed up/volunteered-for this. It's… exciting. There's something… unique about
you. Uneasy, raw, and yet... somehow profound," he muttered thoughtfully.

"That sounds like a compliment, a rather nice one too, thanks."

"It is. Angara feel deeply. Hmph, we have more trouble hiding our emotions than showing them." Ah, that explains a few quirks I noticed in their behavior.

"As if I didn't have enough on my plate, add deciphering alien psychology," I joked.

"What plate?" Jaal questioned.

"Exactly. Old human idiom. This is going to be interesting," I chuckled.

"Scott, there is... a concern I have," Jaal muttered.

"By all means, voice it."

"That... singularity..." Oh. Shit. Not a fond memory.

"Jaal, I cannot express how deeply I regret using that on the Roekaar. I said I've used the ability before, but only ever on practice dummies and Remnant bots. I... I never considered what it would be like... like that," I muttered, looking down in shame. I remembered the terrified screams of the Roekaar and their struggle to escape. "I promise, from the bottom of my heart, that I will NEVER use Singularity on any living thing ever again. That isn't something I want to see again."

"I... believe you. It was horrible to watch, but I believe you feel the same. We should go call Evfra, he should be available now," Jaal suggested, giving us an escape route from that darker end to our talk. I walked up to the meeting room, followed by Jaal, and placed a vid-call with Evfra. A hologram appeared of five dots lighting up and dimming one after the other as the call pended. A moment later, that hologram was replaced by one of Evfra himself.


"Commander."

"Jaal's been keeping me updated on your 'adventures,' your 'good deeds' on our behalf," he began, suspicion and sarcasm as he described my actions

"And I'm sure you received that update from Kiiran Dals. The vault on Havarl is fully online, the Sages of Mithrava are no longer isolated, and we made friends with a now ex-Roekaar, Initiative and Angara scientists are working together, and we all had a few drinks together before heading to bed. All in all, a successful day," I stated.

"Yes, I would have preferred it if Dals spoke to me before extending that invitation, but it's a bit late for that," Evfra muttered. "But... you went out of your way to free that science team. You went out of your way to save our home world. Hmph, and you convinced a Roekaar of all things that you aren't as bad as the Kett. Acts both selfless and impressive. Regardless, your true motive is clear: explore Aya's vault. Jaal says you want to help find the Moshae. Why should I let you?" he questioned. I was surprised at the compliments but this was the tipping point. I had to convince him here and now. Failure would make any future attempts that much harder.

"You're right, I do want into Aya's vault, but it just so happened I want to help as well. Why I did everything I did on Havarl. Why I pleaded with Taavos to help us and not hold him at gunpoint, demanding he help us. Where the Nexus spent over a year with their thumbs up their asses as everything went wrong and people starved. I show up, get the best ship the Nexus has left after
hitting the Scourge, I get people who are the best at what they do, and less than a day later I'm on Eos activating a Remnant vault, making the planet live, and fighting Kett the whole way through. The next day, we get ambushed by the Kett Archon himself and escape. I make first contact with the Angara, and then head off to their home world and find the missing third Monolith. Evfra, you want my help finding the Moshae because of this: I get shit done. And I have a record to back it up," I stated confidently.

"A bold statement. A little arrogant. Hmph, like me. Still, I'll reserve judgement for now. We've managed to trace the Moshae to a special Kett facility on Voeld," Evfra explained.

"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 outstrips the speed of our current processors." After hearing Evfra, SAM spoke up on our private channel.

"Pathfinder, adding my processor to their program would no doubt make the difference."

"And I have just the solution. Respectfully, this time you need it," I began. Evfra began to speak but I continued. "Let me explain. Fully. My AI. With SAM's processing power I can guarantee that shield breach. The Kett tech can adapt? I doubt it can adapt faster than a true AI. And I can't just give you his programming and wish you luck. Not because of security reasons, but because he's connected with an implant in my head. I need to be there to get SAM to connect to it," I explained. "Even if I could hand off a piece of code, I'd still want to be there." Evfra let out a small sigh.

"It was risky for you to be honest about your AI-Storms, it was risky for you to be honest about your biotics. Honesty makes you different from the Kett. Alright. You're welcome on the mission. Send me what information you can about you and your crew's gear and capabilities. I'll work with my tacticians to plan the operation. You'll still have command of your own people but it will help the planning to know and understand," Evfra explained.

"I'll have SAM transmit evaluations and overviews."

"Good, I'll be waiting. When we're ready I'll contact you again. You'll meet with a team at our main base at Voeld, which you already have the coordinates for. Stay strong and clear Pathfinder. Goodbye" Wow he seems to be warming up a bit. I turned to Jaal as Evfra's hologram disappeared.

"That went well," I stated.

"Hmph, that it did. I'm not sure what I'm more impressed by. Saving our Home world, or winning Evfra's trust and respect so quickly," Jaal chuckled. "He may even start to like you at this rate."

"I'll make drinking buddies with him yet, just you wait and see," I chuckled. "Now, just a small warning for the Nexus. You are going to stand out, people will be staring at you in wonder, surprise, etc. You'll be the first Angara to set foot on the Nexus. Leadership may ask to meet with you because of it. There's a cultural center near our docking bay you can go to and learn more about our species, but they may ask questions about the Angara. You don't want to do that, talk with Vetra, she can get you a map and a list of hangouts to try out. You want to buddy around with someone from the crew, I'd do it but I have business to take care of. Ask Peebee or Liam," I suggested.

"I will keep this in mind. Thank you, Scott."

"Anytime Jaal, should be there in about an hour." Wondering what else to do with my time, I made
my way to the cargo bay to see what the others were doing. I opened the door and stumbled across Peebee. Might as well chat.

"Oh, hey Scott."

"Hey Peebee, anything going on?"

"Not really, thought I'd go back to my pod for some work is all," she answered.

"Got any new insights from our time on Havarl and Aya?"

"To put it mildly. Aya and Havarl both are wonders of the cluster, and the Angara are just intriguing. Can't wait to go back. I want to delve and explore and who knows what else."

"We'll be going back, don't worry. And you can do whatever so long as the Angara approve. Explore to your hearts content," I encouraged.

"I plan to. I'm already having fun learning what makes Jaal tick. It's good that we have an Angara with us. Asari can mate with any and all Milky Way species, regardless of sex, you know that. Hell, my dad's an Elcor of all things. I might be wondering if that transcends galactic boundaries. Ha, I sure as hell ain't looking to reproduce any time soon, but he seems like a nice guy. Thoughts?" Well, well, well, seems there might be love in the air. Guess we need to fix the filters before it spreads.

"He is a good guy, go for it if you want. Want me to requisition some scented candles? Maybe some roses? Ooh maybe a band playing some slow jazz?" I joked.

"Pfft, you ass," Peebee laughed.

"Jokes aside, that's what you want, I encourage you to try. My only warning is that if it doesn't work out, that the two of you can still work together, that's it. Oh, and I suppose the only other rule would be no sex in the showers or anywhere that isn't either of your rooms," I teased.

"Please, give a girl some credit, Scott," she chuckled, moving by to get to her room. Still chuckling to myself, I saw Gil working in the engine room, guess I'd go say hi to him as well.

"Ah! Gotcha!" he muttered to himself as he worked, as I entered the engine room.

"Should I have Lexi do a psych review?" I teased.

"Might not be the worst idea. I've had people tell me that I'm crazy my whole life," he chuckled. "Just trying to deal with some lingering scourge issues is all. That Archon fella tried to warn you not to joyride into it but you just couldn't resist, could you? Just pranced right in… An act first, think later move. I respect that. Well, I guess I resemble it. Speaking of which, you play poker?"

"I had this buddy back in the Alliance who tried to teach me, but that was ages ago. Hm, literally. I think I got the hang of it before we left but I never had a real game of it," I answered.

"Used to think it was my calling. Turns out I'm just good at it. We should play sometime. Word of warning, I've never lost."

"Wow, willing to put your streak on the line for a rookie? So bold of you," I teased.

"It's a risk I'm willing to take. I've already played a bit with everyone but Jaal so far. Mostly just testing them out. Though now the rest of them have banded together to practice together to de-
throne the king. So I don't think I'll be needing a raise any time soon," he laughed.

"Wow, that is determined of them. I may need to join them."

"I'll welcome the challenge. Just let me know when you want to have a go while we're ported up somewhere. I will be more than happy to get a few extra credits," he mocked.

"Might not be today, but you can expect a challenge coming your way, I promise you that. I'll let you get back to work, see ya later Gil," I ended, walking back into the cargo bay. I went downstairs to see the Turians talking amongst themselves and the Pyjak watching them curiously. You know what? Screw it, I've got a name for him. Shit-head. His mouth looks like an asshole, so it works. Chuckling to myself, I made my way to crew quarters to see if anyone was lounging in there. I entered to see Drack leaning against the corner with the coffee machine and Vetra sitting at a terminal.

"What's your take on the Angara old man?" she asked him.

"Strong, honorable, survivors. Been awhile since I encountered a new, friendly species. Last time was the Humans," he answered.

"I wasn't born just yet. Where were you during first contact with them?" she asked.

"Out in the Traverse working with another Merc group. Still heard the news that the Turians were butting heads with some new guys. And I was impressed that they managed to kick Turian ass a few times. I think you know which side I was on. Let's see I think I remember my exact words when I learned about them. They're bold for being so squishy. Do they know they're mostly water?"

"Harsh, don't let Scott hear that one," she remarked, I think she knew I had entered though.

"Seventy percent to be precise. And yet we still kicked Turian ass, a Human saved the Citadel from the Geth, and now there's this. I think we've done well for ourselves," I chuckled.

"Credit where it's due kid, credit where it's due," Drack chuckled in reply.

"So, what are you two up to?"

"Just coordinating with a few contacts on the Nexus and... elsewhere. Arranging for supplies and some trading is all. Preparing for some new trade deals with the Angara we may have soon," Vetra answered.

"I'm just talking with her. Waiting to hit the Nexus," Drack answered.

"Sounds good. Any of those supplies going to be Nomad upgrades?" I asked.

"Oh don't you worry about that. Gil pitched in, so I was able to secure everything we'd need to make the Nomad in the best shape it can be. We're gonna have a lot of fun in that thing. Aside from that the R&D teams on the Nexus say they have a few new toys for you to test run," she mentioned.

"I like the sound of that. Well, I won't keep you. We should be at the Nexus soon and Jaal will probably want to watch our approach so I'll bring him up there. I'll see you two around," I ended as they nodded a farewell. "SAM, ETA to the Nexus?"

"Less than five minutes Pathfinder," was the cool reply.
"Let Jaal know that we're about to approach, if he wants to watch have him meet me on the bridge," I ordered, climbing the ladder up to the bridge. A moment later, Jaal joined as we exited FTL, the Nexus and the planet it orbited appearing not far ahead.

"Well, it seems the honor falls to me. Welcome Jaal, to the Nexus."
Man of the People

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The crew and I stepped out into the commons area of the docking bay. Avitus and his people packing up before leaving. I was at the front with Jaal beside me. There were civvies talking and walking and going about their business, but a few were watching to see the crew and I step out, knowing that the Tempest is mine. Their eyes widened in surprise as they noticed Jaal, staring at him. This led to a chain reaction of people who weren't watching wondering what everyone was staring at until seemingly everyone in the docking bay had their eyes on the Newcomer.

"I think they've noticed you," I loudly and sarcastically whispered to him. It drew a few chuckles from the crew but I could tell that Jaal was feeling a bit nervous, better get this under control, make it easier for him. "Alright everyone, listen up," I called out. They shifted their eyes to me but I could still see them glancing back to Jaal every now and then. "This is my new crewmate, and his name is Jaal. He is of the Angara, no doubt you've heard of them by now as I made first contact yesterday. I'm sure you're all very curious about his people, but please, Jaal is a soldier, and he's still getting used to just being on my crew. Please, save your questions, and your stares, for the Angara delegates if we ever get them. Let's try to make his visit a pleasant one. Please, return to your business," I requested. Slowly but surely, the crowd started to disperse, and to force their eyes off Jaal.

"Thank you, Scott. I'm a bit surprised at how well you handled that," Jaal remarked.

"I could hardly yell at them for being curious, could I? And I could hardly just let them make you uncomfortable like that. Now, the Cultural center is just ahead, in that building there. I've already messaged the Liaison working there. She won't disturb you, and will help you find whatever you want to know about our races. You don't have to go there, but it's an option," I explained.

"I believe I shall do that. I'm intrigued about your peoples, and I wouldn't mind a quiet place," he stated.

"Then go sate your curiosity. Any problems, just call or send a message, I'll come sort it out." Jaal nodded and made his way there. Peebee had ran off, saying she was going to her apartment to do some work as the rest of us made our way to the trams. But we stopped when we heard disgruntled chanting. Like a slogan for a protest. I looked to see where the noises were coming from, and sure enough, there was a large crowd of people being kept at bay by Militia. No violence, and the Militia were merely standing watch, but it was a protest. Given the authority I wield, I should probably investigate.

"Make them hear! Make them know! Make them lead! Or make them go!" an Asari woman cried out. I heard the Militia troops muttering to themselves. This isn't something they wanted to be doing. I started to brush past them and stood in front of the crowd. They continued chanting their slogans as I took my place in front of them.

"Scuse me, everyone. Mind quieting down for just a moment? I want to know what this is all about. You want something, tell me what it is," I yelled out. To my surprise and pleasure, they did in fact quiet down. It also occurred to me that this protest was in a wing of Nexus hydroponics, oxygen farms essentially. No doubt that's making leadership nervous. The Asari woman stepped forward to speak with me, but a Krogan male behind her spoke up first.

"That's your 'new galaxy!' Making speeches about some fresh start while your kids stay frozen!"
"Alright, never mind, I think I know what this is about. You want your families woken up, correct?"

"We've waited months for our families to come out of stasis. They should have gone to your outpost," the Asari woman spoke up as she had intended.

"And because you thought research was so important, military personnel got bumped down the list! Like my clan brothers!" the Krogan accused.

"Alright, hold on a moment. Please, I ask that you hear me out FULLY, before you speak. So, first off, yes, I did dedicate Prodromos to science and discovery, sends a message about our intentions here. With first contact with the Angara, a scientific outpost is a prettier picture than military. Second, I did still order the wake up of a block of Military personnel to support Prodromos and the Militia. I apologize that your clan brothers weren't among them, but I only ordered the kind of personnel I wanted awake. Third, it's a hard truth but we simply can't wake everyone up from stasis, we just can't support that," I explained. But I wasn't done yet. Still that drew some growls and angered murmurs from the crowd. "HOWEVER, I do believe that there is something we can work out. I won't explain the whole process, but suffice it to know that odds are I'd be able to wake up a block or even two of specialists by now. I'll speak with leadership about making one of those blocks a civilian block. We'll work out a process, I promise you," I finished.

"Fourteen months of promises. It's time for results," the Krogan growled.

"We tried petitioning Addison. She ignored us. Screw her," a Turian woman shouted.

"And I'm not surprised in the slightest. Don't mistake that for approval though. She needed to at least speak with you about it," I stated.

"I… I just want my mother back. That's all any of us want. Please," a young man with orange hair muttered. His voice was full of both sadness and fear, his face in a perpetual frown. I walked up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I know exactly how you feel. You will see her again, soon. Maybe even today," I tried to reassure. His face lit up and he looked at me, bright eyed.

"You… you really mean that?"

"I do. I'll go to ops and speak with leadership right away. You," I pointed at the Asari woman. "You seem to be one of the ringleaders here. Why don't you come with me? Plead your case directly to them?"

"I would like that very much. Name's Teresh, by the way," she answered.

"Good. Now," I turned back to face the young man with orange hair. "Why don't you come with us too? Not sure about involving you but why don't you come to see the results?" I suggested.

"Y-Yes! Of course! Name's Rhys!" he practically cheered.

"In the meantime, would you all disperse? Wait to hear the results? I'm sure people are nervous about a protest near Hydroponics. Leadership may even be a bit more receptive now if they see you're reasonable and backed off to await results," I suggested to the crowd. The crowd didn't budge, but Teresh turned to face them.

"For now, I agree. But if leadership doesn't listen yet again, we come back, right away. And we don't leave." At that, the crowd began to disperse. The militia looked surprised, but also grateful.
"Call ahead to Kandros. Ask him to set up a meeting with the rest of the leadership," I ordered. A Turian man, likely the sergeant of the group nodded and keyed his comms to make the call. I walked with Rhys and Teresh towards the tram, passing by my squad.

"Gotta admit Scott, I'm a bit impressed," Cora remarked.

"Kid's got a way with words and guns. I don't often see that combination," Drack chuckled. Vetra dramatically fake coughed to get his attention, as if he was ignoring her, he just turned to look and continued chuckling.

"While I appreciate the compliments, unless you have business in ops I'd rather you just wait for the next one. This is urgent," I asked the crew. They understood and Drack was the only one to join us, though he understood he wouldn't get to talk with Kesh just yet. When we arrived, Kandros was waiting just outside of the tram.

"Meeting's been set up in Tann's office. Come on. Will they be joining us?" Kandros asked.

"Only Teresh for the meeting itself. Rhys will be waiting and Drack will just be waiting to see Kesh afterwards," I answered.

"Hey, maybe I'm here to have a friendly chat with Tann," Drack joked.

"It hurt you to say that," I remarked.

"It did. It really did," Drack laughed. Kandros led us towards Tann's office in the Pathfinder lounge, Rhys waiting outside, and Drack waiting in Kesh's office. The others turned to look at us as we joined them.

"Ryder, Kandros. So, I hear protesters have seized Hydroponics?" Tann asked.

"Cut it with the dramatics Tann, a siege implies a riot, they weren't rioting. This is Teresh, she's one of the leaders, and I brought her along to plead her case. But before we begin. Addison, I heard that these protestors petitioned you, yet you ignored them. Is this true?" I asked.

"I did receive a petition, yes. And I immediately discarded it because we simply don't have the resources," she answered. I let out a sigh and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Addison, allow me to put this very clearly. The fuck were you thinking?! You have a petition, signed by who knows how many people, and you just fucking throw it in the goddamn trash bin? Not even a goddamn statement? No wonder there was a fucking mutiny! And you didn't learn from that?!" I yelled. She glared in me as she began to argue:

"Ryder-" I cut her off.

"No. To everyone I've met out here I've asked them to call me Scott, not Pathfinder. But you? No, to you it's Pathfinder. For fucks sake, Tann, Addison, you're the fucking leadership! LEAD THEM! Kesh, I know you've had your hands full keeping the station intact, and this isn't exactly your department anyway. Kandros, you've got your hands full with the Militia. But dammit you all need to speak with the people, talk with them, LISTEN TO THEM! If you keep pissing these people off, there will be another mutiny, and I'm not quite sure they'll fail again. It's not like you have Krogan to make a deal with anymore." I let out another sigh. "Alright, enough of that. Let's all LISTEN, to what Teresh has to say, shall we?" Teresh looked at me in surprise, not expecting an outburst like that, but she recovered and stepped forward.

"Our request is simple. We want our families back. Eos disrupted that schedule. Dozens of people
have been scattered across colony blocks, and we're tired of waiting, we want this fixed now," she stated.

"The realities of our position are-" Tann began his political bullshit.

"We can't wake up those families. We don't have the resources, or the space," Kesh argued, cutting Tann off.

"Then here comes a little thing called compromise. Addison, what's the latest AVP status? Are there more pod blocks I can wake up?" I asked.

"Yes, we've been awaiting your input for two total blocks to wake up," Addison answered.

"Then we have our solution. Right there, plain as day. I suggest we take one of those blocks, and instead of specialists, we wake up a number of family members to those already awake equal to the number of specialists that would have been woken up. It's not like they'll be useless, they can work with Addison or Tann for logistics, maybe help Kesh's engineers," I suggested.

"Or volunteer to help in the Militia…" Kandros continued, seeing the benefits.

"And it keeps the people happy. Push comes to shove and they can go to Eos, be farmers for a small while. I suggest we keep a bit of a pattern with this as well. For every two blocks of specialists I wake up, the next must be a block's worth of family," I stated.

"Hm. I'll admit, at first I expected to hate this meeting and that either way we'd regret the decision. But now? I think this can work Pathfinder," Kandros remarked.

"Kandros, Kesh, no, to you it's Scott," I told them, ignoring Addison's glare.

"Yes, I believe we can make this work. I'll support it," Kesh stated.

"Well it's not like I have much choice is it…" Addison muttered.

"Fine, wake them up. But when they keep asking for more and more family members, and we all starve, you will only have yourself to blame," Tann warned.

"Teresh, does this work for you?" I turned to ask her.

"Y-Why yes it does Pathfinder. The fact alone that we can expect to see our families so soon, even from those who won't get that lucky today, will help tremendously. Thank you," she answered.

"Then I suppose I won't be burdened with the guilt of everyone starving because we kept just bending over backwards to every little thing someone on the station wants regardless of the consequences hmm? Ah, and what I said to Kandros and Kesh goes to you too, just Scott," I remarked. Mocking Tann and poking Addison with a stick.

"I highly doubt that Scott," she chuckled. I noticed a grin from Kesh and Kandros' mandibles flaring oh so slightly, as if he was suppressing laughter himself.

"That didn't take long. So? What happened?" he asked.

"Follow me Rhys," I smiled, leading him and Teresh up. I walked up to the console, nodding to
Brecka as I approached. I keyed the console to send the override command. "What's your mother's name Rhys?"

"Last name Kozlov, first name Samantha. Does-does this mean..." he began. I keyed her name to be included amongst many of the re-arranged civilians.

"That it does Rhys," I smiled.

"I-I thought we'd just get more excuses. Before going into stasis, she was so afraid she'd wake up and be stuck, frozen inside. I know that's not how it works, but I just wanted her out. So, I could know," he explained.

"I know how you feel Rhys. My family has suffered too," I remarked.

"Thank you, Scott. You might be just the thing the Nexus needed. Maybe you will be able to bring the exiles back, Goddess knows many of us had family members exiled too," Teresh stated.

"Then I hope I don't disappoint. Now, Rhys, don't you have a mother to go see? Teresh, I assume you have someone to see too," I suggested. Rhys immediately raced off and Teresh checked the list of who was waking up, sighing in relief and immediately following him. I just stood there, smiling. That one felt good. I told Brecka to wake up a block of Merchants/economists, gotta prepare for the upcoming trade, but I had business still. I had a Sister to see.

---

**Sara Ryder**

I can hear them. The doctors, moving about, treating their patients, sometimes running a check-up on me. I can feel the cushions of the bed I lay on. I can feel when they prick me for a blood test, when they stab my arm with another needle. I can feel it all, I can hear it all. But my eyes are shut, I can't move anything. I can't speak, I can't hear, I'm practically frozen here. Sometimes I'm able to 'sleep' blackout, and 'wake up' later with a whole new set of patients and doctors as they change shifts. Before Scott came to see me yesterday, before linking with my implant, I was in some kind of... trance. Delirious, no real understanding of what was going on, but most of the time just blacked out. Back then I couldn't feel or hear anything. I just thought it was a dream. But my brother came, used SAM to link us, and that brought me back. Didn't wake me up, but I have a hard time thinking that this is anything less than a big step. I may be bored as all hell, while he's out there adventuring, but I'll always be thankful that he found me and brought me back.

Even when he told me about dad. One of the last ways you'd ever want to hear that your dad died is being in a coma and told he died while you were on a bed, while he was worried sick about you. But at least I know that he died to save Scott. Not some stray bullet, not from a fall. This... confirmed what we always knew about him. I just wish I could have said goodbye. It wasn't great to hear that the golden worlds weren't working out, but I can't believe what Scott told me, about that terraforming network, him being Pathfinder now. I'm proud of my brother. Though I'll never tell him that, not that he's gloated about being the big brother now. That's over twenty years of payback coming my way and I'm not looking forward to it.

"Hey Harry, we good for another session?" That's Scott's voice, guess he's back from his mission.

"Sure, I'll get SAM keyed in and prepare for the link. Just a moment," the doc answered.

"This... is going to be weird, isn't it?" I heard an unfamiliar voice ask. Female, the harmonics being distinctly Turian. Must be that Vetra he mentioned. A moment later, I felt a small jolt in the back of my head and I felt... a presence. SAM. I felt the same thing last time, but it's still just
"Connection established. You may speak," SAM stated.

"Hey Sara, how ya doing in there?" Scott asked.

"Could be better. Could be awake and walking around for one. Ever since you came to see me the other day I've been… awake in here. I can hear and feel everything, even smell. But I just… can't move or speak or see anything. Is that a good sign Doc?" I asked.

"I… can't be sure. This, talking with someone in a coma, is a whole new treatment. While it certainly isn't a bad sign, I have no idea if it will have an impact on when you wake up," he answered.

"Well, it sure helps me a lot," Scott remarked.

"You know I heard you crying and felt you grab my hand after our first talk, right? I was trying to get to sleep but there you were, just bawling your eyes out," I teased. I heard the Turian woman chuckle a bit.

"Oh ha ha ha, very funny Sara. For what it's worth, those were happy tears because I was concerned about you. But if you're going to be like that, well maybe I'll just stop visiting," he threatened playfully.

"I'd say 'all right you win,' but I know you Scott. You'd never be able to stop the visits. So, how did your mission go? With the terraforming network?" I asked. Still felt weird having these conversations just by thinking. Whatever I thought was voiced through SAM's speakers. I should choose my thoughts carefully.

"It took quite an unexpected turn. After being ambushed by the Kett on our way to the coordinates, hostile aliens native to Andromeda, but not Heleus, we escaped and had to make an emergency landing, fortunately the same planet the coordinates were leading us to. To our surprise, we got flanked by shuttles, not Kett, and not Initiative. They led us to a landing pad and I spoke with some of their leaders. We've made first contact with the Angara. Natives to Heleus, and they've been fighting the Kett for eighty years. We have allies, Sara!" he explained.

"Wow… that's… something else. So, you mean to tell me, that they didn't shoot you on sight with a face like yours?" I joked. The Turian woman snorted and Scott laughed.

"On the contrary, they were oh so enamored by my godly looks and physique, my facial hair in particular. It was as if I was out of this world to them." I laughed.

"That was a shit pun and you know it. You should feel bad. And god that facial hair, shave it for fucks sake!" I laughed.

"I never will and you know it. So, anyways, understandably the Angara are a bit… cautious with aliens now thanks to the Kett. So I needed to earn their trust so I could get to that active vault. And damn was that Vault working well. Aya, the name of the planet, is one of the most beautiful things I've seen. Waterfalls, tropical plants, reminded me of Hawaii or back home. So, we picked up an Angara named Jaal for our crew and went to their home world, Havarl to help, try to gain their trust. Long story short, we activated the vault on their planet and saved it from dying. Made friends with the Angara there, and now Initiative scientists were invited to stay alongside them at their research outpost. You should have seen Havarl too. So many bioluminescent plants, and the place was like a rainforest, it was beautiful like Aya. Wait wait wait, I think I know a way for you to see
it, actually,” Scott stated. "SAM, can you send images into Sara's implant? Allow her to see those images?"

"I believe I can. A moment…” a flash of white appeared in my vision.

"I just saw a flash of white! It worked!” I exclaimed through my thoughts.

"Excellent! Give her a slide show of Aya, Havarl, and the Angara,” Scott ordered. Sure enough, that was exactly what I saw, just as Scott described it. The worlds were beautiful, and the Angara looked odd, but interesting.

"This… this is amazing! It works! So, who's the woman here? I know you said you'd bring some of your crew, and I've heard her laugh, even ask if this whole thing was going to be weird.”

"Name's Vetra. Vetra Nyx. Good to meet you Sara,” she introduced.

"Vetra huh? So you're the one who not only got Scott a Valkyrie, but the vintage heat sink too? I know that won you a lot of points in his book," I chuckled. SAM flashed an image of Vetra through my implant. If the name and voice didn't give it away, the image confirmed it. Turian. Pretty, too, especially with those Emerald green eyes.

"Heh, yeah that was me. Scott's certainly been enjoying his new toys and putting them to good use. Cost me a few favors but with what we're doing out here it's just earning me more and more,” she remarked.

"Scott? Would you leave us be for a moment? Girl talk," I asked. Granted like this it's more like telling.

"You do know I could just say I left but not move an inch, right?” he teased.

"Scott, listen to your sister, go,” Vetra told him.

"Alright alright, fine. But don't think I don't know exactly what it is you two will be talking about. You're giving her ammo," he chuckled.

"Shoo!” I told him. I heard him walk away, muttering to himself.

"Let's make this quick before he comes back. You two must be friends, so if I know my brother that means you two are joking around, teasing each other, right?” I asked.

"Seems both of you got it in one. Yeah, we're joking around, giving each other shit, that kind of thing. But I'm doing fine with the ammo I got," Vetra answered.

"Nyx, listen. Help me out here. I was the oldest twin of the two of us. Beat him by a minute. Thing is, the damn docs got him out of the pod first and I wasn't out of mine until well after a minute. When he talked to me the other day, he ensured I knew exactly that. I have over twenty years of me reminding him that I was the older sibling coming back to bite me in the ass, and I can't fight back like this. Help me out here," I explained.

"Ouch, alright, I'll help. Spirits know what I'd do if my sister suddenly became the older one,” she muttered.

"Then you understand how this is for me. So, first off, little does he know but my dad and I brought a long a fuck ton of his baby pictures and other pics of all kinds of embarrassing stuff. Thing is, I can't get to those like this, but also, I kind of want to be there when those come back to
haunt him. So let's get to the stuff you can use. Let's see… YES! PERFECT! Ok, so, when we were teenagers living on the citadel, going through puberty and everything. Scott, being overwhelmed with hormones, tried to sneak in to the Asari Consort's chambers. Somehow, he crawled into some vents, and was getting ready to have a bit of a wank as the consort did her thing, when some kind of rodent turned the corner of the vents and jumped on him! Somehow, he didn't scream but did bang around the vents a bit as he tried to get it off him, dick out and everything, got scratches and bits on his face and arms! He got out of the vents, tried to sneak back home without anyone noticing the scratches. Dad caught him, and did not buy the bullshit excuse he gave. Dad gave him the look and made him tell the whole story. In front of mom, while I just overheard it from the other room, eavesdropping. He regrets and hates thinking about it with every fiber of his being. This kind of ammo I wouldn't normally give away, but desperate times call for desperate measures," I remarked. Vetra broke out in laughter.

"You're telling me, that Scott snuck into the Persidium vents, and tried to jerk off to that Asari prostitute, and got jumped by a damn rodent!?” she exclaimed through her laughter. "That may be one of the greatest stories I've ever heard!"

"The only mercy I want you to give him is to not tell the rest of the crew, regardless of what he tries to retaliate with. I do feel bad for him, but just enough for that mercy," I chuckled.

"I promise Sara. Should we bring him back?" Vetra suggested.

"Sure, give it a test run." Vetra chuckled as I heard her walk away to bring Scott back. A moment later I heard the two approach again.

"So, just what kind of ammo did you give her?" Scott asked. He didn't sound nervous at all. Boy is that about to change.

"Oh nothing, she just told me this story about some guy jacking off to a rat in some vents. And that those vents just happened to be over the chambers of the Asari consort," Vetra remarked offhandedly.

"Wha-. Oh. Oh no. You- You didn't. Sara, you didn't. Not that, anything but that," he pleaded.

"You wanted to be the big brother," I teased. Vetra just burst into laughter again.

"Alright. I see how it is. Sara, Vetra. This is fucking war. You want to play rough? I'll play rough," he threatened, but not angrily. He wasn't pleased that I told someone about that story, but he wouldn't get pissy at me about it. He let out a sigh. "Alright sis, even though you just reminded me and told someone of one of my deepest and darkest regrets, I wish I could stay and talk more, but we need to get ready to head off to Eos, take care of a few things. Love you Sara, and I miss you," he stated warmly, grabbing my shoulder.

"It was good meeting you Sara, good talking with you too. Anything you want for your wake-up party, anything to make you more comfortable while you're here, just find a way to let me know," Vetra remarked.

"Good to meet you too Vetra, and thanks. Love you too bro, have fun out there."

"I plan on it. Alright SAM, cut the connection," Scott ordered and the AI's presence withdrew from my head. I suddenly felt very tired.

"Get well soon sis. You little shit," he muttered.

I fell asleep chuckling.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I walked into SAM node, knowing that another memory had been unlocked from SAM's memory array. Not sure what had triggered it, maybe first contact, maybe success on Havarl, maybe even taking charge with the leadership. Hard to know with Dad.

"Play it SAM," I ordered.

"This memory is from when your parents returned to Earth, after the diagnosis," SAM informed. My vision faded to black, replaced with Dad's workshop back home, and Mom standing in front of him, arms crossed. There were crates, lights, and monitors strewn across the workshop, he spent more time working than organizing, and it certainly showed.

"It's simple! We take SAM..." Dad began.

"Who?" Mom asked. Dad looked down at his desk to reveal a small stand with a hologram of the ball like shape SAM uses.

"I named the AI. Simulated Adaptive Matrix. SAM. We use your research and interface SAM with an implant," Dad explained.

"Alec, my work on biotic implants was yielding results, but this? This is something else, I don't know," she muttered.

"What did the doctor say?" Dad questioned. Mom let out a sigh, she knew Dad knew the answer.

"Alec..."

"What did he say?" he pushed.

"He said... it's getting worse."

"There's your answer. This will work. SAM can fix you."

"Alec I'm not some war you have to win... you're not an N7 anymore," she argued. She was trying to prepare him. She stepped closer and placed a hand on his shoulder, looking into his eyes.

"That doesn't mean-" Dad began.

"They kicked you out of the Alliance for this!"

"We're talking about your life!" Dad argued. She looked down for a moment, then put on a gentler look for Dad.

"Alec, did you ever consider that maybe it's my time to go? I'm human... we die. It happens," she tried to comfort. Dad was looking around the room as she said that, refusing to face it. Literally and figuratively.

"Ellen..." Dad began, looking down at her other hand and taking it within his. "Losing you is not an option. I won't let the kids lose their mother. God knows they never had a father," he muttered.

"Then give them one," Mom told him. Dad let out a sigh:

"They'd just ask for a refund." I saw the look in mom's eyes, she didn't believe that, but she knew dad did, and that hurt her a bit. That dad felt that way about himself with us.
"So, can this SAM talk yet?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Hello Ellen. Why did the tree go to the dentist?" SAM asked. "To get a root canal." So, the puns reach back that far eh? Good to know. Mom let out a chuckle and Dad looked back up at her.

"Humor algorithms. Can't seem to get the hang of it," Dad shrugged.

"Or maybe it's the guy teaching him?" Mom teased. The memory faded to black and my vision returned to normal, SAM node. I didn't want it to end yet. It was as if Mom was right there in front of me. I wanted more time.

"That felt so real. Mom was right there, alive…" I muttered.

"It was the first time I met Ellen. My education on Human mortality began that day. Your mother seemed prepared to die," SAM remarked.

"Dad wasn't. Hell, none of us ever were. How could anyone? Mom was just trying to prepare him."

"Yet all organic life one day expires."

"True, but when it's someone you love, someone you care for more than anything else, it just isn't that simple," I explained.

"I'm beginning to understand where your father's resolve came from. There are more private audio logs available," SAM informed.

"Can you send them to the Tempest? I may go over them in my quarters on our way to Eos."

"Of course, they will be waiting." I left SAM node and began making my way towards the docking bay. We'd be done here soon, but the scientists there wanted to see me as well. As I entered the tram, my omni-tool was pinged by a message.

Ryder,

Thanks for the help on Havarl and for getting my people and I off world. We've all packed up our things and left the Tempest, the others getting checked in for residence, work, and everything else they'd need. I spoke with Kandros and he gave me a shuttle I can use to follow the leads we have on Natanus. I'll contact you if I find anything, and don't forget to do the same. I want to be there when we find Macen, I am his second after all. Thanks again, and good luck.

Avitus Rix.

I was pleased to hear that everything seemed to be going smoothly for the Turians we found, and I'll admit I wasn't that surprised to learn that Avitus was wasting no time at all searching for Natanus and Macen. A few minutes later the Tram stopped and I got off, heading up to the science lab.

"Herik, Aridana, Lucan, I hear you guys have something for me?" I asked, getting their attention.

"Ah, yes, of course. Follow me," Herik requested, he and Lucan led me out of the room while Aridana continued her work. We crossed the hall into an adjacent room, perhaps a storage or testing room. They took what appeared to be an oddly shaped block made with Rem-tech from a table, and then it unfolded, forming the shape of a gun, a rifle.

"This here is what we call the Sweeper. It's a triple burst rifle made from a mix of Rem-tech and
Initiative tech. It fires energy rounds like the Remnant do, and, here's the best part, it runs just like the old heat sinks, but unlike our guns, there isn't an ammo block inside to eventually run out. This here is pure energy, and it recharges itself from the heat it generates," Lucan explained. I stood there in awe staring at this thing of beauty.

"So, you're telling me, you've made an energy weapon. And not only that, you made it in the style that is, by far, my absolute favorite? How the hell did you know?!" I asked incredulously.

"Nyx helped us along in that field. We always planned to make you some new toys with the data and materials you've been handing us, just didn't know how we should make them. We're still in the process of making other weapons of other classes, but we worked on this first. Should even have some armor out soon," Lucan answered.

"Where can I test this out?" I asked, as happy as a kid on Christmas.

"In here, why we kept it in here for you. See those targets on the wall? We've made it so that it's safe to shoot there. Might leave some scorch marks, but that's what this place is for," Herik answered. I took aim, using the gun's iron style sights to line up the shot, and pulled the trigger. The rounds left with a satisfying sound, a kind of rapid thuk-thuk-thuk. The rounds went exactly where I hoped, and being a more energy based weapon, the recoil was minor.

"Got a scope?" I asked.

"That we do. Unfortunately given the style of the weapon it's incompatible with almost every mod we have, but we made some special. Not that complicated, and if you want we'll keep working on making mods that should boost the charge capacity before it over-heats," Lucan explained as he handed me a scope and showed me how to fit it properly.

"Would never turn that down," I started, testing the weapon once more with the scope.

"There is one more thing. So, the rounds are energy, that means they're hot as hell, hotter than an incendiary mod on our weapons would be. But we did manage to develop a shield disruptor that was compatible from more of that Rem-tech you've gotten us. Essentially, it acts just like our disruptor ammo. A kind of phasic envelope that screws with kinetic shields and biotic barriers. It won't bring them down instantly, but it will weaken them, just not as much as a dedicated tech attack," Lucan explained.

"I think I just found my new favorite toy! You guys need anything from me? Well just say the word," I exclaimed.

"More outposts and the materials we get from them is enough Ryder, thanks," Herik answered. "Oh, and if I may, how is the Pyjak?"

"Oh, Shit-head? He's doing just fine. Making himself right at home," I answered. Lucan broke out in laughter as Herik just stared at me, confused.

"You named the Pyjak… Shit-head?"

"Couldn't come up with a name and his mouth looks like an asshole. So, shit-head. It just came to me," I shrugged.

"As good a reason as any if you ask me," Lucan chuckled.

"Yes, well, do keep me informed on the status of… Shit-head," Herik requested. The uneasy way he asked just left Lucan and I giggling.
"And good luck out there Ryder. Sorry but we have work to do for more of your toys," Lucan explained.

"Thanks Lucan, and I'll keep you informed Herik, see you around," I ended, typing a quick message to Vetra to ask if she could get someone to bring it and its mods over to the ship while I finished up business. Sure enough, I quickly got a reply that it would be taken care of. I made way towards the Vortex to uphold an agreement I had with the bartenders.

"Hey Anan, Dutch, you get those hops I sent your way?" I asked. On Havarl I had scanned some plant life, some for the benefit of Doc Camden, some searching for Hops. Just so happened, I found some for both. Once Jaal gave an all clear, I took a few, they could clone for more of them.

"We did, they looked horrifying," Anan stated.

"I love them!" Dutch exclaimed.

"Just as I knew you would," Anan chuckled.

"I'm surprised you're back," Dutch remarked.

"People tend to come around when you work at a bar," I teased.

"He's right, you know," Anan laughed.

"I'll have to get used to you too, I guess," he snorted, looking at Anan. "Fine! You can be a regular. What's your name?" he asked. Guess he isn't great with names, I had told him and Anan last time I met them.

"Scott," I stated. If I was right about him being on a certain spectrum, which I'm damn sure I am right about, I wouldn't want to prod about that.

"I'm Dutch. That's Anan, over there," he introduced. He whispered a warning: "Be careful. The snark is strong with that one." Did he just paraphrase what I think he did? And was that intentional or accidental? Anan smirked and so did I:

"Snark is good! I can work with snark," I remarked.

"Ugh, you're one of those," Dutch groaned, and Anan just laughed

"I think you're outnumbered Dutch," she teased.

"Where do you come up with these names?" I asked, chuckling as I took a sip. Not my favorite, but not horrible either.

"That, is my secret," he stated.

"He makes a list of words and rolls a die to decide," Anan laughed.

"Hey!" he accused.

"If it works, it works," I remarked laughing.
"See? It's alright Dutch, besides, you're cute when you're flustered," she teased. Dutch blushed slightly and calmed down. Yep, there's something going on there. Maybe not yet, but it's developing. And hey, it's cute. I left the bar to see how Jaal was doing in the cultural exchange, let him know we'd be leaving soon. My Omni-tool was pinged with a message from Liam. He had checked through the list of movies I got from Ops. He had picked out a few but wanted my input and asked if I had anything I could contribute. I just let him know I'd take a look on our way to Eos and that he should start getting back to the ship. Entering the cultural center, I almost laughed as I saw that Jaal had sat himself down in a corner with several Data pads, reading them as the workers moved boxes and got other stands set up. He looked up, noticing me enter and smiled.

"Hello Scott, thank you for arranging my access here. I have learned much, and enjoyed learning. And yet I have barely scratched the surface! It would take a lifetime to learn it all," he remarked.

"It's not hard to see you've been enjoying yourself. Settled into a corner and reading about the history and cultures of species you only met yesterday, all you need now are some snacks."

"Good idea, I'll bring some the next time we are here. No offense, but I've started with the Asari," he stated.

"Starting at the beginning I see. The first race to reach the citadel, start making our galactic community. Just let me know when you get to Elcor Hamlet. An old and famous Human made play meets the monotone of the Elcor. Fourteen hours of your life you will never forget," I joked.

"And who thought of that?" Jaal chuckled.

"Some guy named Francis Kitt. Fortunately for us, he stayed in the Milky way. Anyways, sorry to cut your little adventure through time short, but we need to get going to Eos. Go ahead, pack up, maybe get copies of some of these data pads, just be on the ship in thirty minutes, alright?" I requested, and Jaal confirmed he'd do so. As I began heading back to the Tempest, I sent out a message to the crew telling them what I told Jaal. It may be early, but today has been a good day.
Everyone was on board, and the Tempest was on its way towards Eos. I had been in the bridge during lift off and the transition to FTL, and was turning to leave, wondering what I'd do with my time. Dad's files? Go over movies with Liam?

"Scott, quick moment?" Kallo asked. I turned back to face him, gesturing for him to continue.

"Just informing you that SAM had been compiling our Star charts. The Nexus has them and are running them by their supply runners. Should make their travel much more efficient," he informed.

"Sounds good. Anything else?" I asked.

"No, nothing. Just… It's funny. Less than a week ago, for months, the station was like a war zone. My only escape, was flying. And now? It's starting to become a haven. Just like it was meant to be," he remarked.

"People have something to look forward to now. Though, it could be better. Every good space station needs a big lake, some fountains," I joked.

"Agreed, even non-amphibians need a little water," Kallo chuckled. "Still, if only there was a way to get rid of the damn scourge. It's been the biggest threat to the Initiative from the beginning. I still see it crippling the Nexus in my memories. I had to train other pilots in hazardous flight techniques, just to look for food and water. It's a minefield. Destroys good ships, good people. This won't be home so long as it exists," he growled. The matter of the Scourge seems to be quite personal to him.

"Unfortunately, I'm not sure we can get rid of it Kallo. But, the Angara live with it, we can learn from them. It'll take a while to settle in with it, but we'll make do," I reassured.

"If only every one of our colonists were an ace pilot, then I wouldn't be worried. But, you're right. That's what we do, isn't it? Find a way where there is none? The Nexus is proof of that. Eos is proof of that. Latest reports claim that most of the radiation is gone!" Kallo remarked. "Wait… what's wrong with the sensors? A moment, Scott." Kallo keyed the comms on his console. "Gil? I'm detecting something odd with the sensors themselves. Not anything they're detecting. Could you repair that?"

"Nothing's wrong with them, it's a redesign," Gil answered. Kallo raised a brow, a confused and annoyed look on his face.

"Redesign? Without a trained crew going over it?"

"Except there is a trained crew, Me. It's working great, don't be so anal or… cloacal? About it? Whatever your word for it is," Gil muttered. I sensed problems brewing.

"Everything fine? With the ship and with you two?" I asked.


"If you say so. But I don't want this turning into a real problem, just keep it professional, if nothing else," I ordered. Kallo nodded his understanding and I turned to leave. Guess I'll run over the
movies with Liam. I found Liam in the crew quarters, talking with Jaal. They noticed me walk in and Liam spoke before I could.

"Hey Scott, been talking with Jaal here and we have a little idea to help with relations. I have a small schematic. I already checked, we have more than enough resources on board and the tech to fabricate it quickly. Just needed your sign off," he explained. I checked the schematic, saw the resource use was negligible, and that it would hardly take even a minute. The surprising part was that it was designed like armor, though it would be less useful than wearing paper like this. Regardless, I authorized it and the 'armor' began fabricating.

"Great! Thanks Scott. Jaal, you go ahead and get ready, I'll grab it and head to my room. Meet me there," Liam ordered, Jaal standing up to move to his room. Unfortunately for me, my curiosity got the better of me and I followed Liam as he picked up the chest piece and returned to his room. To my confusion, Liam pulled off his shirt and set the armor down, beginning to fiddle with it. Unsurprisingly, given our line of work, and his past line of work, Liam was solidly built. Strong and muscular, but not the image of Strongman Boris from Siberia with massively rippling muscles that look like they're about to pop like pimples. Frankly, it made sense for the entire ground team to be similarly built, fitting in with their own physiology at least. The door opened behind me, amusingly for Jaal.

"Jaal Ama Darav! We got our gear!" Liam called out happily, looking up. To my everlasting confusion and surprise, Liam looked entirely calm, normal, not surprised in the slightest. Leaving me very unprepared for what I was about to see.

Jaal was naked. He walked past me, bare chested, bare assed. Purple, pink, and white skin all out for show. His skin was… flappy? Wrinkly? One of the two, all over. Did he walk from his room to Liam's like this? Luckily for me, he walked around Liam and behind the couch, meaning I wouldn't see an Angaran penis.

"Liam. Scott," he greeted calmly and casually. His head flaps came to his chest forming weird… tit like things but upside down. No nipples which made the structure even weirder. The only parts of his body I was now seeing for the first time that did not leave me struggling to hold back a grimace were the arms and shoulders. As expected, I could see muscles, as I would with any soldier.

"So… What's with the gun show?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest and keeping my eyes and head level with their own.

"We're swapping armor, not weapons," Jaal stated incredulously. Another saying that doesn't translate.

"Heh, don't let him bullshit you, I already explained that one," Liam chuckled. Jaal smirked as he was caught. Liam turned to face him:

"Ready?" Jaal turned to face Liam back:

"Go." Liam leaned forward to inspect the armor resting there. Both what was fabricated, and some of Jaal's that had been left here earlier.

"Pattern on the pauldron?"

"Family honorific."

"Can I wear the poncho?" Liam asked, holding up the blue cloak thing Jaal wears.

"It's a Rofjinn, and no," Jaal answered.
"Why? Religious?"

"Personal. You're not allowed." Jaal explained a bit defensively.

"Because of status or species?" Liam pushed.

"Maybe it's both." Liam set down the Rofjinn and continued inspecting the armor.

"Do all Humans look alike?"

"Some of you… sound alike," Jaal replied thoughtfully.

"Alright, just a moment. Could you please explain to me what this is all about? What it is you're doing and everything?" I asked, stopping both. "It sounds like Jaal is getting a bit pissed."

"That's the point. We're asking the kind of questions, learning the kind of things that the diplomats won't. Soldier to soldier. We're getting the insults out and laid on the table now and putting them out of the way, so we know and don't screw up accidentally. The armor's a bit of a side thing," Liam explained.

"My turn was earlier. Nexus info packets leave a lot out," Jaal stated.

"Ah, alright, I get it. Yeah, I understand now. Talk shit, nothing held back, and no hard feelings when it's all said and done so you know for next time. I approve. Should probably send what you learn to Nexus and Angaran diplomats. Hell, we should make this a real step in the process," I remarked. "But none of this answers my question from earlier. Why is Liam shirtless and Jaal naked?" The two looked at each other and shrugged.

"Just getting that out of the way too I guess. Removing that curiosity," Liam casually replied.

"What so you're about to strip down too?" I asked.

"Guess so."

"Well, alright then. Jaal, it may not be a good idea, least for the others, for you to walk throughout the ship naked. Liam, why don't you grab his clothes and bring them back here for him?" I suggested.

"Why would it not be a good idea?" Jaal asked.

"Our species generally don't like seeing other people naked unless they're… intimate. And even then, in private. Though, clearly some people can still be casual about it. Just not everyone is," I explained.

"Sure, I'll go grab it. You staying?" Liam asked.

"No, I was going to discuss those plans with you, but those can wait a bit longer. Run through the list myself," I stated. I backed out of the room and let out a deep breath. I think I need to bleach my eyeballs.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Tempest ground team, all hands-on deck! All ground team report to the cargo bay and armory, suit up, check your weapons," I ordered over the intercom. We're entering Eos' atmosphere now, making a beeline for our landing zone at Prodromos. I was in the cargo bay already, suited up and
ready for action. Except this time, I wasn't in my father's Pathfinder armor. For what we were about
to do, I needed to be fully armored from head to toe. The Pathfinder armor has some gaps in it
revealing the under suit. This armor, minimized such issues. I checked myself down one more time,
my armor was thick, colored black. On the whole of the right arm red one thick red stripe, with a
two thinner white stripes flanking it. On the left side of my chest was that legendary logo: N7.

I was holding the helmet in my left arm. Where the Pathfinder and Initiative helmets were mostly
glass domes for the face, this helmet instead has a small visor for the eyes, allowing a full view,
but still protecting my face with metal and not glass. My Valkyrie remained in my locker, replaced
with the new Sweeper on my back. Liam and Jaal stepped out of Liam's room, fully clothed
thankfully, a flash of surprise and curiosity on their faces with my new look. Vetra stepped out of
hers and nodded, knowing this was the armor she had secured for me. The others joined
intermittently, all expressing curiosity or surprise. Time to explain just what I had in mind.

"Listen up everyone. As you may know, we are currently preparing to land at Prodromos. We are
here for two main reasons. First, refugees from the Asari ark have arrived there, and we are going
to find out just what they know. Second, which is also the reason I've called you all down here, a
reason Drack and maybe Jaal are going to love. There is a Kett base not far from Prodromos. I
don't want that. While Cora, Peebee, and I speak with the refugees, the rest of you will speak with
Bradley or whoever you need to in order to secure additional transport for the whole team, the
Nomad only seats four. Land transport would be preferable in case the Kett base has AA guns, but
we may be able to work something out if all they can spare is a shuttle," I explained. Drack began
chuckling semi-quietly at the prospect of an assault on a Kett base.

"So, what's with the wardrobe change?" Peebee asked.

"Glad you asked. As this is an Assault we're planning, on a full Kett facility, I want heavier armor.
Peebee, I know you have biotic barriers but clothing and skin makes for a very poor backup. At
least just for this and any other large operations, I want you to take a set of Initiative armor. Liam,
Cora, we have heavier sets than what you have now if you wish. This also means I want everyone
wearing helmets too. Full head protection. I don't want to take any chances with this, not with the
Moshae mission on the horizon," I ordered.

"Don't worry Peebee, I've modified, upgraded the standard armor on board. I got a specific set for
you that should help your biotics. Liam, yours has a heavier chest piece but also additional
thrusters for your havoc strike. Cora, like Peebee yours has a few external biotic amps to help,"
Vetra explained. I had spoken to her about additional armor for the others back on the Nexus, but
hadn't told her about the base. Slightly grumpily, Peebee took hers and the under suit, leaving
beginning to leave so that she could change into it. Liam and Cora already had under suits, but only
Liam was the one to take the offer of an armor swap.

"Just a moment Peebee. There's just one more thing. Everyone, I know you're carrying one gun
you're proficient with, but for this, I want you to be equipped with at least one more. If you have a
shotgun, grab an AR. We have more than just Avengers. Use a pistol, or SMG, take a shotgun, we
have more than basic Katanas. If you have a rifle, take a pistol. I want you all to have some effect
at all ranges," I explained. Jaal pulled his Angaran pistol from his holster and showed it, before re-
holstering it. Vetra grabbed a Carnifex, Liam was apparently happy enough with a Katana and
simply took one of those. Cora picked up a Mattock, checking the sights. Drack browsed the
selection before grumbling to himself:

"Drack, I got a new rifle. Try my old one. Vintage heatsink, and more mods courtesy of Vetra," I
suggested, handing my Valkyrie over to him. He inspected it and seemed to approve, clipping it to
his back. Peebee inspected an odd-looking weapon that was in the Shotgun locker:
"Hey Vetra, what's this thing?" she asked. Vetra came over to inspect the weapon.

"Reegar carbine. Made by the Quarians and named after one of their clans with a long line of military service. Essentially, it's an electric flamethrower. They were in development by the Migrant fleet just before we left, and the Quarians who came with us brought a working prototype. They had something big brewing back home… Anyways, it works best against Synthetics as virtually all Quarian made weapons do, but has some effect against Organics. Still, you'd be better off with something else for now," Vetra explained. Peebee taking an N7 Crusader

"Electric flamethrower huh? Sounds like something I may want to bring into a Vault. I'd ask what you think the Quarians had been planning, but there's really only one thing they'd be planning for that would involve new weapons, is there?" I asked rhetorically.

"For their sakes, I hope they didn't. Unless they made one helluva weapon their fleet would be scrapped," Drack muttered.

"And what if they did make a weapon to take them on? What if they got Rannoch back? Hmph, I'd feel bad for the ones that came here," Vetra remarked.

"What is all this about? I'm afraid I don't quite understand," Jaal asked.

"Don't worry about it, you'll learn about it from the cultural center soon enough. Peebee, go get changed, everyone else, we're about to land. We move once Peebee's back," I ordered.

"I'll head straight for Connor. Being the requisition officer, and being a friend who owes me some favors, I should be able to get something quickly enough," Vetra remarked.

"Sounds good. We'll run over the plan over comms when we're en-route. Vetra, you'll drive the other vehicle behind the Nomad," I ordered. I keyed my Omni-tool to comm Gil: "Gil, this is Scott. I need to know what upgrades you've been able to complete on the Nomad so far."

"I turned off a safety with the turning, you should be able to turn much sharper now. I put a little switch in the console to turn it off and on. It's labeled boring mode and agility mode. I also upped the boosts a bit but there's more I can do. I shouldn't need any more resources, just time," he explained.

"Understood, I'll try to make sure you have that time," I ended the call. The cargo bay doors began to open as the ship finished landing and Peebee joined us in her Initiative armor. Together, the team moved down the ramp for our own tasks. The fall of our boots like the beating of War drums.

We were en-route to the Kett stronghold now. Vetra had secured an additional Nomad that Prodromos had been provisioned with on the promise that we'd bring it back in one piece. It should be relatively easy to keep it, as we won't be bringing them into the action to start with. Hydaria, the top-ranking officer of the Asari refugees confirmed that Ark Leusinia was being hunted down across the cluster by Kett. After cross-referencing with the Initiative, those Kett were elite. A specialized Hunter-Killer unit. Sarissa had given an evacuation order of the civilians, so either there are more civilian groups out there, or many still have not been woken up. Hopefully the latter, they might just be safer on the Ark. Fortunately we gained a lead. A ship had launched from the ark to help refugees. Find the ship by following the transponder, check its Nav system. We had the transponder codes and the last flight plan. It was near Voeld.

That wasn't all I had done as we prepared to leave Prodromos. I found Darket Tiervian, the Turian woman I had ordered the awakening of individually for the sake of her father. I spoke with her briefly, she thanked me, and her father who was with her did the same. I could not place it, but
Darket's voice sounded very familiar. At this rate, I should make a tally chart of vaguely familiar voices. She had done more than thank me however. She theorized how the Kett were being supplied and predicted where those supplies might be. Automated drops coming into the system. After the Nomad was off the ship, I ordered the Tempest to investigate and return once it was finished. If someone gets wounded, Prodromos is equipped with proper medical facilities as well.

The colony itself had expanded too since I had last been here, a few more pre-fabs expanding the borders of it and more facilities set up in those established. Less air mattresses and more bunks, more kitchens and less MREs. Even a few patches of dirt for farming. Prodromos was coming along nicely.

The Nomad itself was clearly handling better, and the boosts more effective. What Gil had neglected to mention is that it had now gained a new paintjob. It was a Navy blue with black lines as a trim. The name of it was Archangel, the man Gil bought the design from said he got the inspiration from a Vigilante on Omega. I'd say a Space Batman, but Batman doesn't kill, brings people to the Authorities. Which Omega doesn't have. In the Nomad with me were Cora, Peebee, and Jaal. Vetra, Liam, and Drack in the other Nomad following behind us. For their sake, we were taking the more mundane route so they could keep up with us.

"Hey Jaal," Peebee spoke, but got no response. Jaal seemed to be asleep in the back of the Nomad with her. "Uh, Jaal? Jaal! You alive?" she asked louder and louder. He snorted and sat up, eyes open and alert.

"What? What did I miss?" he asked.

"Ugh, the way Scott drives and you can sleep?" she questioned.

"Hey! My driving ain't that bad. You try driving up mountains on steep ramps," I remarked.

"Yes, this is a rather smooth ride. I might as well be still in my bed on the Tempest," Jaal defended.

"Why thank you," I chuckled. Peebee sighed and continued.

"So, what the hell is that paste that Angara eat? It smells great, but it tastes horrid," she asked.

"You had some of my Nutrient paste? Well, I find your food to be rather bland, Pelessaria B'Sayle, how will we ever get along?" he teased. So that's her name, I hadn't even bothered to check.

"So she does have an actual name! Would you look at that! How did you get her to tell you Jaal?" I asked, feigning innocence to tease Peebee.

"I asked. And she told me. She did not do this with you?" Jaal asked, some confusion in his voice.

"And this is what I get for trying to make conversation," she joked.

"And for waking me up," Jaal teased, earning another groan from the Asari. We arrived at the top of the Plateau, which the Colonists had named "Sheartop" and drove on the opposite edge of the Kett base. I parked and we got out, the other Nomad doing the same. I waved them over so we could talk strategy, taking the view we had and scans from orbit. The whole facility was encased in an energy shield, a dome, aside from the very front, the only way in or out. The entrance was flanked by two pairs of raised platforms. Snipers? Inside the base itself were three paths from the entrance to the center compound. Two paths at the sides were thin with a large one straight down the middle. The side paths seemed to hold either shield pylons or generators. Take those down, the shields come down. Not much that would do for us but it might distract them into suspecting an aerial attack. The center of the compound housed a collection of buildings. Possibly barracks or
armories. At the far back, was the main compound itself.

A large T-shaped structure. No doubt where most of the Kett were located and their Commander. Cut off the head of the snake…

"Jaal, get on one of these rocks and use your sniper to tell us what you see at the main defenses," I ordered. All we had done so far was go over the layout of the base. Now came the actual plan. Not something to stick to the whole way, as intel was limited, but it's a baseline.

"Scott, I can see a pair of defense turrets as well as several Kett. Some Chosen, some Anointed. I can't quite make out much more," Jaal informed, joining us back behind the rock.

"We'll need a way to neutralize those before the real push. Drack, Jaal, what can we expect in terms of resistance and security?" I asked.

"The door into the facility is likely locked and encrypted. Your SAM should be able to hack it, but it may take some time, and the Kett will likely send reinforcements," Jaal warned.

"As for units? Far as I can tell you've fought Fiends, Wraiths, Chosen, and Anointed. Here? You'll probably see some Destined. And I'd bet good credits that the Commander here is an Ascended," Drack informed.

"And what do you know about them?" I asked.

"Destined are smaller than Anointed but larger than Chosen. They have shields and shotguns. But their armor also releases this weird mist shit. Cloaks themselves and any of their buddies who get into it. Not like a smoke grenade, a genuine cloak. Makes good grenade practice," Drack chuckled.

"Agreed. As for Ascended, I've only ever seen one. Most of my squad didn't survive. They are large and they float in the air, Element Zero within their armor. They have a kind of shield around them that not one of our weapons have ever been able to pierce. But the orb they have that generates the shield that orbits their body and is vulnerable. Be warned that they can also use this orb to channel their offensive capabilities. Bolts of energy that are powerful, and whatever you do, do not let them get close and trap you within an energy field. They do that, and your fate is sealed. Take out the orb, and they are defenseless," Jaal explained.

"And no doubt he'll be surrounded by plenty of Kett. Alright, let's see… There's a few rocks just ahead of the entrance, if we drive there and park the Nomads behind them, that will keep them safe and give us cover to exit. But, that still leaves the Turrets. Jaal, you and I will cloak and approach the base. We'll place grenades at their weak points and retreat to the rocks with the others. Once safe, we detonate the grenades. You and I will cover them with our snipers while they charge ahead and grab a foothold. Clear out the Kett there, we join them and begin hacking the door. Jaal, I need you to show me just where the weak spots are, got a hologram?" I asked. Jaal keyed his Angaran tac-pad and as asked, a blue hologram of a Kett turret appeared.

"There is a weak spot here, at the base of the turret where it swivels, and there is a panel here on the side, that if we are quick and lucky, can open and place a grenade inside its power supply. Luckily for us, the Kett's arrogance leaves the panel rather simple to open, just a simple pull of a lever just to the side of it," Jaal explained.

"Excellent. Once we're inside the base, we'll split up into three teams. Hopefully those pylons on the side paths will allow us to take down the shields. If we do that, they may expect an aerial attack which means fewer for us to deal with as they change their defenses. On the left path will be Peebee and Drack, the middle will be Liam and Cora, and on the right, will be Vetra and I. Jaal, for
this push I want you to stay back up on the entrance, scans show an elevated platform just on the side. Your job will be to cover us all. Help take off some pressure, snipe anyone who looks threatening or has us in a bad spot, but focus on helping the middle. The rest of us will radio if we really need the help. Once we're across, you'll follow behind on the path we've cleared. Beyond that… we'll need to cross that bridge when we get to it, scans aren't providing enough info.

Everyone clear?" The team nodded their confirmation. "Good, back into the Nomads. Let's move," I ordered. We made it to the rock without issue, but could not tell if the Kett were aware-or even cared-about our presence. I ordered Jaal to do one last check before we moved. The Kett were calmly continuing their patrols. The raised platforms closest to the entrance both housed a lone Kett, Jaal and I would take care of those as soon as the Turrets blew up. Aside from that the entrance had a squad of five chosen led by a single Anointed. We should be able to overpower them easily enough.

On the way to the outpost, everyone had kept their helmets off for comfort. Now? We were all fully armed and armored, not one bit of skin exposed and a minimum of under suit exposed. The Kett would need quite the lucky shot to hit there instead of armor. I was pleased to discover that not only had my Father's original N7 armor have a cloaking device, but it was upgraded. Heavily. Not sure if by Dad or by the Nexus science teams. I wasn't sure just how long the cloak would last, but I was confident I'd be long gone before it ran out. Jaal and I both vanished into thin air, nothing but barely noticeable ripples moving towards the Kett base. Jaal had the left Turret, I had the right. We crept slowly, the cloak made us nearly invisible, but only we could make ourselves quiet. The Kett simply continued their patrols as I stepped up to the Turret and attached a grenade at its base. I moved to the side, thankful that the Anointed in the middle was not currently looking in my direction, and slowly pulled the lever opening the side panel, dropping a grenade inside, and pulling the lever again to close it. It closed with a clang which caught the Anointed's attention. I stood as still as I could, staring straight back at him. If one stood still, there would be no ripples, but if one moved, there would be a small disturbance, and that would give me away to someone attentive. I really hoped the cloak wouldn't run out. I breathed a small sigh of relief as he looked away, concluding that the sound was nothing, and slowly I began backing away down the way I came. Once back on the sand, and far enough away from the base itself, I picked up the pace back to the rock and de-cloaked.

"What took you so long?" Jaal joked, likely seeing the ordeal himself.

"You not telling me that those panels close so loudly," I retorted. "Alright, positions everyone. On my mark, we detonate the grenades, and the rest of you charge. Jaal, you and I get the chosen on the platforms. Same sides as with the Turret," I ordered, holding up my hand and three fingers as I held the detonator with the other two, readying my sniper with the other hand. "3… 2… 1… MARK!" I called out, the last finger of the countdown triggering the detonator. I immediately took aim on the Chosen on the right platform and pulling the trigger once the detonator was on my belt. The others charged ahead as the Turrets went up in smoke and the elevated Kett fell to the ground. While the detonations hadn't killed any Kett, they were clearly taken off guard and in disarray. The barrel of the Anointed's mini-gun began to glow, so he was our next target. Jaal had the same idea and a round went towards his head but was barely deflected by his shields. A round from my Black Widow took the chance and blew out his brains through the back of his head. Cora picked up one Kett with her Biotics, leaving him floating in the air. I took the chance and the shot, a round going through his head and causing his now headless body to spin in the air until the biotic field dissipated. I popped in a new thermal clip, but doubted I'd need it just yet.

I was right, the remaining four Kett didn't stand a chance against Jaal's rifle and the firepower of five other highly trained men and women charging their position by surprise. Once the Kett were dead, we took their place, assuming a defensive position as I keyed SAM into the door's terminal, letting him into the base's network.
"Jaal, get on one of the raised platforms, lay down covering fire," I ordered. No doubt that there would soon be a shuttle full of Kett. "Everyone else, lock and load." Jaal quickly used his jump-jet to reach the platform on the right and crouched against the low wall it had as cover, waiting for some target practice. SAM informed that I'd need to stay close to the console, but everyone else could be wherever, so I placed myself against a pair of Kett crates next to the console and readied my new Sweeper rifle, keeping my eyes out of the scope for full awareness. A dropship arrived, releasing a squad of five Chosen and an Anointed. One Chosen immediately found himself with a head half missing and half sizzling from an energy round from Jaal and a shock wave barreling towards them from one of our biotics, knocking all but the stronger, larger Anointed onto their bony asses. Wishing to rectify that, I opened fire on him, testing out my new toy. Just as Chief Lucan promised, the rounds were certainly more effective against the shields, bringing them down in just five rounds, two bursts. The last two rounds hit him in the chest, knocking him back slightly as they burned into his chest, but he just growled, beginning to rev up his weapon and open fire. Else he would have, if my next burst hadn't melted away his skull. He dropped dead and the remaining Chosen were finished off before they could even get to their feet as their reinforcements arrived, just moments too late. SAM's countdown struck twenty seconds. Thirty seconds to hack Kett security? Either they're cocky as hell, or SAM's that good.

The second dropship released another squad of five Chosen, but a sixth Kett I did not recognize. This one was thinner than an Anointed, though perhaps as tall as one with the bones on his head forming a single point upwards from his forehead. According to Drack and Jaal, I had only yet to encounter two kinds of Kett, and this one didn't have the signature shield or floating of an Ascendant. Must be a Destined. As they landed, he crouched to one knee as a blue mist seeped from his armor and swept over himself and their squad. They simply vanished from view. Trying the same tactic, Peebee launched a shockwave towards the mist and it was blown away along with the Chosen, but the Destined was still out of view. Cora used her biotics to charge the Kett on the ground, immediately following up with a Nova, charring and killing them all as the burst of dark energy attempted to take them apart atom by atom, then stopped.

But still we could not see the Destined. I searched for a ripple in the air, finding none, as slowly I noticed the same blue mist begin to creep in front of me from behind. Shit. I turned to see the barrel of a Kett shotgun appear, staring right down the barrel as he decloaked. I might be wearing a helmet, with only a little bit of visor, but that ain't gonna do shit to a point-blank energy shotgun burst. Hell, it may even be inside the range of my shields, but even then, it likely wouldn't be enough. Sorry Sara.

As I expected to see a flash or orange light, I instead saw a large mass of orange armor from a large arm slap the barrel away, turning the Destined to face him before slamming his head against the bastard, knocking off a large chunk of the bone armor on his head and staggering him back. Drack pulled his own shotgun back before launching it forwards and upwards, impaling the poor bastard and lifting him up into the air. I could even see the blades poking out of his back. The Destined struggled and let out a cry of pain as Drack proceeded to throw him to the floor. He was still alive, barely, a pool of green blood forming on the floor as he coughed and sputtered. Drack loomed over him, thinking for a moment and slightly lifting his boot before coming to a decision. He placed his foot back down, instead pulling the massive Krogan hammer from his belt, lifting it casually for a moment and looking at it and back to the Destined. He immediately proceeded to slam it down on his head, splattering blood, brains, and bone over the ground and on his hammer, laughing quietly and menacingly.

"I think I owe you one Drack. Guess it was… Destined to happen eventually," I remarked, unable to resist the pun. The others had turned to look as Drack saved my ass, and were now either groaning or chuckling. Or maybe a bit of both. If only I could read their expressions, but no, I ordered helmets.
"Just because of that, next time, I'm letting it happen," Drack stated before walking past me and patting me on the shoulder. We began to return to our defensive positions when SAM spoke up.

"Hack complete. Door is now unlocked and I am within Kett systems. I have disabled their alarm, preventing reinforcements and cutting off communications, but the base itself may already be on alert." SAM warned.

"We expected as much. Can you do anything about the shields?" I asked.

"Negative. That will require direct orders and confirmation from the base Commander. However, I can verify that the pylons on the side paths discussed during the mission planning, can indeed be set to overload. Tamper with them physically, and I can overload them. Once a member of the team is prepared, I will explain the process."

"Good. Vetra? Peebee? I assume you two can do that?" I asked. Peebee nodded her confirmation but Vetra asked:

"Sure, but wouldn't it be better to have each side's heavies up and shooting and not screwing with tech?" she suggested.

"What and you don't think I count as one of the heavies? Grenades, tech attacks, biotics, a gun that can shoot infinite laser bolts?" I chuckled. "Jokes aside, call it some backup. Might be one of us may be better suited to deal with the Kett depending on range." Vetra nodded understanding, and readied her Cyclone and I led the team through the door and into the base. After passing through a small buffer room, we were greeted by Kett fire and quickly ran to new cover as a Kett voice, likely the commander, spoke through the intercom:

"How are they breaking through? We are at peak capacity! Kill the intruders!"

"I think we got their attention," Jaal called out as he knelt into cover.

"Just a bit. Cora, Peebee! Shockwaves! Cora, down the middle, Peebee, on the left, I'll get right. Everyone else, focus on who doesn't get knocked on their asses!" I ordered, giving a countdown to the others. We were pinned and I refuse to stay that way. On cue, we launched our shockwaves, knocking some Kett back while some just got out of the way. I even saw that my shock wave had knocked one over the railing, leaving him to plummet to his death, screaming. Taking their cue, the others stood and opened fire on any Kett they saw. Some on the ground, some who managed to avoid it, and some in the process of getting up. Using my new rifle, I was able to...Sweep(er) them away easily enough. As I stopped and smirked at my inner wit, a Wraith growled and decloaked, moving to pounce. How many things are going to try and sneak up on me in one day? Instead of wasting time for my shotgun, I instead pulled my fist back, allowing my cryo gauntlet to form, and letting the Wraith, in its pounce, do the work for me. Instead of a live, angry, and hungry Wraith lying on top of me and trying to tear into my neck, I was instead left with a live, angry, hungry, but frozen Wraith lying on top of me. Using my biotics, I lifted it off me and threw it over past the ledge, wondering if it would thaw before he hit, or shatter on the ground. Guess that's a little...cold.

"Everyone! Into your teams! Move out!" I called. "Press the advantage, we can't lose our momentum!" So long as we kept on the offensive the Kett wouldn't be able to push us back. We get pushed back, and best-case scenario is that we get slowly and steadily pushed out of the base with a few scratches. Worst case? We all end up dead or captured. Given that body we found by the third Monolith, capture might be a lot worse.

"All units move to engage! Overwhelm these animals!" The commander ordered again over the
"Is it just me, or does he sound nervous?" I asked.

"A most pleasant change of pace," Jaal growled, setting up in his perch as ordered as the teams moved forward along their set paths. I could see Kett setting up on raised platforms in the distance but we were too far away for them to open fire. Us on the other hand, we do have some snipers. More immediate to our concerns however, were a pair of Kett dropships launching from the main compound and heading straight towards each of the side paths and a squad of Kett rushed towards the middle to meet Liam and Cora. The dropship that made its way towards Vetra and I dropped off four Chosen, and it would be a safe assumption that Drack and Peebee got the same treatment. Given how narrow the path is, I think I have a rather simple solution. I focused and slammed my hand forwards, releasing yet another biotic shockwave. Three of the Kett were knocked off but the fourth got lucky and managed to grab the railing, holding on for dear life. The moment his head popped up, he found himself without a brain and let go, limply falling to the surface below.

"Hey! Leave some for the rest of us!" Vetra chuckled.

"Woah, hope we aren't having a… falling out," I quickly joked. She snorted and shook her head as I continued. "Go screw with the Kett tech, they're too far away for your Cyclone." Instead of replying, she simply bent down in front of the console and got to work re-arranging some wires as SAM walked her through it. More Kett didn't seem to be rushing to meet us but they were certainly readying themselves for us. Just to be safe, I formed a barrier in front of me, placing myself in front of Vetra. "Peebee, progress?" I asked.

"Getting to work now," she replied.

"All good here. These guys definitely aren't used to fighting biotics," Cora remarked.

"Don't expect that to last much longer. The Kett adapt quickly. Now that one of their Commander's is witnessing it, no doubt they'll be smarter about engaging you," Jaal warned.

"I wouldn't worry about that too much, for all their adapting they still haven't quite figured out how to deal with good ol' fashioned Krogan brute force. Ha, back in my day all you'd need would be a dozen Krogan warriors charging to send a whole company in retreat," Drack chuckled.

"Don't you dare say 'uphill both ways,'" Vetra groaned as she got out from under the console.

"Hmph, and Turians weren't so damn lippy either," Drack grumbled.

"All done over here," Peebee called out,

"Initiating overload…" SAM informed. After a moment, the top of the shield generators exploded and the shields surrounding the base faded.

"Insult! Our perfection cannot be defeated! Man the anti-air cannons! Watch for enemy shuttles!" the commander ordered.

"Jaal, is this guy too stupid to realize that we can hear the intercom too? Or are they just that damn arrogant?" I asked.

"Might be a bit of both. At least your plan worked, they're now expecting aerial reinforcements," Jaal remarked.

"Say we use our snipers to take out a few of the Kett we can see from here as the others push, or
move with the others? You'd have a better idea as to which would be more effective in a Kett base," I suggested. Before Jaal could answer, the Kett on raised platforms opened fire. "Never mind, I think I know the answer," I muttered, taking aim with my Black Widow. "Everyone else keep your heads down, Jaal and I will take care of these fuckers and then we push." Given our distance, the Kett weren't much of a threat with their ARs, most rounds just going past or over our heads, but one struck my shields as I pulled the trigger. My round killed one of the Kett, his just forced me into cover for a few seconds as Jaal continued from his perch at the back.

"Work quickly! No doubt this is to buy them time to prepare defenses!" Jaal warned. I put my head back up and Jaal had finished off two others, with me putting a round into the head of the last Kett, then swapping out my clips.

"Push forward! The paths converge to a choke point, DO NOT let the Kett trap us in there!" I ordered. Jaal would be running to join us as we ran through. Now the base was built on top of another plateau instead of a ravine. Shockwaves would not be as handy anymore. Likely why the Kett were holding back. At least half a dozen Kett ran out of the front of a large building in front of us, with a ramp to the left that would lead us to the second level of the complex, and another ramp to the right, narrower, more like what we had just walked on. Less resistance, raised in the air, maybe a better vantage point. Might not be a bad idea for a small team. We worked on picking off the Kett in the middle as those to the left moved to fire on us from a nearby platform, the right too far for them or us to have a good sightline.

"They keep coming! We can't stay here and hope they run out Scott," Cora called out. She was right, for each Kett we shot, two more came out of the building to replace it.

"Drack, you and I will be going left. Get to the second floor, pick them off. Jaal, you and Peebee go right, provide covering fire for the center team. Everyone else, stay in front of the base, shoot any Kett you see, push inside when Drack and I get to the second level. We'll push forward together and then split. Drack, Vetra, you provide suppressive fire. Biotics, do whatever you can to keep them distracted. Shockwaves, barriers, throws and pulls, just don't charge into them," I ordered. Another countdown, another push, more dead Kett. The center team took cover along a line of crates and boxes as Drack and I ran up the ramp to a raised circular platform, a shotgun blast from Drack and a burst from my Sweeper killing the pair of Kett there. I could see another squad of the bony aliens moving to engage us from the entrance to the central complex, so Drack and I moved behind some conveniently placed crates on the bridge connecting our platform to theirs.

Drack and I both launched an incinerate round at separate Kett, leaving both engulfed in flame and screaming as it charred their bone and burned through their flesh, leaving a pair of Kett still outside. No doubt, we'd see more soon. A round struck me and instinctively I returned to cover. Thing is, I notice that my shields had held up better than they had before. Must be the new armor. Might be able to take two rounds from a rifle before my shields collapse. After my shields recharged, I looked up to see that Drack had ran ahead to see one of the Kett missing, likely on the ground dead, and the last one being picked up by Drack with a single hand, and thrown over the ledge and off the plateau.

"Someone's having fun," I muttered. "Have you not been hit yet?"

"I've taken a few shots, sure. Armor gets most, the rest helps fuel the blood rage. Besides, most of it hits redundant shit anyway. Krogan regeneration takes care of that. Believe me kid, I'm not stupid, I know what kind of shots not to take," he reassured. I glanced to the side to see a Kett sitting in an AA gun, scanning the skies for any shuttles. Fortunately for us, it doesn't seem like it can aim at ground troops. To help support our little bit of bullshit, I quickly aimed at and shot the gunner, another one quickly moving to replace him as Drack and I pushed forward. A pair of
Chosen ran around the corner, realizing that they were too late for reinforcements and were now face-to-face with an angry Krogan and a heavily armed and armored human.

Given the range, I didn't bother aiming. The first two rounds struck him in the upper chest, a hand moving to clutch it as the rounds attempted to burn through his bony exterior at the soft insides, but the third round struck him in the throat, where there was no white bony armor to protect him. He dropped his gun, and grabbed his neck with both hands as the round burned through and into his spine. Mine was as good as dead, and Drack's had taken a shotgun round in the chest, killing him instantly, so we continued the push, no time to watch one Kett die a slow death, though I did send another burst into his head as we passed as a mercy.

"Scott, Peebee and I see an entrance into the central building from our side. Should we join you?" Jaal asked.

"I see it too. No, stay outside, cover the others, make sure no other Kett come along your side or through the back if there is one," I ordered.

"Scott, if you're gonna start distracting these bastards inside you better do it soon, we got a lot of them coming to join us!" Vetra called out over comms.

"Entering the central building now, we'll kill who's on top and rain hell on anyone below. Just hold on a little longer! If you need to fall back, come the same way Drack and I did, have Cora give you a barrier," I ordered. Drack and I ran forward, surprised to find that only four Kett were upstairs. It seems the rest had gone downstairs to push the center team. Not if I can help it. We took cover against a railing on the other side from them, thankfully the second floor didn't have a middle, allowing us a perfect view of the first. Kill these asshats, and we can use some well-placed grenades. Drack and I stood together, I put a burst into one Kett and another burst into a second, killing both, and as predicted, the two shots I had taken had only depleted my shields, completely reflected by them, and I ducked into cover as Drack finished off his last.

"Drack, hand me one of your grenades. Let me try something," I told him. I pulled one from my own belt and he handed me one of his. I primed both, and summoning my biotics I threw both, directing them to be exactly where I wanted. The Anointed looked up to see the grenades floating over their heads just as they detonated, killing both and several other Chosen. Drack let out a low laugh at the carnage.

"Damn I wish I was biotic," Liam grumbled as Vetra led the central team in a push into the central complex, only a handful of Kett remaining inside. And to our luck, no back entrance, but there was the side one Jaal mentioned. The remaining Kett were slain without strong resistance.

"Only see one way out, Jaal's way in. Must lead down to the rest of the complex," I called out. Using their jump-jets, they joined us and we exited through the right side, regrouping with Jaal and Peebee. Either the Kett were running out of manpower, or they had fallen back for a last line of defense. As we moved along and saw the entrances into the main base itself, I knew it had to be the latter, there wasn't a Kett in sight along any of the three entrances. We jumped down and moved for the closest entrance on our right side. If reinforcements are there, I'll order the others to split up once more. Thing is, no one was there. It was simply one circular room with an obvious panel in the middle and a door in the back, though both locked and powered down.

"I am detecting several Kett waiting for the panel to open. Once it is, they will likely jump through in an attempt to surprise you," SAM warned.

"Shotguns ready," I ordered. There'd be a surprise alright… Drack, Cora, Liam, and Peebee stood
ready around the circle with me, shotguns out and ready to annihilate any Kett who tried to join us up here. Five Chosen and even an Anointed launched themselves upward, immediately finding themselves being riddled full of holes, blasted apart by shotguns, just being knocked back down, some corpses even missing a limb or two. We jumped down checking the room for any others and finding none, and the rest joined us as we pushed on down a longer corridor deeper into the base, without resistance. We entered a large room with three doors. Two were up on the same level as us, and the last in the center of the room below.

"Split up, two teams. One on the left, one on the right. We aren't taking the bottom one. I'd rather us take the high ground than have anyone down under where those up top can open fire. Vetra, Cora, Jaal, you're with me on the left. Drack, Peebee, Liam, on right," I ordered.

"Why does our team have less people?" Peebee asked.

"You don't, I count as two," Drack chuckled.

"Couldn't have said it better myself old man," I laughed. The banter doing its job of removing some nerves and we got ready for combat once more. I gave one more countdown before entering the next room. Kett lined the sides, mostly Chosen, but I saw two Anointed and a Destined. In the center of the room was a large Kett floating in the air, with an orange shield around him, orbited by a metal ball.

"Insolent creatures! I am Invictor! You shall pay dearly for your transgressions!" he roared as he began teleporting himself around the room. Not by a great amount, only a few meters with each, but he could do them quickly enough. And I shouldn't have been surprised that I was his target.

"Vetra, do your thing. Jaal, Cora, grenades to kill the Anointed and Destined, we all throw one, then focus on that orb around the commander!" I ordered. Vetra increased the power of her tech armor and turned off her armor's safeties, venting the heat of her Cyclone into her armor as she stood and unleashed hell on the Kett in front of her, while the rest of us threw our grenades. Sure enough, it got the desired effect, and all the Kett except Invictor on our side were shredded by Vetra or blown up by grenades. Under our combined fire-power, Invictor's orb didn't last long, but he managed to fire off an energy round towards Vetra, who dived to the side to avoid it. I could see the bits of Tech armor it did strike and how easily it broke through, dissipating it. May not be as strong as shields or standard armor, but it still showed how you don't want to be hit by that shit. As his shield dissipated, and Vetra worked on getting back up, we once more unleashed hell into the bastard. For some reason, his forehead was unprotected by a bony armor and a burst from my rifle easily burned out his brains and melted his face, as an arm was torn from his shoulder from Cora's shotgun and his chest was pock-marked with scorch marks and holes from Jaal's rifle.

With Invictor dead, we looked to see if the others needed a hand finishing off their Kett, but they were simply mopping up the last of the resistance. We watched as the final one found himself with a face-full of Krogan blade from Drack, slumping to the floor dead, and I gestured for them to join us in the level below. Which lacked any Kett. Seems they were hoping we were stupid enough to engage them from below.

"So, did we just assault a Kett stronghold and win?" Liam asked.

"And I didn't even get to shoot the leader," Drack grumbled.

"If Evfra is not already convinced that you are an asset, this, undoubtedly will," Jaal remarked.

"We're not done just yet. Find the control room, shut this whole place down, come on, should be this way. Keep your weapons ready, just in case," I warned, leading them through two more doors
and to an elevator. Much to our dismay, this elevator was slow as shit. It took at least five minutes to reach the top. I know we didn't descend much, I know the tower wasn't that tall. It should not have taken this long. Gave me Vietnam style flashbacks of living on the citadel. Finally, we reached the top, plenty of groaning from the others. The main console was at the far end of the room with a window outside just in front of it. I moved to look out the window first, looking out across the desert and plateaus of Eos. It was a very nice view I must say. It would be much nicer if not for the few dozen Kett structures scattered around down there. SAM informed that essentially, those structures were using the wind to generate this base's power. No doubt the Vault lessened just how much wind they got. I moved back to the console and interfaced, powering it down entirely.

"SAM, call Kandros," I ordered. A few moments later, he answered.

"Kandros here. What is it Ryder," he asked.

"You know the Kett base on Eos? The one not far from Prodromos?" I asked. He sighed as he began.

"I'm aware, yes. Been meaning to send an APEX strike force but lacked the intel. You launching an assault? Need backup?"

"Already been launched my friend. I'm speaking to you from the top of the base's tower and I just shut this place down. Was wondering if you could send a team to strip this place for parts, tech, and intel. Oh, and then blow it all to hell," I remarked. Kandros was silent for a moment as what I just told him processed.

"H-how did you even get in? That place was shielded!"

"Through the front door." The others snorted or laughed at my response, obviously being able to hear my conversation with him. Kandros chuckled too before he continued:

"Alright, I'll admit. I'm impressed. Team's on its way now," he answered.

"Good to know this eyesore will be gone soon. Speaking of which, I have an almost beautiful view up here being dirtied by what is essentially a Kett windfarm. Think that team can take out and blow up some of those?"

"Heh, I'll see what I can do. You've done good work today Scott. Prodromos can really start expanding now. Kandros out." I took another moment to look out the window and think. If it wasn't already clear to the Kett, this will certainly be a declaration of war with them. In the end, our victory here showed that it wasn't about who's tech was better, or who had the numbers. This was about the men and women in the fight. Their skill, their intelligence, and their tactics. Those have always been the central factors to winning war. Though the tools may change, War…

War never changes.
Here Be Dragons

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

With the Kett base out of commission, we had returned to Prodromos to deliver the news as well as see if they needed help with anything else. Plenty of things Prodromos had under control and we didn't need to concern ourselves with, such as a few mining and research drones that malfunctioned. However, some things were sketchy and Bradley was convinced that there was more going on. Some supply drops being stolen, only things left being scraps of the crates. A missing tech who was setting up some relays across the area, some seismic readings, and his people have seen the Kett particularly interested in some specific Rem-tech. Bradley even had suspicions that they were under surveillance by the Kett. Scouts being ambushed in the middle of nowhere as if they had known. The Tempest had yet to return from searching for the Kett supply drops allegedly coming in, as needing to search and scan the system outside of FTL would be more time consuming, so using the Nomad we were borrowing had split the team up to divide and conquer.

My team, Jaal, Vetra, and Liam, would be handling the stolen supply drops and the seismic readings. Team two, Cora, Peebee, and Drack would be handling the missing technician, the Rem-tech, and the Kett surveillance. Bradley briefed us on both situations. On days where Kett activity was higher, the Nexus' supply drops would be dead drops scattered around the area and a team would go to recover it. Problem is, when the team got there the crates would be in shreds, the supplies gone entirely, and Kaerkyn scrounging around. Thing is, those crates should not be able to be broken open by them. If Kett, why not set an ambush for the recovery team? They seem hell-bent on killing us anyways. As for the seismic readings, Bradley's team believed we could make use of some seismic hammers to re-direct the water table beneath the surface to where Prodromos could reach it, making the colony that much more self-sufficient. Thing is, the locations where the hammers are needed are too close to Remnant sites for Bradley's liking. Hence our aid. Given the stolen supplies were closer, might as well start there first. Though they likely won't need the dead drops anymore with the Kett base soon going to be a pile of rubble, there's still the concern of a leak. Some threat to Eos' security.

All the sites were to the east of Prodromos, more or less around the lake that housed the entrance to the Vault. To the west and you'd be too close to the Kett base for a dead drop. I parked the Nomad on the Northwest end of the lake where the first dead drop should be. Sure enough, Kaerkyn and shards of the metal crate scattered about. Being nothing more than large and stupid bugs, they presented no problem and ran a scan of what was left.

"Pathfinder, the sensors remaining within the scraps confirm that the crate was first opened using standard protocols. Bradley was correct. The animals are not responsible," SAM stated.

"Kett or exile?" I questioned.

"I cannot be certain. Though unlikely that the Kett would know the standard protocol, it is also not difficult to learn. It is, after all, a crate," SAM remarked.

"Was the AI just being a smart-ass?" Liam asked.

"He's learning! Soon enough he'll have a body and start dancing around crying out 'I'm a real boy!'" I joked. Unsurprisingly, Vetra and Jaal both were confused by my reference.

"Pathfinder, I am an AI, not a wooden puppet without strings. And, I do not tell lies," SAM
"You almost had it SAM, points for the attempt though," I chuckled.

"Scott, what is this about puppets and lies?" Jaal questioned. Liam snorted at the confusion of our not quite so human crewmates.

"Old human fairy tale. This puppet named Pinocchio that magically came to life and then just wanted to be a real boy, made of flesh not wood. And whenever he lied, his nose would grow," I explained.

"Wait, so what would happen if he said, 'My nose will now grow?'" Vetra asked.

"That, my Turian friend, is a Paradox. His nose would probably snap in two. So, SAM, what do we need to do to find these thieves?" I questioned, bringing us back on topic.

"We must either attempt to triangulate a general position from where the thieves base themselves, using scans from other crates, or by using dating for markings and other potential clues the scanner can detect to estimate a general location from which they stage the theft. If they emit any kind of signal uncommon within a desert, I will be able to detect it when nearby," SAM explained.

"So, we're practically going to be searching for a needle in a haystack," Liam remarked with an exasperated sigh.

"Let's just hope we can find something. Least get rid of most of that hay… Wait, SAM, can't you just take the coordinates of all the drop sites and go from there? I mean if they're all going to be trashed anyway, this would save us some time," I suggested.

"I felt it would be prudent to get a full scan of each site, to be fully certain, but yes, I can do so. Searching for likely locations… Complete. I believe it is likely that the thieves are based to the west of Prodromos. Among the plateaus south of the Kett base."

"Then we have a destination. Bit of a drive but not too long. Doubt we'll run into much, but near the Kett base stay alert. No doubt they're pissed at us for it," I warned. I led the others back to the Nomad and drove south, towards a cave on a ridge near Prodromos, should lead us to exactly where we need to be. In the distance, I saw team two, the Nomad being driven by Cora, driving down a hill from the ridgeline instead of the fun way, simply driving off the cliff. I can practically hear Drack groaning in disappointment. With the new upgrades to the boosts, I think I have an idea…

"Hold on guys, testing out Gil's upgrades," I warned, nearing the ridgeline at full speed.

"Scott, I really hope your idea doesn't involve slamming us into solid rock," Jaal remarked a bit nervously.

"Oh, I know what you're doing, come on! Faster!" Vetra exclaimed with a chuckle and smirk.

"Gil calls this a boost? Back on the ship, I am so having a ta-" Liam began, but before he could finish, I shifted into six-wheel drive and slammed down on the speed boost, launching us up the ridgeline and getting some decent airtime as we yelled out in excitement and thrill. At first, Jaal's cries were one of terror. But when he saw that we weren't about to slam into a rock wall, they slowly but surely changed to ones just like ours. We hit the ground with a thud and I kept driving as our laughter died down.

"Never gets old," Vetra chuckled.
"Reminds me of roller coasters from back home. Damn I miss theme parks," Liam remarked.

"Still remember when Sara and I were younger, least during the times that we lived on Earth, Mom would take us to Disney all the time. No stress, no schedule, just a relaxing day, going on the rides, and people watching. Had season passes," I remarked.

"Why not Universal or one of the others?" Liam questioned.

"Universal's decent, sure, and going to Sea-world or Busch gardens can be fun to see some animals and their rides, but they don't have that little Disney touch. The details, the lengths they go to for kids. One of my favorite things to do would be to watch the 'cast members' as they call them, go out of their regular routine to do something for a kid or group of them that just made their year. Hell, just being a polite person to them means they will move mountains to help you out. Be an ass and they do jack-shit. Pretty sure that's part of their training." I joked.

"Theme parks? This Knee? What knee? Again, I am confused by your human culture. Vetra, are you confused as well?" Jaal asked.

"A bit. But my sister is into weird old human shit, some of those names sounded familiar. Not sure, but I think it's some kind of kids thing," she shrugged. I noticed that a flash of anger quickly followed by a slightly shameful look crossed Liam's face at the mention of Sid. So long as another fight doesn't start.

"Yes and no. And it's Disney, Jaal. At first, they made fairy tale movies, and that's generally what they're known for. After first contact they started reaching into the cultures of the other species and making movies off of their fairy tales. Unsurprisingly though, not Turians. Those were always a bit too bloody and violent for their kid friendly style. Also Unsurprisingly they were all over Asari fairy tales. Anyways, earlier on they branched out, bought the company that had a whole universe's worth of superheroes, made movies, damn good ones, out of those. Action and violence and shit but still within kid friendly boundaries. Then they got the rights to what is arguably the most legendary Sci-fi movie franchise of all time, started making movies off that when the latest one was somewhere close to a decade old. As for theme parks, roller coasters, fun rides for thrills. Get in a fast-moving car on a set of rails, whip and fly all over and let gravity do its work on you while in it. Damn it I'm feeling homesick," I muttered.

"Wait, you love a theme park of guys who made a bunch of kids movies? Wouldn't the parks be all kiddy too? Just how old were you two?" Vetra teased as we continued driving along.

"Don't bother trying Vetra, doesn't work for Disney. The parks themselves aren't that heavy on the kid movie themes. It's not something you'll forget in the park but most places in it were either a time period from human history, a region back on Earth, or a famous landmark and its surroundings, just shrunken down. The only places heavy on the fairy tale themes were the places where all the rides were meant for the kids," I explained.

"It sounds fun. I hope you humans build some… theme parks, here in Heleus," Jaal remarked. "I believe the Angara would enjoy them."

"Wouldn't that be something? The people of two different galaxies, coming together as they ride roller coasters, eating Cotton candy and popcorn all day," I joked.

"Don't forget giant pretzels. Ooh and pizza!" Liam exclaimed. Damn now I feel hungry.

"And Ice-cream. Can't forget Ice-cream. Hell, I'd just settle for a good cheeseburger. Cooked rare, blue cheese. Melt in your mouth. Really hope it won't be much longer till the genes for cow are
pulled from storage. I need some beef. And what I wouldn't give for a good steak dinner. My mouth waters just at the thought," I reminisced.

"I'd be content just getting my hands on some Graxen. It's like your popcorn, but even better," Vetra remarked.

"And why's that Ms. Nyx?" I questioned teasingly.

"Simple. Because I can eat it," she laughed. Liam, Jaal and I let out a snort or a laugh at her smug and unexpected reply.

"Well...shit. Heh, when you put it that way," I chuckled. "Any other treats?"

"Always enjoyed some Shatha. Shit was expensive though, some places would grow their meat in vats essentially, no way in hell are you farming those things. Few companies would sell tickets for hunting expeditions to go after them. Not unheard of that a few people don't make it back from them. And yet that doesn't deter them."

"To me, your foods are so bland. Angaran foods are so tasteful," Jaal spoke.

"Jaal, what you've tried doesn't count. MREs, basic foodstuffs, shit that lasts a while. It's the kind of stuff you eat when you can't afford any luxuries. When we actually settle down and can start cooking the good stuff, you'll change your mind, trust me," I defended.

"You cook, Scott?" Vetra asked.

"Oh, pfft. Not unless you count turning something into char cooking. I can cook a frozen pizza when it tells me what temperature and the time, and I can cook a frozen hamburger patty. That's pretty much it. So, when everyone else who actually knows what they're doing starts cooking the good stuff, is what I meant to say," I chuckled. Now we were nearing the cave that would take us West of Prodromos, we were near the second Monolith as well as a ridge overlooking the outpost.

"Hey, can we stop the Nomad for a moment? Want to take a moment," Vetra requested.

"Piss break? I thought I told all you darn kids to go before we left," I joked. Still, I slowed and parked the Nomad.

"Ass, that's not what I wanted to stop for," Vetra laughed, getting out. The rest of us exited the Nomad as well, following her to the ridge overlooking Prodromos. She sat on the ledge, dangling her legs over looking out on the colony, watching its people walk around and go about their brand-new lives in Andromeda. I sat down beside her, Jaal to my other side, and Liam to his. She let out a small sigh, but not one of annoyance or anything negative. This was a sigh of relief.

"For over year. For fourteen damn months, this is exactly the view we've wanted. Just a simple outpost. Just... people living, getting on with their new lives. Hmph, just like the brochures said we would."

"It is rare to witness a true beginning. It is... inspiring. The very thought that your people journeyed across dark space, from one galaxy to another, and here you are, creating a new life is... extraordinary," Jaal remarked.

"If I helped make this and all I got were some battle scars? Well, worth it," Liam remarked.

"We did this once, and we can do it again. Now, we have an outpost. Someday, a town. Eventually? A city. Won't that be something else. Imagine, sitting on this ridge, fifty years or so
from now, looking out on the city of Prodromos. Remembering when this was just an empty valley, remembering the shuttles with the pre-fabs coming in. Remembering this view, at this moment, compared to what it is then. Knowing the hand you had in building it," I muttered, just loud enough for the others to here.

"That'll be the day," Vetra replied. She let out another sigh before standing up. "Come on, why don't we go find the people stealing from what we keep daydreaming about huh?"

The rest of us stood, getting back into the Nomad and driving into the cave.

"Shit, Kett tech, watch for an ambush," I warned, reversing slightly and preparing to boost over a small hill and out the other side of the cave. I floored it, a few rounds striking the Nomad's shields, but I saw something.

"Woah go back, that was an Ark escape pod!" Vetra called out. The distinct design was impossible to miss on the ridge of the cave that was now above us.

"Get ready for a fight. No way in hell am I letting the Kett keep that," I ordered. I got out first and summoned a barrier to give the others cover as they exited the Nomad. The Kett were moving to get new sightlines on us, the rounds bouncing off my barrier and SAM keeping me from getting too tired. "Use the Nomad for cover, get a few picks. The rocks aren't thick enough to protect us. Gotta end this quickly, don't want them doing too much damage." Once everyone was out, I made the barrier small enough to just cover me which also allowed me to move without issue, joining Jaal at the front tires as Liam and Vetra took cover behind the second row. Vetra and Liam both crouched so that when they fired, they were on a knee allowing Jaal and I an open line of fire not blocked by friends. We didn't have the time for precision, and they weren't too far away either, so I used my Sweeper to take out some of the chosen coming at us. Their shots were pinging off the Nomad's shields first, leaving us more time to shoot and mow them down.

Sure enough, the Chosen's lack of shields and the Nomad's supplementing our own, we eliminated the Kett without issue. Slowly, expecting more, we walked back deeper into the cave for the path up to the escape pod itself. Surprisingly, each and every Kett in here had attempted to charge that. Rather stupid of them honestly. The Kett had the escape pod and several other Initiative supplies that they had been examining, yet no bodies.

"Pathfinder, the Escape pod is marked as one from Ark Natanus. However, the flight recorder has been severely damaged. I cannot recover any navigational data from it," SAM explained.

"Damn it, must have been the Scourge. Escape pod nav systems are built to withstand just about anything. Scourge is the only thing we've come across here to screw with that," Vetra stated. "Just hope the Ark is still intact."

"We'll find em Vetra. We'll find all of them," I reassured. She remained quiet and we all returned to the Nomad, we should be close to the thieves now.

"I'm sorry about freaking out on you the other day Nyx. About your sister," Liam spoke.

"You're sorry, huh?" Vetra questioned, a bit aggressively.

"Yeah, I suppose I was feeling afraid, nervous about everything that's going on here, and then I imagined what it must be like for a kid, I projected," Liam explained.

"You said you're sorry that you got pissed. Not for what you've said. So what you're saying is that you regret getting pissed off but you still feel exactly the same way, don't you?" she accused. "Tell
"Well..." he began.

"Knew it. My whole damn life raising my sister after my father vanished off the face of the damned galaxy there's always been someone who's never raised a kid in their lives trying to tell me what I need to do differently. People who have absolutely no idea what I've done for her and what it's been like for me, let alone her. There's always someone judging, and it's something I thought I finally fucking escaped when I signed on for the Initiative," she muttered, crossing her arms over her chest and turning to look out the window, letting out a deep breath. Yeah, not getting involved right now. I have little doubt this outburst was a mix of stress from the still unknown condition of Natanus, and just built up anger from being judged for her doing everything she can for her sister. We continued to drive around, hunting for the thieves in awkward silence.

"Well, well, well. You're a long way from the flock, little duck," a gruff voice appeared on the comms. That got everyone's attention.

"The hell? Who is this?" I questioned.

"A man who's got work for you. Here are my coordinates. Pay me a visit when you can," he requested, proceeding to immediately end the comm.

"Think that's our thief SAM?"

"Negative. During your conversation with this individual, I detected movement and signals from this plateau. Climb to the top, and you should find them," SAM informed.

"Wanna check it out? Little duck?" Vetra teased, speaking up for the first time since the argument, and thankfully a bit more cheerful.

"Don't. If anyone here is going to be a 'little duck,' it's going to be you. You literal bird-brain," I retorted with a chuckle.

"Again, more phrases I do not understand," Jaal chuckled.

"A duck is a bird back on Earth," I explained.

"And Turians are technically Avian," Vetra spoke.

"Still think you guys look more like Dinosaurs. Guess it's just that evolutionary gap between lizard and bird," I remarked.

"If I had a credit for every time I heard that one..." Vetra chuckled.

"Don't come any closer Pathfinder! We'll shoot!" a human voice appeared on our calms, younger, clearly more nervous. Exiles?

"If you're the ones taking those supply crates, and if you know who I am, a fight isn't what you're looking for," I warned. "Put your weapons down, and I promise you won't be harmed." The man paused, considering his options.

"Damn it, you're right. We're waiting," he muttered. SAM could have simply traced the comm, but no need. I could see their encampment in a small depression in the top of this plateau. A few barriers, and supplies covered by a tarp. I parked in front of the encampment and we all exited. There were three humans, two men and a woman. One sitting on the ground, shipping a bottle.
Beer? Water? Probably beer. They certainly had a double take with Jaal, but kept their focus on me.

"So, who are you?" I questioned. A light skinned, bald man stepped forward, likely the same one who was on the comm.

"Chase Gagnon. Used to be maintenance. Look, we weren't trying to hurt anyone, it's why we never laid an ambush or traps," he explained. Yep, definitely the same guy.

"How did you even know about the dead drops?" Vetra asked.

"Tapped into the comms, some slight hacking for the encryption. We needed to make sure we never showed up at the same time as anyone else," Chase answered.

"Then why?" I questioned.

"Didn't want to be outlaws. We have family on the Nexus. Thing is, we didn't exactly expect to be welcome. Tann hasn't been forgiving. Not that we deserve it anyway," he solemnly remarked. He certainly seemed to regret taking part in the mutiny.

"Why'd you mutiny?" I needed to know everything before I came to a decision.

"No hope. We thought we were all going to die. After being exiled, we saw just how worse it could be. People preying on their own. Anarchy, survival of the fittest. We couldn't take part in that, so we hid out here hoping that maybe… I don't know. Something," he explained.

"But why steal? I could care less about the mutiny, Tann's an ass, Addison's a bitch, neither inspire confidence in leadership," I remarked.

"Maybe things really are starting to look up then. Anyways, exile means they kill you if you come back, and none of us have a death wish. We're not pirates, we came to Andromeda to build, not destroy. So, we watched. Watched you build, it was something at least."

"You know as well as I do that I can't let the theft continue. The supplies do need to get to Prodromos."

"We're not asking to continue. Just… damn it we tried all right? We tried and just… we fucked it all up. We have no goddamn defense. We got scared, did shitty things, and regret it. We just want to believe that there's a way back."

"Which is why I'm not going to kick you off Eos. I'm not Tann, unlike him, I'm not convinced that everyone who mutinied is a murderous scumbag. And I've made it a personal policy that his opinion means fuck all to me. I'll talk to Bradley at Prodromos. They aren't going to turn down honest help. Hard work will be your way back." The three humans just stared at me in shock.

"I… I'm numb. I don't know if there are words…" Chase muttered.

"There doesn't need to be. Just pack up, get to Prodromos, and get to work. I'll make sure Bradley is expecting you." They rushed to begin packing, slight smiles crossing their faces, slowly breaking into larger and larger grins. I simply led my team back to the Nomad and began to find whoever the hell called me "Little Duck."

"I had some friends get exiled. Good to think that maybe they won't always be," Vetra remarked. We neared the coordinates to see a Kett truck turned over and on fire, even corpses strewn about. All of which were Kett.
"I think Drack would like this guy," I joked, and Vetra snorted in reply. We entered the door to see more Kett corpses and an older, mustached man sitting on one of their corpses, smoking a cigarette.

"Would you look who decided to show," he greeted. Mix of friendly and snarkily. Wasn't getting any bad vibes or intentions out of him, so I relaxed a bit.

"Your handiwork?" I questioned.

"Not as impressive as taking out a whole goddamn base, but yeah, mine. Bain Massani. Kett hunting's a hobby of mine," he introduced.

"Wait, Massani? You any chance related to Zaeed Massani? He has quite the reputation back in the Terminus," Vetra asked.

"Gave me his name and nothing else. Had left my mother long before I was born. Became a merc myself, and being his bastard son helped my reputation, and helped me get some better contracts. Still, wanted to be my own man and not his bastard, so I came out here," he answered.

"Might not have been too hard to do that back home had you waited much longer. Heard he had signed on for some sort of suicide mission," she remarked.

"And if you know his reputation, you know it wouldn't have been his first suicide mission. No, the old fucker survived, I'd bet on that. I didn't call you here to talk about the past. I've been tracking the Kett across Eos, marking locations to target. You took out the crown jewel, but obviously they haven't left Eos yet. Want to protect that shiny new outpost? Keep your momentum up, kick their fucking assess off this goddamn planet. Sending nav-points to you now," he explained.

"Let me guess, finding you before this would have weakened the base, wouldn't it?" I asked.

"Got it in one," he chuckled.

"Wish you contacted me sooner than. Would have loved to weaken the place before launching the assault. Unfortunately, none of our intel on the base said, 'fuck them up over here, weaken these fuckers in their base.'"

"Least you're smart enough to know the value of sabotage," Bain remarked. "Anyways, happy hunting."

"I got an APEX demo team coming in to blow the base to hell, might pass off the coordinates to them. Got more business on Eos and off-world, but I still want these places destroyed," I explained.

"Which is why I only sent you two. Thing is, Pathfinder, I wouldn't mind watching someone who wiped out a Kett base in action. Take out these two locations, I'll see the methods you have, learn something myself. Then, I'll send you a list of every Kett location I've scouted and all the intel I have on them. Sorry Pathfinder, old habits die hard," he explained.

"Alright, fine, I'll get it done," I sighed

"Excellent. First thing is the power generator just next door. Take them out, then break the generator. After that, the Barracks on the ridgeline just to the east. I'll contact you with the coordinates when you're done." I led the team out the door:

"Thinking we just walk through the back? Sneak up on the bastards?" I suggested.
"Or you and I sneak from the back, Liam and Vetra attack from the front as a distraction," Jaal gave his opinion. With recent hostilities, I'd rather not, just to be safe.

"Fuck it, you go from behind, we attack from the front. Might be better for more of us to distract," I shrugged.

"I'll comm you when I'm in position," Jaal informed, activating his cloak and making his way to the back. I ran with the others towards the front of the small power facility, taking cover behind some rocks in the front. About five Kett took cover against the railing and opened fire, yet I doubted that was it. We were pinned behind these rocks by the constant fire, but I noticed how close together the lot of them were. I focused my biotics to form a shockwave and launched it just slightly above the railing so that it would push the Kett down towards the ground. Wouldn't kill, but it would give us a chance. It worked as planned, three of the Kett falling over, and I took the chance to shoot at some of the Chosen as Liam threw a grenade, Kett blood and limbs launching outwards from the explosion.

"In position Scott. Clear for me to engage? Or will there be more grenades?" Jaal questioned.

"Go. Liam, no more grenades, don't want to blow up Jaal," I ordered, leading the others in a charge up the ramp into the entryway. We checked our corners, no contacts. We entered the center of the small facility, to see an Anointed, dead on the ground in the back, and a Chosen rapidly searching the room before turning to see us. He cried out something in his language, before his head shot up and his throat simply opened up, green blood spurting out as Jaal's cloak wore off and he allowed the Kett to slump to the ground.

"Resistance was light," he shrugged.

"You mean we did most of the work for you," Liam teased.

"Let's just shut down the power and get a move on. Prodromos still needs that water," I remarked, walking to the main console and shutting it off, then proceeding to riddle the console with energy rounds for good measure. Another location to mark for the demo team. Speaking of which, I saw a pair of shuttles descend from orbit and land within the Kett base. Won't be long now till we get some fire-works. Instead of following the path to the ridgeline up a hill, I simply drove up the ridge, the fun way. Not that it was very high in the first place, and parked the Nomad in front of some rocks outside the barracks. A few Chosen scrambled to the windows and opened fire and a trio rushed out of the door to face us head on. Thing is, doing so put them in the open and Vetra mowed them down with her Cyclone. The pain in our ass began when an Anointed set up and unleashed a hail of energy from a platform on the left.

"Jaal, drain his shields, I'll handle the rest," I ordered. He followed suit, returning to taking shots at the Kett in the windows above as I too drained his shields. The Anointed was smart enough to take cover, but I had accounted for that. Using my biotics, I pulled him upwards, leaving him as a large target out in the open, completely at my mercy. Unfortunately for him, right now that simply extends to a quick death. Using my Black Widow, I easily pulled off the headshot as he slowly drifted higher into the air, struggling to be released by this invisible hand, and his corpse went limp, falling back to the ground. All that were left now were a pair of Chosen shooting at us from the Barrack's second floor. It was tempting to simply charge them with my biotics and use a Nova to wrap things up, but I didn't know if there were any Kett waiting within the Barracks. I highly doubted it, given Kett tactics as we've fought them so far, but better safe than sorry. I put a round through one's head, leaving that familiar green mist, and Jaal put a round into the head of the other, vaporizing some of his head, melting the rest.

"Get inside the barracks, do a sweep, just to be safe," I ordered. We stayed armed and in formation,
me on point up the ramp towards the barracks entrance. The room was void of life, lit by orange lights, a few tables and chairs inside. Even spilled containers containing a kind of sludge. Protein sludge apparently. The next room over had a few more chairs and several cots. One had a data pad, SAM was barely able to translate. In essence, Invictor, the ass we killed commanding the Kett facility was ordering the troops on Eos to focus on Initiative people and our tech, ignoring orders to study the Remnant. And he was ambitious, hoping that doing so would raise him up in Kett hierarchy. Only thing he's raising now are daisies. I turned to see a blue mist had appeared in the middle of the room, a slight ripple in the air moving closer and closer to Jaal. Everyone was scrounging throughout the room for tech or salvage, anything that could be of use. Seems though that this destined had slipped through. Without time to hesitate, I focused on that slight ripple and summoned my biotics for a charge, instantly appearing by the bastard's side and knocking him to the ground, the others turning to see what all the fuss was about. The Destined snarled in anger as I pinned him to the ground, struggling to turn his shotgun to me. I quickly grabbed the Scorpion pistol from my belt and shoved it into his mouth, eyes going wide, and pulled the trigger.

He was both confused and shocked further by the sticky and gel-like ball that appeared at the back of his throat and he tried to pull it out, only to have it stick to his hand as I got off him. It might have even suffocated him, had it not blown up, vaporizing his head and his chest.

"Very nice little duck, very nice," Bain's voice appearing on our comms.

"Of all the nicknames," I muttered. Bain simply chuckled at me.

"You fulfilled your end, now I'll do mine. Here's the coordinates and a full briefing on each Kett outpost I've scouted. Tell Kandros that Bain sends his regards," he ended, cutting his comms as a rather long list of intel was transmitted to my Omni-tool.

"SAM, get this in a message to Kandros. Brief him on how we got it, and that I'm leaving it up to him for when to move on them. But let him know that I'd recommend sending some APEX teams soon," I ordered. SAM acknowledged and we moved to check the second floor for posterity. A part of me wishes I hadn't. The first 'room' of the second floor was missing half its roof. Intentionally. The front housing a terminal, the back, without a roof, an AA gun. The second room housed a console and a few examination tables. One of which was occupied. The naked corpse of a Turian woman. A mandible torn off. Not cut, torn, strings of flesh sticking out proving that much. Her forehead plate missing, a gash of dried blood in its place. Other plates on her head were cracked or shattered. Her torso was covered in incisions, her carapace shattered in some places, removed in others. The rest of her body was much the same, incisions, broken and removed plates. No doubt a slow and painful death.

"Anyone got something to cover her up?" I asked quietly. We couldn't just leave her here like this. We'd of course have the demo team come pick up her body, but we, personally, can't take the body.

"Here, take this. I can get another no problem," Vetra muttered, handing me the scarf thing she wears around her neck while armored. I placed it over her waist, covering her from there to her knees. Turian women don't have breasts, so no reason to cover that up too. Among all her wounds I had failed to notice that her eyes were still open. They were… haunting. Frozen in pain and shock and fear, her mouth slightly opened in a scream. I gently moved my hands over her face to close her eyes, and closed her mouth, allowing her to finally rest. I'm not a religious man, and though I hope for an afterlife, I accept that there might be none. Nonetheless, it's respectful. And whatever she went through, she deserves it.

"Scott, there are… some logs here, on the terminal. Audio…" Jaal muttered.
"Play it," I sighed.

"I am Invictor. This one is different. Exoskeleton. Dextro-based," a familiar Kett voice spoke. His voice so… professional, as if it's a goddamn lab experiment on a rat.

"You haven't asked any questions?" the Turian woman nervously stated.

"Do you know the exact force required to detach your dermal plates? I thought not," he replied calmly. Then the screaming began. Even more haunting than the eyes.

"Turn it off, Jaal. Just turn it off," I muttered. He obliged immediately.

Vetra snarled, her eyes full of rage as she glanced back at the nameless corpse and Liam slammed his fist into a wall, muttering curses. Jaal simply sighed and looked down, no doubt he's seen worse done to the Angara.

"Really glad we killed that motherfucker," I growled.

"I only wish he didn't die so quickly. That we could go back and slowly peel the bones off his fucking head and claw out his spirits damned eyes," Vetra roared. I let out another sigh to calm myself before keying my comms for the APEX demo team.

"Sergeant Ajax, what do you need Pathfinder?" a Turian voice answered the call.

"Sending you my coordinates, Kett barracks, just cleared out. Before you blow the base, I need you to come here and retrieve a body. Turian, female, one of the settlers," I ordered, glancing back at the body. "And bring something to cover her, leave her more decent than we could," I asked softly.

"Damn it," he sighed. "Got a name?"

"Scanning… Aemina Canril" I answered.

"Then may the spirits welcome her," he replied solemnly. "We'll bring her home Pathfinder. Thank you. Ajax out."

"When he hears about this, no doubt Kandros is going to see that Eos gets a lot of APEX squads, kick the fuckers off this planet," Liam growled.

"And I've half a mind to join them," Vetra remarked, calming down slightly.

"That makes two of us. Damn it. We may not have been able to help her, but at least we made sure that this 'Invictor,' never gets to do this shit ever again. Least we can do is keep helping Prodromos. Let's go get them their water," I muttered an order.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We were coming up on the second location for the seismic hammers. The first one had made quite the boom and shook the ground, also bringing out a bunch of Remnant given where exactly we had to use it. Jaal wanted one. "Important reasons," he had said. I think we may be less alien to each other than we think. I had to do a double take when I saw the site where we needed to place the second hammer. It was occupied. Humans. Armed and armored, defensive positions, but their weapons were not raised. We parked outside their position, in plain view and right in front of them and I ordered the others to start unloading the second hammer while I spoke with their leader. A
light skinned man, bald head wearing some more rustic scav like armor approached.

"Pathfinder huh? No need to ask if you're friend or foe," he casually remarked.

"Generally, the only things I'm looking to shoot are Kett and Remnant. Exile or Nexus?" I asked.

"Exiles," he answered, using air quotes. "Not like Kadara though. We're from the sovereign nation of Advent, few hundred klicks south. Our nation. No Nexus interference. We didn't come to Andromeda to fuel Tann's regime. In Advent, we're all free citizens," he explained.

"From what I see, Tann has less power than he thinks. Kandros, Kesh, and now me are practically against them. Addison seems to be more just… her side. But I understand and can respect your decision. And respect that you've made something for yourselves out here. Question though. Our orbital views of Eos show a few hundred Klicks of fuck all down south. No sign of Advent. Just, where is it?" I asked.

"Heh, maybe I should get you a passport for our capital. When the showers work again, that is," he chuckled. "Aurora is in a nice hollow of caves. Even before the storms stopped it was cozy.

"Wouldn't mind a diplomatic trip. One of my goals is to better relations with the exiles. Bring them back if they want it, make trade with them if they don't. Plus, it will be fun to watch Tann squirm when he needs to make apologies," I joked. "As for the showers, let me guess, water table dropped?"

"How'd you know?"

"Prodromos detected the shift in it. These seismic hammers we have are meant to use the tremors going on to shift it so Prodromos can reach it," I explained.

"Shit. Advent needs that water supply to stay independent. Look, Pathfinder, consider a deal?" he requested.

"Depends on the deal. Tell me."

"Our surveys show a massive Natural gas deposit just around here. Tap that instead, we mine the gas, trade it to your outpost, everybody wins." I thought for a moment but…

"I want Advent to stay independent, I want to help you out, but we just cleaned Eos up, and it's probably in a fragile state right now. I'm not eager to start screwing it over again. But, I think we can work something else out. Essentially, split the water 50/50. Sure, it will need to be transported, but I think that's essentially what you were expecting to need to do out here anyway. Mayor Bradley is a good guy, he'd be willing to make a deal like that. Advent would be getting more than just keeping water out of this. If you have people popping near Prodromos to get the water, you could trade as well. Everyone gets supplies, and yours may include some old creature comforts from home brought on the Nexus," I explained.

"Hm, maybe, Pathfinder. But I'm just a scout, this is the kind of thing I'd need to talk to people about back at Advent. As it stands I'd rather you get the gas deposit, after all that kind of thing will take a long time to screw with Eos. And would also take a helluva lot being used up. Back on Earth it happened across centuries then we stopped, after all. But I can't stop you, I'm not stupid enough to try and take you down, and you're doing good work out here anyway. Just… think about it," he pleaded. He moved to direct his men to pack up for the trip home as the team was putting the final touches on the hammer.

"What was that all about?" Liam asked.
"Guys from an independent nation they set up few hundred klicks south. Their water table dropped, and that's the same water table Prodromos needs. They suggested I use the hammers to tap some natural gas nearby, and they mine it, trade it with Prodromos. Given we just fixed Eos, I wasn't too eager to take that deal," I began.

"So the hell's going to happen to them then?" Liam questioned a bit more angrily.

"Calm down Kosta, let me finish. Instead, I suggested that they split the water with Prodromos, and that too opens some trading. He didn't accept or refuse the offer, saying he needed to speak with others back in Advent first. Thing is, we don't have the time to wait, so we're tapping the water. They can accept the deal or find another source," I explained.

"Though hard, I find it to be a wise decision. The Angara would not approve of your first world being industrialized with smog and smoke," Jaal remarked.

"That was part of my reasoning. Not hard to imagine that the Angara have their eye on Eos. Our actions here say a lot," I replied, activating the hammer. The ground shook once more and I led the others back to the Nomad and to a Remnant area just to the East. Placing the hammer on the North side would shift the water, and south would tap the gas. We went to the North side. We got out and placed the hammer. "Get in cover, like the first one, expect Remnant," I warned, activating the hammer. Another large booming noise as the ground shook. Several Remnant bots formed on the other side of the hammer, an observer and two Assemblers. Between Vetra's disruptor Cyclone rounds and my Sweeper, the shields collapsed like a house made of wet tissue paper and the Observer crashed to the ground. Jaal's rifle pierced the main circuits of an Assembler, and a few controlled bursts from Liam brought down the bots.

"With the amount of boom these hammers give off, I'm surprised there aren't more," Liam remarked.

"Anyone else wondering just what might be causing these tremors? Can't be an Earthquake, those are a one and done kind of thing. Sure, some aftershock, but not like this," Vetra cautioned.

"Maybe the vault?" I suggested.

"I doubt that. Aya rarely ever has tremors, and there have been no reports of any on Havarl since the vault was re-set," Jaal answered.

"Well shit..." I muttered, as I led the others back to the Nomad. Only one more hammer, up the hill, and in another Remnant site. We got the hammer placed without incident and I gave the same warning to the team before activating it. It shook and for a moment, nothing happened. "Let's get back to Prodromos an-" the ground shook once more. Heavily. A plume of sand and smoke erupted from a clearing amongst the Remnant metals in front of us and a giant, four-pronged head of a giant metal Remnant worm shot out upwards, it's body segmented with its armor plating like scales. A bit below the head, the body split into three large and long legs, piercing into the ground and stabilizing itself. Below its head, two smaller tentacles like structures extended, the ends suspiciously like gun barrels. The massive bot looked skyward and let out a metallic screech. It looked back down towards us, it's "mouth" rotating and electricity surging within.

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST WHAT THE FLYING FUCK IS THAT FUCKING THING?!” I exclaimed, running back into cover.

"First, we assault a Kett base, and now this shit? Least it never gets boring," Vetra remarked.

"Stars above, we have no records of such things," Jaal yelled out.
"It's bigger than the goddamn Tempest!" Liam noticed. Great. Fucking great. I immediately called Peebee over the comms.

"What is it Scott? Kinda busy over here," she answered amidst the sound of gunfire.

"Peebee, the fuck is this thing? And we need reinforcements!" I yelled out.

"Stuck in a firefight in a Remnant ruin, we got a damn destroyer. What are yo- BY THE FUCKING GODDESS THE HELL IS THAT THING?! SAM just sent me an image. Scott, I got no fucking clue, and we can't get backup. We'll try but-ah shit, gotta go," she ended the call.

"Pathfinder, this is Sergeant Ajax," he spoke over the comms. Thank fuck they noticed over there. "I got this funny feeling that you just so happen to be right next to whatever the hell that monstrosity is. We're ready to assist."

"Do NOT approach via shuttle, it looks like it has some heavy guns on it, and no doubt they'd shred right through a shuttle," I warned.

"Think we can use the shuttle to get most of the way, run the rest of it?" he suggested.

"Try it, but again DO NOT get close with the shuttle."

"Acknowledged, but you'll be on your own until we can walk the rest of the way," he cautioned. Shit, it's risky but I may want to try open comms.

"This is Pathfinder Scott Ryder on open comms calling for the scouts from Advent. I really hope you're still in the area and can see this thing, we could use some backup!" I exclaimed as one of this monstrosities weapons lit up and all three of its legs opened slightly to reveal glowing red lights. I ducked into cover and braced myself against the Remnant metal, hoping it would hold. A barrage of orange energy slammed, round after round into the cover.

"I recommend aiming for its legs when they glow. I believe those contain power circuits that are left vulnerable," SAM suggested.

"Focus fire on the leg closest to us, we need to take this thing down," I ordered. "Tech attacks, grenades, throw fucking everything you have at it. Run out of ammo? Take handfuls of sand and throw it at the thing!" We opened fire and with each shot the leg sparked a bit. The barrage of rounds against my cover stopped and instead a strange mass, perhaps shards of metal, some electricity, or maybe even a kind of gas began to form within its mouth, a series of red lights, like laser sights in front of it, right over me. Fuck that, I ran out of its path and into new cover to see that very mass engulf the area I was just in. Gotta avoid that shit. We did some more damage to its leg and the construct jerked itself violently, it's head rising into the air with another metallic screech as its legs armored itself. When it lowered its head back down to us, armor in the head had receded and like the legs, glowing red lights exposing circuitry were in perfect view, making a nice target. The team needed no new orders as they were smart enough to fit the pieces together. We once more opened fire and its other weapon began to charge in a purple light several solid projectiles shot out and stuck to the ground. I jumped to the ground, away from the nearest and covered my head, they exploded, but not much more than your average grenade. Vetra was the only one who was not targeted by that weapon, keeping enough distance from us and was still firing as we re-joined her. Soon its head jerked back once more and its armor returned, lowering its head, closing it, and slowly shaking it over the ground.

It made some friends. The air filled with static as it created two Nullifiers and two Breachers. We focused our fire on the Nullifiers before they could set up in their shields, our combined fire..."
breaching their armor and the Breachers are hardly a serious threat. The construct just watched. As the last Remnant fell, its legs opened once more and it charged its rapid-fire weapon as we opened fire on its leg. This time Liam was the one who needed to stay in cover as we continued. It began charging its main weapon, and Liam stood, shooting, yet ready to move. Just before it fired, the circuits in its leg exploded, tearing off a few shreds of armor and the weapon discharged. Once more it reared its head as if it felt pain as a shock wave was sent out. It was short range, so all it really did to us was blow my hair back a little bit, before it began to twist low over the ground. Its legs came loose from how firmly they were planted within the ground and the construct took flight, slowly floating higher into the air.

"Of course it can fly, why wouldn't it be able to fly," Vetra muttered.

"Can't believe I'm saying this, but… chase it down! We let it go and Prodromos is at risk!" I ordered, leading the others back to the Nomad. We followed it to the south end of the Remnant site with the third hammer, running over a few Assemblers along the way, and took cover in the same area where we fought the Remnant there. Gave us some distance, but it was a big target, we were small.

"Pathfinder, this is Ajax. We've landed and can see you from our position. ETA five minutes," he called out as he ordered his soldiers to run. As the construct landed, we were fortunate that one of its undamaged legs was within our field of view. Good, they were close.

"Reinforcements inbound, keep it up people!" I ordered. There may have been a few war cries as we opened fire, our position allowing us to remain in cover without the rapid-fire blast or grenade bursts to strike us, yet still shoot its leg. It reared its head skyward again and its legs closed and head opened. Thing was, it began charging its main weapon, realizing that for now, it's other attacks were futile. It focused on Jaal, so he cloaked and went to the other side of our area, attempting to drag out its firing process. It seemed to work. Yet again the armor returned and it made more Remnant bots. As it was in the process of doing so, however, we got another message over the comms.

"Pathfinder, this is Eric Maddix of the Advent scouts. Engaging… whatever the hell this thing is. Let me guess, shoot the big red glowy bits?" he joked.

"And a seemingly rinse and repeat pattern from the bot itself. Learn the pattern, keep your people alive. Its main weapon in its mouth doesn't give a damn about cover, make sure your men know that," I warned.

"Come now little duck, you didn't think you were going to kill the biggest goddamn thing on this planet without some help from Bain Massani, did you?" the gruff voice teased. "Coming up on your position now."

"I think I'll deserve a new nickname after this one," I replied. Opening fire on the Nullifiers and Breachers. Yep, same defense protocol. Perhaps the bots are run by more basic VIs? Bain ran up beside us, helping finish off the last Nullifier as the legs opened. I could see the shots being taken by the Advent scouts on the other leg as we continued fire on ours. We continued raining hell on this monster as it turned its head to face the scouts, powering up its main cannon and firing. I saw most of the streams of bullets stop before it hit and at least most of them reappear from a new position.

"Maddix, you guys alright over there?" I asked over comms.

"We're fine. If it wasn't for that warning you gave us, bastard would have wiped most of us out. Thanks Pathfinder," he answered as our leg's circuits exploded
"And just as we got here too. Guess we have more running now. No matter, we're APEX, we've run farther for longer," Ajax spoke, joining his squad with my own. He wore full armor, most a silvery color and carried an X-5 Ghost, an AR made by the Initiative, very like an Avenger. Those he brought with him included a Salarian, an Asari, and a Human. Ajax did a quick bit of introductions with the time we'd bought. The human was Gaige Phillips, heavy weapons, the Asari, Kiixe T'Peto, Ex-Justicar, and the Salarian was Rekol Cozor, tech expert. Had to know what I was working with.

I had expected the construct to lead us on another chase, but instead it simply flew to the other side of the small Remnant site. We just switched what side of the cover we were on. Shit it's been scorched. I could see several forms sprinting across the desert from the rocks a small ways away that had to be the Advent scouts staying in the fight.

"Operational command is yours Pathfinder," Ajax spoke.

"You know your squad, I know mine. Only one leg left so just take this bastard down, other than that have your men do whatever they need to," I replied. Bain looked back with an approving nod as Ajax turned to his men.

"Fireteam Sigma, I want combos across the board. Call out your abilities, and keep firing. Do not let those guns hit you. Look at the scorch marks to remind yourselves why! Let's show this bucket of bolts what APEX can do!"

"Ooh Rah!" They yelled back enthusiastically. The legs opened and a barrage of gunfire, biotics, and tech struck it, shouts of what abilities were used leading to constant explosions of electricity, flame, or dark energy. Before the construct could even charge its main gun, it jerked again and armored up, yet leaving its head exposed. It was beginning to spark, lights slowly fading before shining back on. The Advent scouts rejoined the battle, adding to the hail of bullets striking the constructs weakened head. We were so damn close now. The lights beginning to crack, more and more flares of electricity, the lights dimming more and more, and then for the last time it regained its armor and created what few Remnant it could muster, a few Assemblers and a Breachers. Against about a dozen heavily armed men and women? They didn't last long.

One last time, the leg's armor lifted. One last time, a storm of bullets struck it. One last time, it's leg exploded. One last time, it's head was left exposed as it struggled to stand itself. Before any one of us could even empty a full magazine into its head, the construct collapsed. Parts of its head still twitching, and a hologram of symbols appearing by its 'mouth.'

"Pathfinder, it is initiating self-repair protocols. Quickly, move near its head, and interface. I can re-write its programming and neutralize it," SAM informed. Shit, likely didn't have much time. I raced across the field to its head as the others began cheering, yet stopped when they saw me running. I felt rather uneasy standing amongst its 'jaws' yet I opened a connection with my Omni-tool, allowing SAM his connection. The construct jerked once more, before it returned its head towards the sky and straightened out its body and shot upwards until it was out of sight.

"SAM… please tell me you took care of it," I sighed as my body calmed down, the fatigue of the fight getting to me.

"Affirmative Pathfinder. It is now achieving orbit and scanning the planet, monitoring the vault's work. The 'Architect' as its coding labeled it, has been pacified," SAM explained. Everyone else must have heard the news as they broke out in cheering. A few of Advent's scouts even shooting their rifles in the air before Maddix reminded them just how valuable thermal clips were.

"I don't care what that bot says, I'm calling that thing a goddamn Dragon," Bain chuckled.
"If that's what you're going to call it I think I know what my new nickname should be, hm?" I teased.

"Heh, alright, fine, Dragon slayer," he relented. Although very close to what I was hoping for, I'd take it, no one would get that reference anymore.

"Still can't believe we just did that," Liam exclaimed, letting out a few laughs.

"Damn fucking right!" Gaige, the APEX heavy weapons responded, raising a hand for Liam to slap, which he did, very enthusiastically.

"Advent may not trust the Nexus, Pathfinder, but after they read the report I give them, I think they'll trust you. Tell Mayor Bradley to expect a few delegates," Maddix remarked, walking over for a handshake.

"Guess you've had quite the… Advent…ure, huh Maddix?" I joked, shaking his hand. He snorted and groaned all in one as he replied.

"Please, don't make me reconsider." I turned to Ajax as he and his squad rested for a moment.

"Thanks for the reinforcements there Sergeant, want a ride back to your shuttle? Wouldn't mind ferrying you guys back," I offered.

"Just Ajax to you, Pathfinder, and like hell were we just going to let you have all the fun yourself," he chuckled. "As for the ride, no need, I left a pilot to guard it, just in case. I was about to message him," he answered.

"If you're just gonna be Ajax than I'm just going to be Scott, alright? Good luck out there Ajax, and let us know before those explosives go off, I'm sure Prodromos would love to watch the fireworks," I suggested.

"Sure thing Path… Scott. Good luck to you out there too," he finished. I was about to lead the squad back to the Nomad when I remembered I may have left the others a bit nervous, so I commend Cora, given she was leading the other team. I had commed Peebee first earlier since she was the Remnant expert.

"Cora, this is Scott. The situation has been handled, and we're all still alive and unharmed. What's your situation?" I asked.

"On our way to help you, but guess no need anymore. Meet at Prodromos? We're all done here," she answered.

"Hold on, kid, are you telling me that you just killed the biggest damned thing we've seen in Andromeda? Without me?! You owe me big time," he remarked, half chuckling, half groaning.

"The hell was that thing anyway? Get some data from it?" Peebee questioned.

"Thing's called an Architect. I'll just have SAM give you a copy of everything he learned when he interfaced," I answered.

"YOU INTERFACED WITH A GIANT REMNANT BOT?!" she exclaimed.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Wha-NO! Anything but! GAH! I don't know if I can wait until later!" she groaned.
"Maybe you'll get it at Prodromos, whenever we get some down time. Cora, meet us there," I ordered, closing the comms and leading the others back into the Nomad. The others talked amongst themselves about what this thing was, but my mind just went back to what my new nickname from Bain was, and what I had been hoping for. A single line of an old theme song came to mind.

*Dovahkiin, Dovahkiin, Naal los Ziinkros Vahriin.*
For the record, as far ahead as I am, I kinda regret my movie nights. They overstayed their welcome. I won't do too much for this chapter, editing wise, but read the first part and what follows the movie night at least. Skip the rest if you so choose. I'll leave you with a final chapter after this before I head out to school.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

By the time the team had re-grouped in Prodromos, the Tempest had also returned. Darket was right, she predicted the locations of the Kett supply drops, some of which were now housed within the Tempest's cargo bay, others marked for pick up by the Militia. Once informed of the impending fire-works, Bradley made arrangements to move anyone who wanted to watch up to the Sheartop with drinks on standby. As I had expected, Prodromos was open to receiving aid from the cargo thieves, though Bradley was keeping an eye on them, and were open to making a deal with Advent for the water. In the meantime, we were all just waiting for the call from Ajax and his team.

I had taken this time to get a briefing from team two on their to do list. The Rem-tech the Kett were investigating had led them to a Remnant data-cache relating to the wildlife, something Prodromos could readily make use of. They had confirmed Kett surveillance and had destroyed their long-range transmitter. As for the missing tech, he was killed but his relays survived, which they placed. Cora teared up a bit when she mentioned that each one had a motivational audio log from the tech's son who had died of a disease before the Initiative left. The last thing they had done, which was where they were fighting a Destroyer, was that they had found the trail of a missing researcher from Promise. Led them to a Remnant ruin, but unfortunately the researcher had died. Least they got some data and tech out of it.

"Pathfinder, can I talk to you for a moment?" Bradley asked.


"I see the armor you've been wearing, and I know it belonged to your father, it's why I'm calm about this, willing to listen. You know you didn't go through N7 training, that if you were wearing that back home you'd be in a jail cell. I may be retired from the alliance but I kept a lot of the discipline. I just want to know it's for the right reasons," he explained, keeping his voice low.

"When dad died, he left his armor to me, as a kind of inheritance. But if this was back home I'd have kept it without ever wearing it, maybe put it on a stand as a kind of memorial. But here? There's a reason I'm not making do with more standard issue armor, hell even something that the techs could come up with," I sighed. This isn't something I wanted to fully share, but... "Suffice it to say it's a way of... coping. Remembering," I finished, hinting at there being more but keeping some privacy.

"Say no more Scott. We have a saying here. We stay out of other people's grief," he smiled, patting me on the shoulder and walking back to join the colonists. The sun was starting to set on Eos. Odds are, we'll watch the explosion, have our little movie night, see what was next on the agenda. I
made my way to Liam, who was chatting with Gil, and pulled him to the side so we could keep the movie selections a surprise a bit longer.

"Whatcha need Scott?" he asked.

"Move selection. I've gone over the list, added my own stash, and I'm thinking we do rotations. A movie from each species. Starts with us, then one of the others, and so on eventually coming back to us and repeating. As for the movie itself, it needs to be a good one to rope them into the idea," I suggested.

"Agreed. Any specifics in mind?"

"Thinking we let them choose between Star Wars and The Hobbit."

"So long as it's not one of the prequels," he warned.

"Pfft, oh hell no. We'd be starting with a New Hope, and just skip episode one, just tell them what happens," I explained.

"And if they don't like it, I pick the next human movie, deal?"

"Deal. Why the hell are we picking out movies centuries old?" I laughed.

"Because they were damn good movies," he chuckled in response.

"Preach it Kosta." My omni-tool pinged, and knowing who it was I set it to speaker and told everyone to quiet down and listen up.

"Scott, Ajax here. Ready for the show to start?" The crowd surrounding me cheered out, some drunken cries to 'blow that shit up.'

"Give us a countdown Ajax, make it dramatic," I requested.

"Heh, my pleasure," he chuckled. "Detonation in 10… 9… 8… 7… 6… 5… 4… 3… 2… 1…" he continued, the pauses between three, two, and one, being considerably longer. Then the base exploded into a fireball, the many bridges and elevated platforms crumbling, the buildings as nothing but rubble, and for the base's tower? With its supports gone, it tilted to the side and fell off the plateau, crushing it's top under its own weight as it landed upside down, crumbling into even more rubble. In the dimming night sky, it was goddamn beautiful. The crowd cheered and laughed, yelling many a profanity at the Kett. More than one comment referencing payback for Resilience.

The crowd lingered for a small while before Bradley called the shuttles back for pick-up and my crew returned to the Tempest. Once everyone had stored their weapons and placed their armor back in their lockers, they began to leave for their rooms.

"Hold on people, don't go to bed just yet. Everyone, meet me in my quarters in about thirty minutes. Vetra, get the goods. Everyone else? Casual. Pajamas if you want," I remarked. Vetra's faced shifted with her realization and she nodded, going to grab the treats from the armory and Liam followed me to my quarters to set things up. We moved the couches in my quarters to just in front of the entrance, facing the center of the viewport where a large vidscreen appeared, asking that we select a vid. Liam left to ensure he could get changed and I did so myself, changing into a simple tank top and gym shorts. I sat down on the couch to wait, and the first of the crew began to arrive twenty minutes after my announcement. Vetra walked in, holding a total of three bags. Two of them steaming with a familiar, buttery scent.
"Popcorn and Graxen. I don't have much of either, so you Levos are going to need to share," Vetra warned, taking a seat on the large sofa herself. I realized I hadn't ever really seen her casual before, always in her armor. Her casual involved what essentially appeared to be a plain black shirt, the sleeves running all the way down her arms, and what appeared to be a kind of sweatpants, baggy around her legs and so the small backwards curvature in them wouldn't be an issue. The only things on her feet as she crossed her legs, her lower left leg crossing over her right knee, were a kind of plastic guard over her talons. Though likely not enough to block anything at their full force, perhaps to prevent accidents?

"Easier said than done. Clearly, you've never eaten popcorn. Quickly, you hardly even realize you're still eating it and then, Poof! It's all gone," I remarked, earning a small chuckle. "What's with the things on your talons? Don't those feel uncomfortable?" I asked.

"What the little guards? No, our talons don't have many nerves, enough to tell their touching something but that's it. We are predators after all, kinda helps to know that you are clawing into your prey, but would be rather counterproductive to feel discomfort from their blood and bone," she remarked.

"Well, when you put it that way…" Liam walked in, holding a few various bottles of beer. Too many for him, so must be for the others. He was dressed virtually the same as I was, though a light shirt in place of the tank top. Vetra completely ignored his presence and he, hers, sitting as far away as possible from her.

"So, what are we gonna be watching anyway?" she asked me.

"Two options, old human movies, but classics. Once everyone's here we'll hold a vote," I answered.

"And the options are…?"

"Patience, my young Padawan," I teased and Liam snickered at my response. Vetra just stared at me, confused.

"Pada-what?"

"Depending on what option is picked, that question may be answered." She sighed and leaned back, reaching into her bag of Graxen and popping it into her mouth. It was green, roundish, and bumpy looking. As it crunched in her mouth her eyes rolled up and she moaned slightly at the taste.

"Been too damn long. This shit cost me a lot of favors, but damn was it worth it," she muttered.

"Think you'll be able to get your hands on much more?" I questioned.

"No," she sighed. "Same goes for Popcorn. We barely had any to start with, aside from personal stashes. It was assumed we'd be able to quickly grow the means of producing either. Then in the mutiny, a few exiles made off with a bunch of treats like that. If we're really damn lucky, they haven't eaten or burned it all."

"Someone mention burning? Brings an old story to mind. So, what's with the setup?" Drack asked as he entered. A part of me wasn't surprised that his idea of casual wear, was just his armor, with some of the gauntlets and boots removed.

"You'll see. Grab a drink if you want it and take a seat," I told him. He looked at me curiously as he grabbed one of the bottles Liam had brought and sat himself down between Vetra and Liam, spreading out his arms and legs. Given so few had joined us so far, we were likely all just spacing ourselves out. We were soon joined by Jaal and Gil. Jaal hadn't changed, and Gil was wearing a
stained black shirt. Grease stains? Oil? Good thing we grabbed the couches in my room and not Liam's small one. Lot of people would be on the floor. Jaal sat beside Drack and Gil beside him, the two chatting about tech. Peebee walked in, dressed as she normally was and not in armor and scooted herself between Drack and Jaal, shifting everyone on the left side over a bit. I gave her a knowing glance and she winked in reply. Kallo and Suvi entered together, Kallo dressed the same and Suvi in a tank top and sweatpants, chatting about various discoveries in Andromeda. Vetra scooted to give them room, as it was exactly the kind of talk Gil would be interested in. Lexi took a seat between Liam and Drack, still dressed in her medical uniform leaving one open spot between Vetra and I. Shit, don't want to sit next to Cora the entire movie. I leaned over to her and whispered:

"Vetra, would you mind scooting over? Only person left is Cora and I'd rather not sit next to her the entire movie," I requested. She chuckled lightly and complied. While not sitting next to me, she left slightly more space on her right than her left. Cora entered, standard Initiative shirt and jeans. Guess she doesn't have a casual. After taking a look at the couch, decided to grab a chair and move it over near Liam instead. Vetra glanced at me and I just shrugged, standing up. "Welcome, Pathfinder crew," I began dramatically, waving my arms in patterns for flair. "To the first annual… Movie Night!" The Milky way crew gave either a smile or a small cheer at the reveal.

"What's movie night?" Jaal asked, leading to snickers and chuckles from the rest of us.

"We spend the night watching a vid with our friends. You know, a story with people acting out a part, and someone filming it all? Do the Angara really not have that kind of thing?" Gil asked.

"Ah, yes, I see. We do have… movies. What are we watching?"

"Glad you asked. Tonight, we have two options. Both of which are old human classics. Damn good ones. One is of the fantasy genre, a movie series adaptation of a book series from a legendary author. This being fantasy, swords and shields, magic and mythological creatures. And this series is also known for some very epic battle scenes. We'd be doing the first of the series. The Hobbit, an Unexpected Journey," I began.

"Ooh! I know that one! What's the other?" Suvi asked.

"The other option is arguably the greatest Sci-Fi movie franchise of all time. You can all see what some humans thought aliens may look like and laugh at how wrong we were," I joked, earning a few chuckles. Option two, is Star Wars, Episode Four, A New Hope," I finished.

"Wait, why are we starting with the fourth one and not the first?" Kallo questioned.

"We do not speak of the first one. Ever. New Hope was the first one ever made, and after the 'Original Trilogy' was finished, they went on to make the prequels. The first movie only has one good thing about it, and the rest is an abomination. If that option is picked and we get to the prequels, we will skip that one and Liam and I will tell you what you need to know, which isn't much," I explained.

"Which has more explosions?" Drack asked.

"Star Wars. Space battles and ground battles both have plenty of vehicles blowing up," Liam answered.

"That has my vote!" Drack chuckled.

"When were both of these movies made?" Jaal asked.

"Hang on, let me try and find the best way to explain this… Ok, so we left six-hundred and thirty-
five years ago. On our calendars, that was the year 2185. Star Wars was made in 1977, and the Hobbit was made in 2012. So, let's see, the longest time would be… around Eight and a half hundred years ago," I muttered. "Shit that's old."

"Were you space-faring yet?" Jaal questioned.

"The first Human walked on Earth's moon in 1969. Was a while after, though long before the Hobbit, that we had gotten rovers on to Mars, a planet close to Earth. So we were in the beginning stages, you could say," I answered.

"Imagination with so few barriers from experience must have been quite vivid. I'm curious to see what you humans thought of. I vote for this, Star Wars," Jaal stated.

"This seems to all be going one way, anyone voting Hobbit?" I asked. When no one answered, I began to key in that selection as the movie began to load and get straight to the main menu. (SAM's help)

"Before we begin, just giving credit where it's due. This idea was Liam's, and he asked me to check out the Nexus' library. I already had Star Wars on my Omni-tool before we left, and it's thanks to Vetra that we got a few treats tonight. Popcorn! Word of warning, we don't have much. Two bags tonight, so try and share," I warned, taking my seat on the left side of the couch again. The others sat back and settled, still some light whispering among the others as the main menu appeared and I immediately keyed for it to begin. Thanks to SAM completely bypassing trailers, ads, and warnings, the familiar, legendary, and now ancient phrase faded onto the screen.

*A long time ago, in a Galaxy, far, far away…*

"Andromeda?" Jaal chuckled. It would have earned a few smirks had anyone had the time. I may or may not have turned the volume up a bit higher than it should have been for the intro. The music boomed and the title appeared on screen.

"FUCKING HELL, turn that shit down!" Vetra exclaimed as Liam and I broke into laughter at the crew's pain. I obliged, of course, but kept laughing.

"You two did that on purpose, didn't you," Peebee accused as I paused, the movie, ensuring they'd still be able to read the opening crawl.

"Perhaps…" I chuckled, pressing play.

"Ass," Vetra muttered, reaching over to lightly punch me in the shoulder, leaving me chuckling further as I pressed play for the opening crawl.

"Rebels and an evil empire? That sounds familiar…" Jaal muttered. It earned a small snort from more of the crew as they too saw the connection.

"Death Star? Really? Doesn't that blatantly tell everyone that they're an evil empire and not just secretly evil where the rebels can tell?" Cora questioned.


"I wouldn't be too sure about that," I warned with a smirk. The opening crawl ended with the words fading into the depths of space and the screen panned down to show a desert planet and its moons. The music perked up as a Starship sped across the screen, laser weapons with the signature "pew-pew-pew."
"Right into the action, good," Drack chuckled, and the underside of an even large ship, white-grey in color appeared, gaining in size as its signature triangular shape moved into view. The others remained silent as the fleeing ship was struck and the view panned within, showing three robotic figures, two upright and humanoid, one blue and white, shaped like a cylinder with wheels. Alarms blaring and soldiers running into position.

"Hold on, a long time ago in a galaxy far far away, and humans? Self-centered asshats," Vetra chuckled.

"And where's the armor? Cloth won't stop an energy round," Drack questioned.

"If you were a director making a movie with a tighter budget would you want to spend a lot on all the makeup?" Liam retorted. Drack shrugged and we continued watching.

"Intelligent robots and they don't seem to be trying to kill all organics. Silly, naive little humans," Peebee teased again.

"SAM hasn't tried to kill us," Suvi reminded.

"Come on, enough talking, watch the movie," Liam shushed.

Though Liam's efforts did prevent more talking for a small while, there were still a few smirks or chuckles here and there, such as when Leia inserted a solid disc into R2 or from the acting of rebels and stormtroopers being shot and falling dead. Or even the banter between R2 and 3PO as they entered the escape pod. The relative silence was broken when R2 was making his way through a rocky area and was being watched by Jawas.

"Hoods and glowing eyes? Are these Quarians?" Drack joked, earning a few chuckles from the Milky Way crew. When they shorted out R2 and gathered around him Drack let out another laugh: "And they even have a thing for technology! They have to be!"

"Are our translators broken or are they really just talking in gibberish?" Vetra asked.

"Gibberish, those aren't real words in any human language," Gil answered. The next words weren't spoken until after R2 was taken inside the Jawa's sandcrawler, filled with all kinds of droids.

"The hell is with some of these designs? What function could most of these possibly serve?" Cora asked incredulously.

"Come on, this movie was made when our computers were still big and clunky, give it a break," I replied. Cora shrugged and the others quieted down once more. It was later, when Luke and his Uncle Owen were browsing the droids for a translator that the next question was asked.

"So they have this level of technology, thorough and assumingly fast transportation across a galaxy without mass relays, but they need droids to translate? We have those in our omni-tools or even cochlear implants," Vetra remarked. "I know you told us how old this was but isn't that a common and simple idea?"

"Guess Lucas just never thought of it," Liam remarked.

"Well they obviously know more than they're telling him. The glances between each other, telling Luke to forget about Ben and Obi-Wan," Vetra remarked. "They're not very good liars." I sat back and watched as a grin spread across my face at the next scene, Luke walking to the surface and
standing on the ridge of the crater watching the dual sunset of Tatooine. Slightly swaying my head to yet another piece of the Saga's signature and legendary music. Duh nuuuuuuh nuh nuh nuuuuuuh nuh, duh nuuuuuuuuh nuh nuh nuh nuuuuuuuuuuuuh, duh nuuuuuuuuh duh nuh nuh nuh nuuuuuuuuuuuuh nuh, duh nuuuuuuuuh duh nuh nuh nuh nuuuuuuuuuh…
"Sand people huh? Great name…" Peebee teased.
"They got another name, Tusken Raiders, not sure why it was never used sooner," I replied. Luke was looking through a pair of binoculars at that moment as one stood up in front of him, making those familiar noises, raising its club in the air. The others watched curiously as the scene continued, a mysterious hooded figure scaring off the three raiders from Luke's unconscious body, checking on him then noticing R2. They watched as he revealed himself a Ben, then as Obi-wan, taking Luke and the droids home to speak with him. Speaking the truth, rather, the half-truth, of his father and what the two of them once were. And as Obi-wan gave to Luke what appeared to be a small metal stick. Luke activated the weapon, a beam of blue light shooting out from it and forming a decently sized 'blade.'

"An elegant weapon for a more civilized age, hm? I don't quite see how a laser sword can compete against energy weapons. Not to say I wouldn't want one," Drack chuckled. With my prior knowledge to the series, proving more insight into Obi-Wan's explanations for Luke's father, for Vader, and the end of the Republic showing more emotion that Obi-Wan would have been feeling, though I'm not sure Lucas had planned that far ahead. Knowing as his best friend, his brother, metaphorically died to become an evil figure hunting down and slaughtering the Jedi, even the younglings. Where Anakin died and became Vader when he saved Palpatine's life, Obi-wan died when he left Anakin on Mustafar, becoming the old hermit, Ben Kenobi.

"What's this… force, he's talking about?" Jaal asked.
"Patience, my young Padawan, your questions shall be answered in time," I answered, my response gaining a snort from Liam and Gil. The scene soon changed to the Death Star, a council of Imperial leaders discussing the next course of action and the situation with the plans being stolen. Vader and Tarkin entered and soon a General was insulting Vader and the force as it hasn't solved the problem of the plans being missing. Vader cut him off with a gesture, a slight sound resonating within the room as the General began to choke, grasping at his throat as an invisible hand gripped it and threatened to crush it. 'I find your lack of faith disturbing.'

"Behold, but a small taste of the power of the dark side of the force," I spoke in an overly dramatic deep and booming voice.

"I see," Jaal remarked as Vader released his grip on the General's throat.

'Mos Eisley Spaceport. You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.'

"Omega. It's Omega," Lexi joked. That earned a few laughs from the rest of the Milky Way crew. The movie continued, with Luke, Kenobi, and the droids riding their speeder into the spaceport, being stopped by a group of Stormtroopers asking for identification. Kenobi literally getting them to leave with a few waves of his hand.

"Are none of the others going to question that? At all?" Vetra remarked. The speeder continued. "Guess not."
Ah the Cantina. The music, and the whole showcase of very odd-looking aliens, none of which bear any resemblance to what the reality is. Funny how that works.

"Well, these aliens are… interesting," Peebee remarked as the scene continued.

"Wondering if Asari could reproduce with any of them?" I teased.

"Hell no, my dad may be an Elcor but that just leaves me wondering what the hell my Mother was thinking. I had even heard that some Asari were trying to get with those Vorcha we found before we left," she answered. "Ugh," she shook, a bit disgusted at the thought. I chuckled and glanced at her again, she lifted her middle finger towards be subtly from behind the couch, knowing exactly why I made that little joke, yet she kept a mild grin on her face to show she wasn't angry. The movie continued, Luke getting a drink while Kenobi was speaking with a large walking carpet we all know and love as his attention was grabbed by one of the aliens. Luke attempted to ignore him as a horribly disfigured human with a pig like nose grabbed the same shoulder, threatening him.

"Picking a fight for absolutely no reason. Dumbass, small time mercs or pickpockets trying to prove something. No way he has even one death sentence like he said, choosing a spindly kid like that," Drack remarked. Pig Nose shoved Luke to the ground and his friend lifted a blaster, prompting Kenobi to quickly draw his lightsaber and slice off his arm. "Yep, dumbasses."

'\textit{Han Solo, captain of the Millenium Falcon.}'

"Huh, only just now occurred to me, but Vetra, Drack, the two of you remind me a lot of Han and Chewie here, I bet the two of them will be your favorites," I remarked. Vetra simply raised a brow plate to see where this was going as Drack let out a small snort.

"Han shot first!" I exclaimed as the smuggler shot the bounty hunter Greedo from under the table. Liam let out a snort.

"You might have been right, Scott. I am starting to like this smuggler," Vetra mused. "Debts to pay too. That sounds a bit familiar." Han worked on getting Jabba to ease off of him in the docking bay the Falcon was docked in.

"Still love that ship," I muttered under my breath.

'\textit{Let the Wookie win.}'

"Ha! I'm starting to like this hairy meat bag," Drack laughed.

"Well they got up there fast. And how did no one notice any of that?" Vetra remarked as the door to the Death Star hangar bay control room opened, admitting Chewbacca, 3PO, R2, Kenobi, and a disguised Han, and neutralizing the officers within. "This security is laughable."

"You know there are a few theories that would explain it…” I hinted. My vague answer implying that I’d say nothing. It was after Han's reluctance and relative selfishness to not save Leia that Vetra turned to face me.

"Ok, now I'm not so sure. I remind you of him?"

"Just… give it time Vetra. Give it time," I answered, raising my hands slightly defensively. She raised her brow plate again before shrugging, turning to face the movie once more and throwing
another piece of Graxen into her mouth. I gestured for the others to hand one of the two bags of Popcorn we were all sharing, sparingly, for a bite myself. Had to get Jaal's attention as he was quite clearly enjoying it.

"So how's that bland Milky Way food there Jaal?" I teased as the bag was trained along the others towards me.

"I take it all back," was his only reply. I had to do a double take as I noticed that almost half the bag was gone. I decided to not bring attention to it though to avoid embarrassment.

'Had a slight weapons malfunction, but, uh, everything's perfectly alright now. We're fine- We're all fine here now. Thank you. How are you?' Vetra visibly cringed at Han's little screw up at the end, before giving a slight chuckle as she seemed to remember something.

"Scott, I thought you said she wasn't going to be a damsel in distress. Yet here she is, in distress," Peebee remarked as Luke began to open her cell door.

"Please, like anyone could have fought their way out of her situation alone. Besides, does she really seem to be all that distressed? Just watch her," I retorted. She did just so as the ensuing firefight began, Leia simply acting annoyed as if she was dealing with idiots, taking Luke's blaster and making a new escape route down a garbage chute. After everyone had entered the trash compactor, they had heard the noise of the creature and saw the tentacle.

"It's a Hanar!" Gil joked, earning a few small chuckles

"How would something even survive in there? No food," Lexi remarked.

"Movie magic," Liam answered jokingly.

Soon, the scene changed to the control room as Luke was calling 3PO to get them out of there.

"Here here here! Watch and listen! When it pans to the door watch the stormtrooper on our right," I called out and pointed at the spot. The squad opened the door and entered, the one exactly where I said, that I pointed out banging his head on the door with a noticeable 'dunk.' That brought out a hearty chuckle from everyone.

"What the bloody hell is he thinking charging off after those guys? More importantly, why the hell are they running away? They have more than enough to take them on!" Drack stated as Han chased a sizable squad of Stormtroopers down a passageway. He turned the corner to face a room full more of them. "And there you go!" he laughed, Han immediately turning to run back the way he came.

"Why am I not surprised the villain's lightsaber is red?" Cora spoke, Kenobi and Vader preparing to face each other one last time. As we watched the fight, Liam muttered aloud:

"If there's one thing the prequels did right, it was the lightsaber fight scenes. Way more acrobatics and actual, aggressive fighting." Luke and co. saw their chance to return to the ship as the battle between Vader and Kenobi caught the attention of the Stormtroopers on guard. Kenobi saw them on the move, and lowered his guard, allowing the final blow to be struck.

"What? Why the hell would he do that?" Peebee questioned aloud, throwing her hands up into the air in confusion. I also noticed that as they came back down, one arm slowly and lightly hooked
around behind Jaal, not touching his shoulders or neck, but they were there.

"And the body?" Cora asked.

"Only explanation is just: The force. I know, not a satisfying one, but it's the one we got," Liam answered.

'Run, Luke, run!'

"Is it just me or was that supposed to be Kenobi saying that?" Vetra asked.

"It is. Come on, we're talking too much again, let's let the movie go," I answered.

"Homing beacon? Well that explains how they fought through impossible odds, they let them escape," Drack remarked.

"That one of the theories you mentioned, Scott?" Vetra asked.

"Might just be," I answered. The scene changed to Leia betting that they were being tracked.

"At least one of the protagonists isn't oblivious to the obvious," Peebee joked.

"He's coming back, isn't he?" Vetra muttered. She seemed to ask that rhetorically given her tone. She was right, of course, Han would be coming back right in the nick of time.

"I would think so. He hardly seemed sure of himself," Jaal replied. Once more the crew descended into silence to watch the upcoming battle.

"They're getting fucked by those fighters. Got a name for them?" Drack questioned.

"TIE fighters, the fighter Luke is in is called an X-Wing, and the other ones you saw earlier are Y-Wings," Liam answered.

"Weird names for fighters," Peebee remarked.

"Not for humans, they're shaped like letters in our Alphabet, X and Y," Suvi explained.

"Learn something new every day," Jaal muttered in understanding. Luke was making his way down the Death Star's trench, almost at the end, Vader getting a lock when a TIE fighter on his flank exploded, Han's voice encouraging Luke to go on as the Falcon appeared on screen.

"Called it," Vetra remarked, popping in another piece of Graxen as she rolled up the bag, saving what was left for another time. Vader was sent spinning off into space as Luke made the shot, it went in. Those within the Death Star entirely unaware as they prepared for it to fire. And it exploded magnificently.

"Ha! That's a helluva boom," Drack roared. The movie continued, the rebels celebrating their victory and Luke, Han, and Chewie receiving medals as the credits rolled. I stood and shut off the vid screen.

"So, what did you all think of our first little movie night?" I asked.

"I'll admit, I enjoyed myself. Wouldn't mind doing this again," Vetra answered.
"Same here kid," Drack answered.

"It had been a long time since I saw this movie, now I just want to watch all of it over again, thanks for that Scott," Gil remarked.

"I still remember my parents sitting me down and forcing me to watch this when I was little, they didn't have to force me after the first movie," Suvi remembered.

"I'd recommend doing this again. Seems to be a large stress reliever and helps the crew get together," Lexi explained.

"I have a few ideas for the next movie night, Scott. Angaran movies you can actually… feel. I'll speak with Gil about the details, but I think I know a way to set something up," Jaal remarked. Well that sounds interesting.

"So, seems like most people, if not all, want to do this again. Tell you what, anyone who doesn't, doesn't need to show, but you're encouraged to. Bring any movies you may want to see to the next one. You want to have a movie from your species, we'd be happy to oblige. If no one brings anything, then we'll continue with Star Wars, alright? And hey, go easy on the popcorn," I joked, earning a few laughs and a slightly guilty look from Jaal. I just gave him a smile and nod to let him know it was fine. "Well I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm feeling a bit tired. And this is my bedroom. So… shoo," I smirked.

Jaal Ama Darav

Vetra and I were the only members of the crew to not immediately leave Scott's quarters, we stayed a moment to help him move the couch back to where it once was. Once done, we wished him goodnight and left.

"Vetra, before you go, do you have a moment?" I asked the Turian.

"Something up, Jaal?" she replied a bit defensively.

"A few, small things. But, it may be better for private."

"Ok… let's talk in the med-bay. Lexi normally leaves to sleep in the bunks," she answered, clearly confused. I followed her in and the door shut behind us, and she crossed her arms over her chest and gestured for me to continue with a wave of her hand.

"I get the feeling you don't trust me. I'd like to understand why," I questioned. I did so softly, and without aggression as I did not wish to accuse.

"What makes you think that?" she responded. I paid close attention, yes, exactly as I predicted. Her eyes constantly avoid my own.

"You seem distant, your eyes don't meet my own," I explained. She let out a sigh and lowered her head.

"Can I be honest?"

"By all means," I gestured for her to continue. She raised her head to look at me once more. This time, her eyes did meet mine.

"I don't really know you yet, I know that we're the aliens here and I know that like the Roekaaar,
you may… resent that… a bit." Ah, so that's what this is about.

"Allow me to clarify. You act as if you don't like me, because you aren't sure if I like you?"

"Well… yes. I suppose that covers it," she answered, a bit awkwardly. I let out a warm smile and small laugh:

"No, Vetra Nyx, I don't resent you. I remember what you tried to do for those two Roekaar on Havarl, how could I resent someone who tried to do that? If it helps, what I've seen of you so far, on and off the ship, I like. I hope that makes things easier."

"Yeah… heh, yeah it does," she responded warmly. Her mandibles flaring into what I had learned to be a grin. "You said there were a few things bothering you, what was the other?" she asked, her arms no longer crossed over her chest.

"Ah… yes, well. I'm not sure if bothering is the right word, but… I'm not sure. I've noticed some… actions, from Peebee, lately. I often find her looking at me. Often times if I glance behind me I find that her eyes are squarely on my… rear. And during the movie, she was getting rather close to me…" I began, a bit awkwardly myself. I felt… confusion. Vetra's eyes took a more serious look yet still friendly.

"I see, want me to get her to stop?" she offered.

"I… don't know. Does that mean what I think it does?"

"Hm, well with Asari it's hard to tell if it's just for a fling or something more. My advice? Wait and see. Still, if you want it to end, just let me know and I can work on it for you, deal?" she offered warmly.

"Er, deal, yes, thank you." I answered.

"Anything else? I'd like to get some sleep after what we've done today. Got a feeling I'll need the energy," she requested.

"No, nothing else for now. Goodnight, Vetra," I ended, she nodded and walked out towards the armory, and I walked back towards the ladders to get to my own room. I had a lot to think about.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Scott, your presence is required within the comm room. You are being contacted by Evfra, it is flagged as urgent. Jaal has been alerted and is already preparing," SAM spoke loudly through both the room's speakers and our private channel. I shot straight up and checked my omni-tool. I hadn't slept the full 9 hours I was hoping for, but I've done worse before, losing only two hours, and again, I was not plagued by night terrors sapping me of energy. I got dressed in a simple outfit quickly and raced up to the meeting room, Jaal waiting and Evfra's hologram present, meaning the call had begun, they were simply waiting for me.

"Sorry about the wait, Evfra, you caught us in our sleep," I explained.

"So I heard. And my scouts reported the destruction of a Kett base on Eos. Something tells me that's your handiwork," he began.

"I briefed him on what we've accomplished as we waited for you, Scott," Jaal spoke up.
"Anyways, to the point of this call. We're ready. We've formulated a plan to save the Moshae. I have a team on Voeld on standby, waiting for your arrival," Evfra continued.

"Then we have no time to lose. We'll be on our way ASAP, just need to wake up the flight crew," I answered.

"Acknowledged. Message me back with your ETA. Evfra out," he ended the call.

"Kallo, Suvi, and Gil have all been awoken and are heading for their stations Shall I awake the ground crew, Pathfinder?" SAM questioned.

"Not yet, when we're about an hour and a half from Voeld, wake them up, get them fed, get them suited up. I want them as rested as possible for this. Jaal, Evfra send the plans by any chance?"

"Yes, it contains all our intel on the Kett facility as well, however limited it may be," Jaal answered.

"Then I got some reading to do. Go do what you need to do, I'll see you on the ground," I ended, returning to my quarters.

"Readying for takeoff now Scott. ETA, approximately four hours. We need to go around the Black hole's pull," Kallo explained.

"Noted. SAM, inform Evfra," I ordered sitting down in my quarters and taking out the data-pad of the plan. Ah yes, the reading of plans, absolutely my favorite part… completely…


Exaltation

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Voeld. By all reports I've read it's my definition of hell. A frozen ice-ball of constant snow-storms. Severe ones. -40 degrees Celsius and the Angara just love the place. I'm gonna need to bring something warm under my armor. We would land close to the Resistance HQ and link up with the resistance squad and ride together in Angaran shuttles. The LZ would be a small blind spot by the base of the Kett tower, yet with the way in still blocked by the Kett shield. SAM would infiltrate the shield's systems, take them down and allow us entry. Find the Moshae, extract via one of the upper landing pads. No way am I going in with anything less than my full team.

"Pathfinder, ETA is now an hour and a half away, awaking the ground team now. Would you wish to brief them?" SAM questioned.

"I will later, for now just tell them it's the Moshae mission. Tell them to eat then suit up," I ordered, moving to search my wardrobe for something warm, yet able to fit within my armor. I could probably stuff my hoodie under my under suit but my southern ass needs more than that. I moved clothing aside and thankfully found a fur-lined robe. Again, it wouldn't be perfect, but it would help. As necessary, I stripped down to my boxers, put on the robe before donning my under suit, making my way towards the armory to suit up first. Although our entry would be stealthy, I'd be an idiot to think that this would end the same way. Once again, we'd all need heavy armor. Besides, it would help insulate me. I grabbed my father's N7 armor and began fitting the pieces on.
"turn into another assault, despite our stealthy approach. Questions?"

"What intel do we have for security?" Vetra asked.

"Beyond the shield surrounding the base, none. Though I would suspect security similar to what we faced on Eos. A lot of Kett," I answered.

"What about the Moshae's location?" Cora questioned.

"All we know is that she's somewhere within the facility. Once SAM is in their systems, either he will be able to find her himself, or direct us to where we can learn," I explained.

"How do we even know that SAM will be able to crack that shield?" Peebee spoke.

"The Angara have a program that has been able to crack most Kett security and shield systems, but the ones around this facility are more secure, they have been able to adapt just quickly enough to render our systems useless. SAM believes that his added processing power can give our program the edge it needs," Jaal explained for me.

"Any other questions?" I asked, my eyes scanning the rest of the crew. None spoke as they all kept their eyes on me. "No? Alright. Keep an eye out for anything that might get us intel on just what the Kett do with their prisoners they send here and where they end up, no doubt the resistance could make use of it," I ended, returning to my weapons to complete my checks as the others returned to work.

"Why oh why did the Kett have to take her to an ice ball," I heard Vetra groan as she tightened the replacement scarf thing she had around her neck.

"Believe me, I'm not any bit happier about it than you are Nyx, southerners like me can't stand that shit. Back home if it ever got to around sixty degrees Fahrenheit or below, people would start wearing extra layers," I chuckled.

"Ha, not much different than Turians. Back on Palaven, the only spots it really gets cold are mountain tops and the poles," she remarked.

"Yeah, the only tradeoff is a bit more solar radiation than my people can handle," I retorted.

"Hey, it's your fault for evolving with such soft flesh, should get a bit more metal in there," Vetra joked.

"Or use our superior ape brains and build a device that lowers the radiation levels," I smirked. "Something your silly little bird brains can't handle."

"Oh? Was it your 'superior ape brain' that led you into those vents?" she teased back. I stared back at her and drew my lower lip back into my mouth slightly, lightly biting it. Damn it Sara…

"You win…" I quietly sighed.

"Oh? What's that? I couldn't hear you. Could you speak up a little? My silly little bird brain can't quite make out what you're saying," she smirked back.

"Don't push your luck, Nyx," I muttered. We both took another look at each other and broke out into a minor fit of laughter, drawing the attention of the others, though they looked between themselves and shrugged, not hearing the conversation. As we calmed down my Omni-tool pinged with a message. From Sid? I opened it to read, turning it slightly to hide the new ammo I was
getting from Vetra.

Hi Scott! I'm so sorry that it took me so long to get back to you, I've been busy with work on the Nexus since the new outpost went up and the scientists arrived on Havarl. Plus, it took me a while to think of the best story for you to use. Need more? Believe me I'd be happy to help you mess with my sister. Maybe you could send a few pics of her face when they come back to bite her in the ass? Anyways, we were living on Omega for a while and the Mercs/Smugglers Vetra was with at the time were planning a kind of heist to steal from a rival group. A lot of the rival group were Turians who spent a LOT of time at Afterlife. And Vetra was the only Turian woman in the group, and she got stuck with the distraction. She had to be a stripper giving them a show as the others struck both their ship and their hideout, taking as much as possible. She had to hide these tiny little devices all over her carapace and plates. She'd move her hands around her body trying to act all sexy to grab one and then straddle one of the guys so she could sneak the device onto them, cutting off their comms. Lucky for her, they had left one member of their group in the bar with her to watch and signal the others for when the job was done. She was an Asari and armed. They had placed a bug in the room earlier, so she could listen in and watch. Unfortunately for my sister, she was horrible at it. Stumbling and sometimes a bit awkward. Compared to the other strippers, she had no flexibility whatsoever. The Asari even recorded it and sent it to me! (No, I won't share, I do have some respect for my sister.) Vetra was only able to get the device on two of them before they got bored and tried to send her away. So, came plan B. The others made Vetra hide a weapon on her just in case as the Asari came to back her up. She had a baton hidden in nature's pocket. That's right. She pulled a STICK out of her ASS! Together, her and the Asari beat the shit out of their rival group and made off with all their loot. Coincidentally, that was also the week we left Omega. Have fun with this, and keep up the good work out there! :) (Yeah, I know that's a smiley face, I know a lot of old human stuff :P)

Sid

If I had been drinking something, I'd have spit it out at the story I just read. I worked hard to keep the laugh from getting out, so had to resort to placing my fist over my mouth and just keeping the chuckles from bursting out. Vetra looked at me with a brow-plate raised.

"The hell was in that message?" she asked suspiciously.

"Oh no, I ain't saying shit. I'm saving this. You'll find out, trust me," I smirked wickedly. Her eyes widened in fear as to what story I had just learned.

"I'm going to have a nice, long chat with my sister, aren't I?" she groaned.

"You get embarrassing stories from my sister? I get embarrassing stories from your sister. I warned you Nyx, this is war," I reminded.

"Fair enough..." she sighed in reply as she chuckled lightly. The crew continued talking amongst themselves as the ship continued towards Voeld.

"Kallo here. We've entered atmo and are en-route for the LZ. Readings show a storm in the area. High winds, low temperature. I think you may need to wait and have a shuttle pick you up, these temperatures are simply too extreme," our pilot mused over the comms.

"We have heat lamps lining the path up to the base. Those should provide some respite," Jaal reassured. That damn cold? I'm going to leave this planet as a goddamn popsicle! A few minutes more passed and the ship began to land at the LZ. The ship set itself down gently enough when the ship suddenly lurched itself upwards and back down, and once more settling.
"We're good! We're good!" Kallo yelled out over the ship's comms. The color slowly returned to my face as I my heart began pumping once more.

"Already starting to hate this planet," Vetra muttered as the cargo bay doors opened.

"Jesus fuck that's cold! Everyone, if you value your faces, put those helmets on now," I groaned, putting my own on as quick as I could. The cold air of Voeld had rushed inside our nice, warm ship at the first opportunity.

"Feels like going into cryo all over again," Liam muttered as we set out. As we walked down the cargo ramp I glanced back to figure out just why the ship had lurched like it had. Apparently one of the landing gear had cracked through a layer of ice. Reassuring.

"Pathfinder, the current temperature is below negative fifty degrees Celsius, I recommend you seek shelter immediately, your armor will not provide sufficient protection," SAM warned.

"Quickly, the first heat lamp is not far ahead. Follow the lamps," Jaal called out. The storm was blocking any natural light, leaving the world mostly dark with the red lamps leaving a glow on the snow. We followed the mountain path flanked by a ravine on the right and iced over rock on the left, jumping over a few ledges to reach the first heat lamp.

"Can we stop for a moment? I need to defrost," Vetra requested, hands gripping her arms as they were crossed over her chest, rubbing on them furiously to generate some semblance of heat.

"It would be recommended, Pathfinder. Though hardly ideal, the heat lamp generates enough to allow your body to recuperate for the next push," SAM explained. Guess we were waiting for a moment.

"I'll go ahead and ensure that Commander Heckt and his men are prepared," Jaal offered, being more accustomed to the cold.

"I'll go with you. Krogan can deal with this shit easily enough, I don't need to wait," Drack mumbled. Jaal shrugged and the two jumped across a small gap to prepare the others. We stayed another moment, warming our armored hands against the heater when Cora spoke up.

"I'm not happy about it either but this will need to be enough. Scott, we should move on," Cora suggested. She was right.

"I've half a mind to just stay here," Vetra muttered. Still, she pulled herself from the heat and moved on with us. We climbed another ledge, seeing two fully armored and armed Angara on lookout next to another heat-lamp. They waved us over as we paused for another moment.

"Nice ship you got there. You must be the aliens with Jaal. Your shuttles are ready and waiting just over there. Lot more heat lamps along the way," they explained. We nodded our thanks and moved on, our pace noticeably increasing each time we left another heat lamp. It was hard to miss where Jaal and Drack had gone, simply look for the massive Krogan. They were stood near a trio of Angara and a shuttle, ready for take-off, just outside the base itself.

"Scott, this is Commander Heckt. He will be leading the assault," Jaal introduced.

"Scott Ryder, Human Pathfinder," I greeted.

"Well met. Word's been spreading that you aliens are alright. I'll decide for myself," he replied.

"Can't say I blame you. Read the reports on the rest of my team?" I asked.
"I did. And the reports on these… biotics. I don't think I'll ever be able to understand that," he muttered.

"If it makes it easier, call it space magic. Now, can we please get out of the damn cold?" I requested.

"Humans do not deal with the cold as easily as we do," Jaal do explained.

"Let alone Turians," Vetra groaned. Heckt gave a small laugh in reply.

"Were just waiting for your arrival anyway. These two shuttles, here and there. We'll get you introduced with my men along the way. The facility is on the other side of the planet so it will have daylight and no storms, be a bit warmer for you. Your men take that one, you ride with me, settle on the chain of command here," the Commander recommended. Jaal however rode with us, likely taking the chance to speak with some more of his own people. The shuttle's doors opened for us and closed once we were safely inside, lifting into the air for take-off. I took a seat while Jaal preferred to stand. Everyone on the inside removed their helmets.

"So, we have no intel on what the inside of these facilities? No one has ever been inside one?" I asked.

"None who lived to tell. Any prisoners who go in are never seen again. My father was one such prisoner," Jaal answered.

"But what about the slave camps?" I questioned.

"Sure, we've had many ops liberating Kett work camps, but not once any of these facilities. We've lost so many fighters trying, the price has always been too high," Heckt explained. His skin was of a pinkish color like Jaal's and he was wearing what seemed to be a more standard Resistance armor. Largely it was identical to Jaal's, just a different color scheme, light blues with some black.

"I like to think that the Kett take important Angara from here to their home cluster," another soldier theorized, younger by the sound of his voice.

"What? As slaves?" Jaal muttered, slight mockery in his tone.

"That's Owwin. Or as we like to call him, Rookie. New to our squad but don't let the name fool you, he's still seen his share of successful ops. He's our idealist, and our medic," Heckt introduced.

"Death is better…” Jaal muttered.

"No point in living a life without freedom. Where everything you do is for someone else and you're left with scrapes and bruises. Still, you can't be that fatalistic about it yet. So long as the Resistance exists, those slaves have hope of freedom," I remarked.

"Wise words, Pathfinder. Suppose I should get you introduced to the rest of the squad. The woman here is Skaelv Raaf, tech expert and hacker. The other man beside me is Velrad De Qad, demolitions expert," Heckt finished.

"Pleasure to meet you all. So, demolitions? We brought our own supply of charges to supplement your own, just in case," I remarked.

"Can I get a technical readout of them? Good to know how those compare to our own, know where to place them and such," Velrad suggested.
"Sure, SAM, transfer a full tech-readout to Velrad here," I ordered.

"Who are you talking to?" Owwin asked, confusion in his voice.

"SAM, our AI. He's in our comms so I had to talk out loud to contact him," I answered.

"Can this, SAM, hear us?" Owwin asked more nervously.

"I can. Have the readouts been delivered successfully Velrad." he spoke through our now linked comms.

"Y-yes, they have been. Thank you… SAM," he replied.

"SAM should be able to give our hacking program the kick it needs to break through the Kett shield. Once done with that, SAM will try to gain control of facility systems, lead us to the Moshae and lessen resistance as much as possible," Heckt explained to his men. "Now, as for the chain of command. This is an Angaran Op but you know how to best utilize your crew and their abilities, particularly the biotics, and we'll be splitting up regardless. I'll relinquish tactical control of your own men to you, but larger operational command will remain with me. Though it may hardly matter much given our lack of intel. Problems?"

"Far as I can see, the only things that matter are getting the Moshae out, rescuing as many prisoners as possible, and that when the Kett eventually regain control of the facilities systems, likely meaning we won't be able to save anyone else, this place becomes a smoking crater. I have little doubt that after this Op their shield defenses will see a significant upgrade. So no, I believe any orders I'd make, you'd make, and vice versa," I answered.

"Good, now as my team will be serving as the distraction, and your own team came with more members, I will need to borrow some of them," Heckt began.

"Agreed. Take Drack, you'll certainly benefit from having an angry Krogan on your side. Other than that, you can take Cora Harper and Liam Kosta, the other humans. Liam is ex-crisis response and ex-law enforcement. Minor tech skills and generally good at shooting what comes into view. Cora's put a lot of training in her biotics, used to work with an exclusively biotic elite unit. Drack in particular should be able to help out your demolitions expert, and my own team should be able to handle ours well enough," I explained.

"Understood. Inform your team of the situation, we should arrive soon," Heckt suggested. I did so, the team understanding their roles and I ran a final check on my weapons.

"We're here. Move quickly, it may be a blind spot but only until a patrol flies by," the shuttle pilot warned.

"You all know the plan, let's try to stay safe, alright?" I remarked as I stood up, the shuttle doors beginning to open.

"Bah, no one joins the Resistance to stay safe, Pathfinder," Skaelv retorted with a slight chuckle. The shuttle doors finished opening and in pairs, we jumped out, the fall was only a few meters but the LZ was hardly suitable for a pair of shuttles to land. Besides, the jump jets soften the fall.

"Good luck down there, radio when ready for exfil," the pilot reminded, the pair of shuttles taking off to wait nearby as everyone was now on the ground. The LZ was a small outcropping, like a small box canyon. Only thing it needs now is two bases filled with squads of lovable idiots "fighting" each other. We were facing the Kett facility and the blue wall of energy it was generating to keep out intruders and keep in any escapees.
"Well, you were right that it would be a bit warmer. Hardly as warm as I'd like," I muttered, slightly shivering as Vetra groaned about the cold once more.

"Intel says there's a system node to hack into on our side of the shield, should be over there, on the right side," Skaelv called out. We searched along the shield, finding a small console just barely buried beneath the snow.

"Found it! Do your thing SAM," I ordered, linking the console with my Omni-tool.

"Stand by…" SAM began as we waited for the program to work. A few seconds passed as the whole team began to glance amongst themselves. "Continue to stand by…"

"Please don't embarrass me in front of my new friends," I muttered. Vetra was the only one to hear or at least react, letting out a snort. Fortunately, the shield began to part, forming a small hole, big enough for Drack to use as well.

"Task complete," SAM stated the obvious, as machines must do, I suppose.

"Stars above, he did it!" Skaelv muttered. "Think this SAM could teach me a few tricks?"

"According to my analysis of your program, it is at the highest efficiency that an organic can achieve with the tools at your disposal. It is commendable, Skaelv Raaf," SAM remarked.

"Well… thank you," she replied, some surprise clear in her voice.

"I just hope you're as good with your gun as you are with tech. Wraiths, incoming," Drack warned, drawing his shotgun and scanning the area around us. Everyone else drew their weapons and formed a circle, our backs only to each other as we all searched for them.

"I didn't hear them, you sure?" Heckt questioned.

"Krogan can hear a lot better than all other species we've encountered. I heard their growls clear as day," Drack explained. I glanced at one of the base's large vents that we'd be entering from to see the air shifting slightly.

"In the vents!" I called out as I launched a shockwave towards them. It must have been too slow as I saw a pair of ripples split and drop down onto the rocks.

"I see them, take them down!" Heckt ordered. Before he even began speaking anyone who saw them, thanks to having their focus drawn towards them opened fire. With a total of eleven well-armed men and women trying to take down a mere two Wraiths, their corpses quickly decloaked, riddled with bullets.

"Any chance that would have alerted the Kett?" Cora asked.

"Negative, not in our experience. Nothing more than keeping in any possible escapees," Heckt answered. "Come on, on me, into the complex." He led us into the same vent that the Wraiths came through. "Cut off by some metal bars. Velrad, take care of it."

"Ha! Don't bother wasting it, this just needs a Krogan touch," Drack rumbled with low laughter, striding forward and grabbed hold of the bar just above his own head. In a flash, he tore it from its housing as if it was made of paper, then sticking out his arm and slamming it down to break a few more in half, and using his powerful legs to stomp on the last two closest to the ground. "After you," he laughed, taking pleasure in the surprise of the Angara. If only we could see their faces, but I don't think anyone is going to be removing their helmets here. Slowly, Heckt and the others
picked up the pace once more, leading us through the vents.

"Hold, room up ahead, Kett on patrol, looks like all Chosen, might be others," Heckt whispered. "Snipers, line up shots, the rest of you, get ready. Wait for snipers to pick and kill a target before jumping out. Spread out, some make for the higher ground, some the lower," he ordered. Jaal and I both pulled the snipers from our backs and got on a knee against the walls. Owwin too pulled out a rifle of clearly Angaran make himself, a long barrel and large scope, a green light along the barrel. Given our encounters with the Roekaar, I knew this was an Isharay.

"I got the one on the far side of the room, by the door," I whispered.

"And I the one straight ahead," Jaal informed. Owwin inched forward slowly to gain a line of sight on one of the Kett.

"Two Wraiths down in the lower room, I got the chosen patrolling the center of the room, ready on your mark," he whispered.

"On three. One, two, three," I quietly called out, pulling the trigger on my Chosen, his head exploding. Jaal too shot his at the same time, half of his head evaporated, the other half sizzling. Owwin was less than a second off the mark, but was the victim of pure old bad luck. The Kett was already moving his head, and the sound of gunfire made him move just slightly enough that the round missed his head by millimeters, instead impacting and burning a hole through a low barrier.

"Skkut," he growled as the others jumped down, the gunfire as their cue to engage the Kett. Looking down, I noticed that Skaelv had performed a well-timed roll with her impact, the whole team taking a Destined we hadn't seen in the room by surprise. She quickly pulled a knife from her belt and threw it at the Destined, the knife burying itself into his face up to the hilt, killing him. Large objects such as the knife are ignored by kinetic shields after all. She also drew the pistol from her thigh and aimed it at the Chosen Owwin had missed, the Angara pistol letting out a powerful round that burned itself through the Kett's bony skull.

"Well… shit," Liam muttered aloud.

"Ha, what's the matter aliens? Can't keep up?" she teased. Vetra opened fire on a ripple in the air just to her side, killing a Wraith just ready to pounce, saving Skaelv.

"Heheh, you guys are great," Vetra laughed. Peebee also seemed to find an opportunity to enjoy herself by pulling the still cloaked final Wraith into the air, keeping the biotics focused to leave it there, struggling and snarling harmlessly.

"SKKUTTING STARS AND STORMS HOW ARE YOU DOING THAT?!" Skaelv called out as the other Angara, aside from Jaal stared in awe.

"I suppose these are those biotics Evfra told us about," Heckt muttered.

"They might be," Peebee smirked. She decided to emphasize her point by using her other hand to throw a warp at the Wraith, the combined and opposite polarities of dark energy reacting violently, tearing the beast apart, atom by atom, leaving nothing but a few charred bones and ash left.

"I want to do that…" Velrad muttered.

"You and me both," Liam laughed. We kept our weapons out but relaxed our stances as Jaal, Owwin and I re-joined the others down below.

"I've stared at these places so many times, never thought we'd ever get inside," Owwin muttered.
"Well we are now, let's make it count. Look, these tables. Our people's things, abandoned. And here, next to where we dropped down, it's a holo of the Archon. Let's look around before moving on," Heckt ordered.

"I am Archon. I choose you for new Dignity," the hologram spoke.

"Choose? The basic Kett is a Chosen. Could this also serve as a training facility?" I questioned.


"Your true life, begins now," The hologram continued. I took a moment to study the Archon, I had only seen his face when we were ambushed by him. The bones on his head formed a hoop towards the back.

"Hey Liam, are you by any chance getting a sudden urge to play some basketball?" I asked aloud so he could hear me. Liam was looking around the tables at the Angaran items left behind. He looked over to see why I asked that, eyes locking onto the Archon's hoop.

"Ha! You know what? I think I am," he laughed.

"What do games have to do with any of this?" Heckt asked, confused.

"Old human game from back on Earth. You take a ball, and try to throw it into a hoop. If you can jump high enough, sometimes you grab onto the hoop and slam the ball into it. We call it a slam dunk. Which is exactly what I want to do to this asshat," I explained.

"Heh, I say we use his head as one of these hoops for a game when we kill him," Skaelv laughed.

"You know, I don't think I can come up with a better way for our species to bond than a friendly game of basketball using a mutual enemy's head as a hoop," I joked, earning laughs from the others.

"Heckt, these aren't just Angaran items, random supplies. These are personal things. Things no one would just leave behind," Velrad called out. Heckt turned to investigate, coming to the same conclusion.

"Not a good sign," Vetra muttered.

"Agreed," Jaal remarked.

"Pathfinder, I cannot access the facilities systems from the shield, they run on separate, closed systems. I require a new access point," SAM informed.

"On it. I'll call you over when I find one," Skaelv stated, searching around the room for an access point.

"If this is a training facility, and this holo seems to be welcoming the new recruits, why are Angaran supplies in this room? Why would they even be here in the first place?" Peebee questioned.

"No idea why they would be in this room. As for why they're here? Live targets, studying us, interrogation maybe. But we've liberated facilities that do the same thing elsewhere, less security. Why does these facilities have such high levels of security for training and any of the other possibilities? It doesn't make sense," Heckt answered.
"Pathfinder, up here!" Skaelv waved to me. She was on the level just above us, so I used my jump-jets and a touch of biotics to reach her, interfacing with the console she picked out and giving SAM access.

"I am in the system. Working on gaining control of systems. I suggest moving on with the operation. The direct route, for the distraction team is below. Your route, Pathfinder, is just along the catwalk," SAM explained. Heckt let out a sigh:

"We won't learn anything else scrounging around here. Drack, Harper, Kosta, with my team," Heckt ordered. Given I had already explained this to them, they moved without issue, though Drack did mutter something about how Heckt better not think he can push him around. "I doubt the Kett are still unaware of our presence with that little skirmish. Form up, be ready for anything. Good luck Pathfinder," Heckt ordered, before the door opened to admit his team.

"Abandon your fear. You have no use for it anymore," the hologram stated. It sent a chill up my spine. I shook it off and led my team through the other door.

"Pathfinder, Commander Heckt, the same program used to breach the shields can also overload the facilities main reactor, destroying the facility. However, the pulse is lethal to Angaran physiology. Granted, all the Angara within range of the pulse would die within the facilities own destruction," SAM explained.

"Work on finding the Moshae and a way to release all prisoners first. The facility will not be destroyed so long as a single Angara can still be saved," Heckt ordered.

"Agreed, SAM. Is there a way the Kett can force you out?" I asked.

"A full system reset would achieve that goal. However, I would have enough time to begin the overload before the reset. As a back-up, I have also accessed schematics for the facility, and located several structural weak-points along the known path of the distraction team. Transmitting…"

"Then we have a Plan A, and B, good," Heckt remarked.

"Are we sure about destroying this place when we're done?" Vetra muttered.

"It pains me to say it, but yes. Evfra believes that our operation will lead to a full overhaul of this facilities, and any others security, meaning we won't be able to break into them like this ever again. And I agree with him. Yet he was still Adamant that the base would not be destroyed so long as a single Angara can still be saved," Heckt explained. The door I led my team through admitted us into a smaller, rectangular room filled with vents on the walls and a viewport into the next room. Once the last of us entered, the door shut, and given that the interface now glowed red, was likely locked, as was the next door.

"SAM what is this?" I asked, as a gas began to seep out of the vents and into the room.

"A decontamination protocol, it is not harmful to any of your physiologies. The door is locked by several firewalls and will not open until the cycle is complete. I will work on a means to bypass it," SAM explained.


"Shoot the window?" Vetra suggested.

"It is both an energy barrier and a material I am unfamiliar with. Small arms will not have an
"Effect," SAM answered.

"Why would they need decontamination?" I questioned.

"Sick? Or perhaps they get sick easily?" Jaal theorized.

"Then why wouldn't they wear environmental suits everywhere like the Quarians?" Vetra responded.

"None of this makes any sense," I muttered as the cycle finished and the door unlocked. We opened it into a hallway as a voice came through my comms.

"Pathfinder, come in," Skaelv whispered.

"We read you," I answered.

"We're still undetected but we can see some of our people."

"Can you get to them?" Jaal asked.

"Negative, they're surrounded by Kett. But they seem... calm," she remarked, clearly confused. "What of your own progress?"

"No sign of any Angara in here, maybe a Kett only area," I answered.

"Understood. Discussing our next move. We'll be in contact. Skaelv out."

"Door on the right, seems unlocked. Check it out?" Peebee whispered. I nodded and slowly led the team over.

"The hell? It looks like a classroom," I muttered. Six desks, neatly lined up, chairs and data pads with each all facing the front of the room. At the front was a small platform, like a stage or pedestal with a weird looking pod stood up at the back, as if it was the subject of study

"I believe the object at the front of the room is a kind of stasis pod, Pathfinder," SAM informed.

"For transport? Maybe they are sending Angara back deeper into Kett space," Vetra theorized.

"Look, this data pad has several questions on it. And a quote where you need to 'explain your reasoning.' Definitely a classroom," Peebee pointed out.

"And this one. The Chosen Beasts of Heleus. It's about the Wraiths. The translation appears broken, imprecise, but something about the Challyrlion being... something, for exaltation. They built a facility to harmonize it with Kett genetics. Did they take its genetics to modify a creature the Kett already had? Are they doing the same with Angara?" Jaal theorized.

"The Angara do have a powerful Bio-electric field, right? Think they're trying to give themselves the same?" Vetra pointed out.

"And what happens once they have the genetic code?" Jaal asked. Something about this was giving me a very bad feeling. I couldn't explain it but it just felt wrong. It was as if some deep, primal fear, instinctually within was being triggered by whatever this exaltation could be. Whatever it is, I hope these Kett Reap what they sow... I shook my head to clear it:

"Come on, there's nothing left in here but more questions. Move on," I ordered. They nodded and moved with me, all eager to leave the room. We traveled back down the hallway, adjacent to where
we entered when I saw a Wraith curled up on the ground as if it was sleeping, it's chest barely rising and falling as it breathed. I held up a hand to stop the others and pulled the Black Widow from my back, folding up and placing the Sweeper back onto the mag-locks. I took aim and fired, the bullet pulverizing the bone and obliterating its brain, leaving it dead.

"May have been guarding something important. Let's check it out," Jaal suggested. I agreed and led my team towards the room it was sleeping near. It was like a crew quarters. Tables and chairs in the middle, a trio of cubicles with a private desk, chair and bed in each.

"A commune, but Angaran supplies. And it's not a jail cell. Why…" Jaal muttered.

"Wanna trash the place?" I suggested.

"Whatever that means, it doesn't sound violent enough," he growled. There were more data pads in the room, but I couldn't make sense of them. Sure, most of it was translated, but some key words weren't, and with Kett word choice, nearly impossible to interpret for someone lacking intel.

"Only one other door to try, right near the Decon room," Peebee remarked. We traveled back down the dimly lit hallway to the final door, readying our weapons. It seemed to be a kind of control room, no Kett had heard us enter. In the center was a large round disc, perhaps a holo-communicator.

"Strike fast and hard. Kill them quickly enough, may not be an alarm sounded," I whispered the order.

"I'll cloak, take down someone on the right," Jaal suggested.

"Good idea, I'll do the same with someone on the left. Once we strike, Peebee I want you to pull the Chosen there in the middle into the air and detonate him with a throw, you two charge in and mop up," I ordered. Jaal and I both cloaked and inched through the room. I slowly stepped up the stairs on the left, hoping my armor wouldn't make any noise and spotted my prey. A Chosen leaning back against a small crate, his arms crossed over his chest tapping his foot on the ground impatiently. True, I may have a Cryo-gauntlet now, and an Omni-blade on my other arm, but either makes noise when activated. Fortunately, Combat knives are standard issue, and the one my dad kept with his armor? Just a bit higher quality than standard issue. Quietly and slowly, I unsheathed the knife with my left hand and grabbed the Scorpion from my thigh with my right, not unfolding it just yet. I stood behind the crate with the Chosen leaning against it and prepared to grab him with my right arm and slit his throat with my knife in one swift motion.

Thanks to being fully armored, the only way for someone to hear what we say was for them to be linked on our comms unless we activated our armor's speakers. Cloaking automatically deactivates the speakers.

"Ready Jaal?" I questioned, instinct keeping my voice at a whisper, regardless that it was unnecessary.

"In position," he confirmed. I gave another small countdown before wrapping my right arm across the Chosen's chest and pulling him back over the crate so he was face down on the ground in front of me. I followed the swift motion by slicing my combat knife across his throat, a pool of green blood forming as all his attempts to breath simply resulted in the air escaping from the new hole in his throat and choking on his own blood. The rapid flurry of movement was too much for the cloak and the safeties kicked in, deactivating it as Jaal and I both reappeared on top of the now dead Kett. Following their cue, The Chosen in the center of the room found itself lifted into the air, crying out in surprise as his feet left the ground before a blue ball of biotic energy impacted him and he was
gone. The reason I had unholstered my Scorpion as well was because I had noticed a Destined working on a console in front of the room's large window and I needed to act fast before he vanished. As his attention was drawn from the biotic Detonation I opened fire, launching the small explosives towards him.

Given that the rounds used mass effect fields to hold the explosives together, the field surrounding the Destined for his kinetic barriers made the rounds collapse, but still drained the shields significantly. The third round stuck to his armor and the fourth one, the final one in the clip stuck to his forehead. He tried to pull them off, but the one on his chest detonated first, blowing off the arm and leaving a gaping hole in his armor with a significant "crater" in his chest, his shredded lungs visible and his heart beginning to shrivel up from the explosion. He was already doomed to a painful death, but the one on his forehead ended it quickly, leaving a fountain of green blood spurting as the heart came to a complete stop. The room was clear.

"Pathfinder, I am detecting a signal from the room to your left, a communication, I believe. It may shed more light on this facility," SAM informed. I stepped up the stairs first, as I was the closest waiting for the team to join me. Another hologram of the Archon stood in the center of the room, several other terminals awaiting use. "Activating message…"

"Keep this place sacred, and I will embrace you. You are elite among Kett. All at home envy your sacred position," the message spoke calmly.

"What a damn ego," Vetra muttered.

"It's revolting," Jaal growled.

"Heh, he's clearly compensating for something," Vetra chuckled.

"Ha! Your right! Look how tiny his crotch piece is! There's nothing there! Like Asari armor but with less exaggerated camel toe!" Peebee laughed. Wait, she called it Camel toe? Must be that the phrase is just translated.

"Huh, well I think I know what I'm going to say the next time I see him. Mine's bigger," I joked. It earned a laugh from the two women and a smirk even crossed Jaal's face at our insults to his people's greatest enemy.

"Please, we won't find the Moshae speaking of our… endowments. Let's move," Jaal suggested. The rest of us finished our chuckles as we returned to the control room.

"Pathfinder, the window looks out at a courtyard, several Kett and Angara are gathered out there. Reducing the opacity," SAM informed. The window, which was, at the time, closer to a milky white, became clear. The far end of the courtyard housed a large statue of the Archon, holding a kind of spiritual looking pose. What if this is some kind of temple? Around the statue was a railing, like you'd see at an assembly line with the same pods we saw in the classroom lined up across it. The courtyard was filled with many Chosen watching, and a trio of Destined flanking… Angara? As if they were an honor guard at some kind of ceremony? While from our angle the four Angara stood horizontally, looking towards the statue, the Chosen and Destined stood to the side vertically, looking on. Not a single weapon in sight. On a pedestal before them was an Ascended, no orb, no shield. Wearing purple robes compared to the common Kett green. "Playing audio," SAM informed. Four of the pods opened.

"Fortunate welcome! Step forward," the Kett greeted. A friendly greeting? The hell? Where most Kett voices sounded deep and masculine, hell, this one still sounded deep, the voice of this Kett was higher in pitch, maybe even a bit feminine? A priest? I was shocked to see the four Angara
calmly step forward, just as they were ordered. Not even looking amongst themselves. "I am humbled before you, you who are the Chosen. Chosen by the Archon. Chosen to be Exalted," the Kett continued. The Kett crossed its arms over its chest, outwards a bit in a kind of salute. The Chosen? Is she talking to the Kett or the Angara? The fuck is going on here? All Kett in the courtyard copied the salute, and repeated the same ending phrase.

"Chosen to be Exalted!" The Angara continued walking forward closer and closer into the pods, finally entering them as they closed.

"What the fuck…" I muttered.

"Why… Why aren't they resisting?" Jaal questioned nervously. Again, that same feeling of dread, of an ancient, primordial fear took hold.

"This is some kind of crazy cult shit," Peebee muttered.

"It's like a trance," Vetra theorized.

"I know the Moshae, she's not down there. And…" he pulled out his rifle and searched the other pods through his scope. "Not in the other pods. Maybe in one we can't see."

"Then we need a way to figure out which one," I stated. Our comms came to life with Velrad's voice.

"Pathfinder? You know that distraction we talked about?" he asked. The moment he finished, an explosion rocked the base and staggered both us and many of the Kett in the courtyard. "You just got it," he laughed.

"Ha! I like you guys," Drack roared with laughter over the comms. Alarms started to blare across the base and a holo of the Archon appeared behind the purple Ascended. SAM began to play the audio for us again.

"Archon," the Kett greeted, getting down onto a knee.

"Cardinal, explain," he demanded. All Kett in the courtyard too bended the knee at his virtual presence.

"We've been breached! I will defend the temple-" the 'Cardinal' began to explain. So, it is a temple? The Archon raised a dual fingered, single thumbed hand.

"Wait, is the Moshae among these?" he questioned. He asked for her specifically? They must view her as an important target.

"No. It awaits final exaltation," the Cardinal answered.

"Then proceed immediately and bring it to me. If necessary, Exaltation will be performed on the Verrikan," he ordered, as he cut communications. The Cardinal and the rest of the Kett stood, heading to their various destinations.

"Scott, the Verrikan is the Archon's flagship, if the Moshae is sent there we will never get her back. And Final exaltation? What's final? What are they doing to us? Scott, please, we MUST save them all," Jaal pleaded, fear and panic setting in. I grabbed him by the shoulders gently yet firmly.

"Jaal, I promise you, not only will we save the Moshae, but we will do our damndest to save every last one of the Angara here. That was already part of the plan. But you also know that if we can't
anymore, if the Kett lock us out of the systems we won't be able to get anymore and that reactor is going up in flames. I don't want a single Angara to fall victim to that detonation. But whatever this exaltation is, if the Kett do lock us out before the last one can be recovered, it might just be a fate worse than death," I warned.

"I… I know. I know we planned to save as many as we could just… There are so many questions. So many unknowns to what they're doing to us… Thank you," he let out a deep breath to calm himself.

"Don't thank me just yet. Come on, the more time we waste is the more time the Kett have to regain control of their systems," I reminded, urging them on to our destination. We ran through another hallway attempting to find a pod storage bay as we heard gunfire in the courtyard. I saw the other team fighting their way through almost a dozen Kett who had remained to guard the courtyard, Heckt directing the attacks of the others and Drack doing what Krogan do. It wasn't lost on me that the first Chosen he got a hold of, he ripped both arms from their sockets, the screams of the Chosen heard even from up here. He should have let the Wookie win.

"Never change, you crazy old man," Vetra muttered to herself as we continued our run.

"Pathfinder, we've contacted Commander Do Xeel of the Resistance HQ, more fighters are on their way to help with rescue efforts and demolition," he informed.

"Tell them to send some hackers too, help keep SAM in the Kett systems as long as possible," I suggested.

"Already done, we're getting a dozen of Voeld's greatest hackers, and we already have Skaelv," he reminded.

"Good, the Kett leader here has been ordered to bring the Moshae to the Archon, we're trying to find them both now," I informed.

"Acknowledged, need backup?"

"Negative, can't risk getting slowed down. Ryder out," I ended the call as I continued running. We entered the first door we came across surprising a Chosen and the Wraith he had at his side. We opened fire quickly, killing both before either could attack us, but no doubt drawing the attention of any other Kett in the room. It was a long hallway with another hallway running alongside this one yet raised up above the room's entrance. We jumped up there to push the assault as an Anointed charged and fired his gun and blue mist started to rise from below, a Destined was near.

"Pods at the end of the room," Peebee called out.

"Going behind the wall, may be another entrance," Jaal suggested as I drained the Anointed's shields, allowing Peebee to pluck him into the air and detonate him.

"Then mop up and go straight there," I ordered. Another Anointed at the far side of the room began to charge up his own main gun and I ordered Jaal to be ready to blow his head off as I prepared another shield drain.

"Scott, we've passed the main room, continuing the attack," Cora called out over comms. This place is like some kind of… church. We found some prisoners, yet they refused to evacuate, as if they were in some kind of trance. We had to leave them behind for the rescue team."

"Understood, we saw the same earlier, no idea what the fuck is going on here," I muttered. I drained the Anointed's shields and his head was subsequently melted by Jaal's rifle and we
continued the push, they were clearly not ready for us in here. As I ran a Chosen jumped up onto the ledge beside me, but he was prepared, and I wasn't. He moved to slam his fist into my face and just barely, like it was the matrix or some shit I managed to avoid it, but his other hand followed up and knocked my Sweeper out of my hands, skidding it across the floor as the others had already begun opening fire on the Anointed ahead. He continued to attempt another follow up but I managed to deflect his punch and instead shoved him back against a crate as I moved to stab him with my Omni-blade, only for his head to explode.

"You're welcome," Peebee called out, once more taking aim on the Anointed with her Sidewinder. I used my biotics to pull my Sweeper back to me, keeping myself out of the Anointed's line of fire. Under our combined fire, the Anointed didn't last long and we continued running for the end of the room.

"There, this vent follows the pods," Jaal called out. On the other side of the room and a small jump was another vent like how we entered the facility, also blocked by grates.

"Ah fuck it," I muttered, and launched a shockwave towards them. Fortunately, it worked, the grates crumbling under the force and clearing a path. In the next chamber, I could see a few pods, a good place to start. Upon entrance, I looked up and just… stopped.

"Storms… How many…?" Jaal muttered. Looking up, there was a whole tower above us lined with pod after pod.

"Damn," Vetra whispered.

"There is a console near the center of the room. It should provide a directory of all the pods," SAM informed.

"Well, at least we don't need to scan them all," I remarked as I found the console and interfaced with SAM.

"This will take a moment. Cross referencing in an alien language, in alien technology, with Angaran databases, which are alien," SAM explained. He paused a moment longer. "She was here, but her pod was just pulled moments ago. I have the destination. Marking the route on your armor's HUD." The team muttered several profanities at our shitty luck as a flashing holographic line appeared in our visors.

"Pathfinder, Skaelv here. Reinforcements have arrived, doubling pack to rendezvous to lead them to prisoners and detonation points. Do you have a lead on the Moshae?" she asked.

"Affirmative, en route to her location now, she should still be alive," I explained.

"Excellent news, Skaelv out." We continued down the path, another vent area, another shockwave to knock down the grates, and through another door into a Decon room.

"Get down!" I whispered as the next room was filled with Kett, and another pod. "SAM, how's that bypass coming along?" I questioned.

"Still working on it. My runtimes have been divided through both the systems and the two teams," he explained. As the Stasis pod, likely holding an Angara began to descend, two destined ceremoniously handed two objects to an Ascended standing in the center of the room, a kind of… chanting, perhaps, filling our ears. The Ascended clutched the objects around his chest as the Eezo in his armor allowed him to float into the air to meet the pod, the four of us watching in both confusion and a kind of morbid curiosity. The pod was floating in air as well, no doubt via Mass
Effect fields as it opened in front of the Ascended, a naked Angaran male floating out of it as well. His eyes opened and he began to breathe calmly as he was approached. Jaal's face shifted to fear as his arms followed the Ascended's out to the sides. The Ascended lifted his arms into the air before stabbing downwards, right into the Angara's shoulders. He cried out in pain as the Kett's thumbs pushed down on the objects, like a kind of syringe.

The Angara's face twisted and distorted in pain as he grunted and moaned as his veins turned dark black, across his body, his breathing growing faster and more labored. The syringes were removed as he threw his head back, his body growing even darker and darker as whatever was done to him spread throughout his body. His fingers and limbs twitched, a faint cracking noise reaching our ears, almost as if bone was breaking. Jaal placed his hand along the viewport in worry and horror. The Kett descended back to the ground as the Angara remained in the air, writhing in agony. His body was consumed in black as the twitching and convulsing grew ever more violent. And then it was over. He fell to the ground, on his hands and knees, slowly standing back up. I gasped, my mouth wide open, eyes wide in shock at what I saw. Vetra stood, simply staring. I could not see her expression through her helmet, but I doubted she could remove her eyes from the nightmare we just witnessed. Peebee doing the same. But Jaal? He had removed his helmet, almost as if he believed it was providing him a mirage. His helmet fell to the floor and his face was marred with absolute horror, terror and shock across all his features, his breathing had stopped entirely and seemingly each pigment of color from his whole body had drained to pasty white almost. The creature that stood where the Angara had just fallen…

Was Kett. We stood, half a second longer frozen in terror at what this means. Holy fuck. Holy fucking shit they're turning them INTO FUCKING KETT!? WHAT THE FUCK!? The door opened and Jaal was the first to react, running out, rifle in hand with absolute fury, yet still concerned.

"Watch your fire! Don't kill the Angara!" he pleaded. The once Angara was handed a rifle by the Ascended as he ran out of the room, the new Kett opening fire on us.

"Jaal he's shooting at us!" Peebee called out, fear still gripping her voice.

"Jaal, I swear to you, these fucking bastards are going to get what they fucking deserve. YOU HEAR THAT YOU MOTHERFUCKERS? I'M GOING TO KILL ALL OF YOU FUCKING ANIMALS!" Vetra roared out as she stood, and turned off her weapon's safeties, focusing on the pair of Destined at the front.

"You… You MONSTERS! VILLAINS! DIE!" Jaal too roared out as he threw a grenade at a Destined, the explosive sticking to him center mass, dooming him to death.

"Goddess… I think… I think I'm going to vomit…" Peebee muttered, tearing off her helmet as she began dry-heaving. Honestly? I think I'm about to do the same. I shook my head clear.

"I'M GOING TO PUT YOU ASSHOLES DOWN!" I cried out, biotically charging the Destined like an idiot then stabbing him through the throat with my Omni-blade. I turned my rifle to shoot at the Kett closest to me, a pang of regret as I noticed it was the same one we just watched turn. The rounds struck him all center mass, but without armor, burned right through him, knocking him to the ground as he died. I'm sorry…

"DIE! DIE!" Jaal roared as he pulled the pistol from his belt and ran towards another Destined at the room. Pulling the trigger, slapping in a new power cell, shooting again to finish him off… He stood there, holding his smoking pistol out as he breathed.

"I think we're clear. The fuck was that…" I muttered. Jaal had lowered his weapon and turned to
search for the former Angara.

"As if I needed another reason to hate the Kett... you alright Peebee?" she too muttered. Peebee walked up with her helmet back on, but simply shook her head no. She was at a loss for words.

"I've seen some bad shit, checking out colonies after a Batarian raid, but this? This is straight up evil," I muttered, shock still gripping me. Jaal collapsed onto his knees over the body and began... crying. I walked over slowly to place a hand on his shoulder.

"They... are us..." he began. He let out a pained breath as his eyes closed tightly. Jaal sobbed, his shoulders shaking, face distorted by sorrow. "They are us... How many have I killed, not knowing? Scott, I did not know! I did not know..." he whispered.

"Jaal, I... I'm so sorry. What can I do?" I questioned, hand still on his shoulder as I too got on a knee.

"What can you do? You know what you can do?" he replied, standing up, staring at me, with absolute fury and hatred in his eyes. I stared back, in shock, assuming this fury was being directed at me. He did not speak, just staring at me.

"W-What?" I asked nervously.

Mega oof on my part, sorry guys. Busy and forgetful ol' me. I'll be leaving you off on chapter 29, but for a reason. I want y'all to have that cliffhanger before chapter thirty for a little while...

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I reeled back almost at what Jaal had just asked of me. Singularity. When I used it on a group of Roekaar back on Havarl, I had watched as they screamed, helpless in the air, struggling to swim away as they were engulfed in quantum oblivion. I terrified both Jaal and myself, and I promised him I'd never use it on any living thing again. I promised myself that. And now I was being asked by Jaal to use it to slaughter the Kett. Fucking hell, the evil they've done here has no rival. Kidnapping Angara, screwing with their minds, turning them into Kett. Loyal, unthinking, unfeeling slaves fighting against the very people they once were. If I was in a calmer head, I might have tried to argue. But like Jaal, I was seething at the Kett. Just like Vetra and Peebee were. This shit is nightmare fuel, and that's nothing compared to what it must be to Jaal. The Kett view themselves as better than everyone and everything, that anything not Kett is a stupid, small minded bug to be squashed under their boot, or to be used to their advantage. They took away everything that makes these Angara people, that makes them a living, breathing, sentient creature, and throw it into a meat grinder. Fuck the Kett.

"You got it Jaal," I replied sternly, standing up with him.

"Scott, Jaal, the Moshae! In here!" Vetra called out. Jaal snapped up and ran towards the door to see. He would not lose her to this… monstrosity as well. Fantastic, another fucking Decon room.

"SAM, you better have that fucking bypass ready right fucking now," I ordered, a bit harshly but it wasn't meant to be directed at him. And if anyone other than me would be able to tell, it would be SAM. Unlike the previous Angara, she was still fully clothed but was slowly descending through the air, the Cardinal awaiting her. The Moshae had a more purple skin color, and her clothes were a purple to white gradient, around her neck and along her arms from her shoulders was a kind of gold adornment, and black metal ring around her head, symbols of authority or honor, I suppose.

"Initiating bypass," SAM stated. Jaal stormed over to the viewport and began mashing the butt of his rifle against it, screaming out in fury. It must have drawn the attention of the Kett in the room, as instead of beginning the Exaltation, the Cardinal grabbed her and began running out of the room, glaring daggers at us. The door opened and we ran through, but the two had already escaped through the back of the room, leaving a pair of Destined for us to fight.

"WE CAN'T LET THEM GET AWAY!" Jaal cried out. I obliged to his wishes and my fury, forming a singularity between the two Destined.

"Peebee, we don't have time to wait for them, use a throw, push them in!" I ordered, anger still in my voice. She obliged, using both hands to throw both confused Destined towards oblivion, and I
allowed it to collapse, allowing us safe passage.

"I hope it hurt," Jaal growled softly as we ran into the next Decon room. Fortunately, the bypass worked much faster this time and we went straight into the next room, two doors.

"Take the right, they are both elevators to a launch pad, the Cardinal has taken the left," SAM informed. We rushed in and SAM closed the doors, speeding the elevator along as quickly as he could. Luckily, this time it was a quick ride as we soon found the doors open to a room identical to the one where we stepped into the elevator. We rushed to the door and opened it, the sting of the freezing air of Voeld greeting us, yet our fury allowed us to ignore it. It also helped that we were in broad daylight and the walls kept out any wind. But this was clearly a launch bay. No roof, and three other large exits that could easily fit a shuttle. And there was the Cardinal, straight across from us, setting the Moshae down gently as an Orb floating alongside… her? The shield forming and she floated into the air.

"I see her! Don't let them leave!" Jaal cried out. A Kett fighter was being lifted from a hangar bay below, seems we got here in the nick of time, they can't leave if we're shooting at them.

"You will not take her!" The Cardinal yelled out as two pairs of Kett opened fire on us from either side.

"OVER MY FUCKING DEAD BODY, YOU BITCH!" I yelled back.

"Look at these animals, stooping to such vulgarity. You are Kett! You are stronger! Purge the filth!" The Cardinal spoke to the Kett supporting her. Jaal's rifle took out one of the Chosen standing at the wall as Peebee lifted another into the air and slammed him with all her might towards a Destined beginning to cloak. Shield or no shield, the force was enough to kill them both. A simple burst from my Sweeper able to kill the last Chosen easily. An image flashed in my mind of the Angara we watched become a Chosen, for a brief moment I had considered who he or she was before, who they knew, and what they left behind. But these thoughts were not for now, they would be dealt with later.

"Doing pretty damn well for animals aren't we, you cunt!" Peebee yelled back. Words that would make an Aussie proud.

"Yet now you must deal with me!" the Cardinal roared, beginning to teleport across the Catwalks to engage us.

"Jaal, grab the Moshae, get her away from that fighter!" I ordered. He nodded, cloaking and making his way towards his old teacher, down the route opposite of the Cardinal's. "Focus fire on the orb! Get that fucking thing down!" We tried taking our shots but the Cardinal just kept moving. Each time the orb was coming into view, she teleported away, making it difficult to get a shot off on it. Each time the orb was behind her, she held out her hand a large burst of energy shot towards us, forcing us into cover. It was a stalemate as Jaal worked on moving the Moshae.

"My own exaltation shield protects me! You flawed ignorant!" The Cardinal cried, making a real move. She teleported on the other edge of the catwalk lining up a shot with all of us. The orb hastened in front of her, as a large mass of energy began to form from it and around it.

"Move! It's a concentrated energy attack, DO NOT let it reach you!" Jaal warned. This was going to be our chance.

The others jumped off the bridge but I remained a small bit longer, unleashing everything I could on the orb as her attack charged. It finished charging and a wolf like grin spread across her face as
the orb began speeding towards me, one last burst was sent out from my rifle as I jumped off the catwalk, re-joining Vetra and Peebee.

"Shields down! Shoot her!" Vetra cried out as I landed. I tried to turn as fast as I could as Vetra opened fire but she fell to the ground, taking cover on the catwalk, yelling out in pain as apparently a round did manage to strike her.

"Shit, I don't have a line of sight!" Peebee stated.

"My power comes from the gift of the Archon! I will not yield!" The Cardinal claimed, as her orb reformed, generating the shield around her once more. Reinforcements joined her, a Destined from the shuttle pads to the right, and a pair of the same on the left supplemented with a Chosen.

"We fight for the Archon!" They cried out as they joined the battle.

"We fight to the death! Protect this sacred place!" she ordered. We were sitting ducks down here so we ran as fast as we could up the ramp now behind us, where we first saw the Cardinal and the Moshae.

"Scott! Behind you!" Jaal called out over the comms. I turned behind me to see an energy bolt primed to fire right at me, and I had no cover. Quickly, I generated a biotic barrier to try and deflect it. The faint purple light of a barrier began to glow and spread in front of me as the bolt was sent on its way. While there, it was not at its full strength, and the barrier collapsed under the force of the round leaving my shields and armor the only thing in its path. My shields collapsed and the round struck me in the chest, just like that Kett round on Habitat 7. It knocked me to the ground and I grunted in pain as it began to burn through my armor. The HUD on my visor began flashing red as the armor's integrity was being compromised.

"SCOTT!" Vetra cried out, running out of her own cover to drag me out of the open, grabbing my arm and using her other for covering fire. I cried out in pain again at the searing heat of the round beginning to burn my chest and I squeezed Vetra's arm as tight as I could to try and numb the pain. In a panic, as it almost chewed its way through my armor, I grabbed a handful of snow by my side and dumped it into the new hole watching as it turned to steam but the armor still burned.

"Pathfinder, your shields and armor were thick enough to stop what was left of the bolt from reaching your body, however, you are suffering from a severe burn on your chest from the heat of your armor. To avoid more serious injury, it must be cooled now," SAM warned. The force of the round had still knocked the wind out of me and I entered a coughing fit as my lungs attempted to regain the lost oxygen.

"S-snow, water, c-cool armor off," I sputtered, grabbing more handfuls as Vetra grabbed her canteen, dumping out all its contents into the hole, there was more steam, but at least the pain was bearable now. Or maybe that was the Medi-gel. I nodded to Vetra that I was alright and she looked a moment longer before nodding back, standing to fight the new wave of Kett.

"The Moshae is safe, is Scott alright?" Jaal questioned.

"Yes, but he's wounded, need to keep the Kett off him," Vetra spoke for me.

"Look at how easily these pathetic creatures fall to our glory! Destroy them all!" the Cardinal cried out.

"I- Agh, I ain't dead yet you ugly motherfucker!" I yelled back, going back into a coughing fit as I sat myself up. The Cardinal growled as the Destined that was now on our left neared. Only to have
his throat slit by an angry Angara. He nodded before de-cloaking again, the Cardinal remained on the bridge so we couldn't deal with her until the others were dead. I looked around me to find that my sweeper was missing. I stuck my head out back down the stairs for a moment and saw it lying there, it had been knocked out of my grip. Despite the pain, I struggled to use my biotics and pull it back towards me. It crawled its way up the stairs into my hands as I pulled it away and let out a few pained breaths.

"Destined are down Scott, can you move?" Vetra asked, turning to face me again.

"Y-yeah, I think I can," I groaned as I stood up. At least my legs weren't injured. I don't think I'd be able to run much though.

"Jaal, she's doing her damn evasive routine again," I sputtered. "I need you to," I coughed, "Cloak and get behind her. The moment she charges another one of those, energy ball… things, take her down," I ordered.

"With pleasure," he growled, the cloak activating as he seemingly disappeared into thin air. Again, she would teleport somewhere else every time her orb was visible, leaving us guessing as to where she ended up to regain a precious few seconds.

"I will not yield! None of us will yield!" she cried, making her first real mistake. She hadn't even had a good shot lined up, but she charged another energy ball. I, alongside Vetra and Peebee, gave it everything we had, and managed to destroy the orb before she fired. On cue, Jaal appeared behind her, raised the hand holding his knife into the air, and plunged it deep into her back. She fell to her knees, crying out in pain as Jaal began to slowly twist the knife. Though Jaal was whispering, he had activated his armor's speakers, allowing the whispers to be heard by the Cardinal as she continued to grunt in pain and we could hear him as well.

"Do you feel that? That is for my father. And everyone else you've killed, you bitch," he growled. Jaal gave the knife one last twist before he removed it and pushed her to the ground, content to leave her to bleed out. "Come on, the Moshae is back near the elevators," Jaal muttered, turning away from the dying Cardinal. Vetra offered to take some of my weight to help me back to the lifts but I assured her I was fine, and she reluctantly allowed me to walk on my own. The doors opened and there was the Moshae, on the ground, breathing heavily. She looked up at Jaal with familiarity, a slight grin on her features.

"Moshae Sjefa, we're getting you out of here," Jaal stated reassuringly, getting down on a knee and placing a hand on her shoulder.

"No one has ever returned from behind Kett walls…" she muttered. Her voice certainly sounded older. Not like an elderly woman, but more so middle aged, yet her voice still seemed to carry the wisdom of one so old.

"Hey, we don't know the rules yet," I joked, coughing as it hurt to laugh.

"This facility is on alert, and we have rescue and assault teams freeing as many prisoners as we can, we have to get you out of here," Jaal stated calmly. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders, Jaal supporting her weight to move her along. She was tired, very tired. With his other hand, Jaal ran a scan. "Her vitals are bad. Very bad, her immune system's been decimated," he revealed. "We need to get you out of here now," he urged.

"You will not take it," the Cardinal groaned. She stood by the door, a hand clutched to her back as she struggled to breathe. "It is meant for the Archon himself." She raised her hand and a bolt of energy began to charge, only for the barrel of a Cyclone to find itself against her forehead.
"Oh no you fucking don't," Vetra growled. The Moshae's face shifted to a scowl.

"Wait… don't shoot. I want to know why the Archon-" the Moshae began gasping a question.

"Arrogant simpletons! This is a gift! Who are you to deny it?" she accused, fury across her face.

"A gift?! A fucking gift?! You take these people from their friends and their families, you take away everything that makes them who they fucking are, and turn them into monsters that slaughter their own damn people," I growled, fighting through the pain it causes to speak.

"They are chosen to join with us to become great beyond your ability to understand," she growled. "Like them, I was once wretched, and the exalted DNA of our great Archon entwines with mine. I stand on the shoulders of his greatness. As they do. As, one day, you will."

"And you call us arrogant? Listen to your fucking self! Thinking about how much better you must be than the fucking rest of us, thinking we're all stupid little shits. Well look what we've fucking done today. We've beaten you and all your fucking followers here, rescued your top prisoner, we'll rescue as many more as we can, and then we're going to blow this place the fuck up. You think that one day you're going to fucking turn us into you? Fuck no. You know why?" I began. I began stepping closer and closer with each of the next words out of my mouth until I was right in her face. "Because I am going to fuck your shit up," I growled. "And there's not a fucking thing you can do about it."

"Pathfinder, I am tracking multiple inbound Kett cruisers. ETA, thirty minutes," SAM informed over our comms.

"You will all be exalted," she threatened.

"SAM, get that reactor ready to blow. I want this place gone the moment those cruisers are in range and we're out of here," I ordered. Fear spread across the Cardinal's features.

"Wait! Leave my sacred temple intact, and I will open the pods of the Chosen. Take them. Just leave this place standing," she pleaded.

"No, even if I die here, this place must be destroyed!" the Moshae urged.

"We can come back to destroy it, we must free those here now!" Jaal pleaded.

"If your plan fails, the Kett will simply fill this place again," she remarked.

"With respect, our compatriots are also here. Our fighters, our scientists, our strength," Jaal defended. So, it seems like I'm being given two choices. Accept this deal, but the Kett facility remains standing, piss off the Moshae, and potentially many more Angara can be exalted here later. Alternatively, I blow this place without having our job be ten times easier, dooming many more Angara to die. Or I take the blatantly obvious third choice sitting right in front of me. I turned off my armor's speakers.

"Tricking her. We're still blowing this place to hell," I whispered, the others hearing me. I turned the speakers back on to respond. "Do it, release the Angara," I stated. A look of relief spread across Cardinals face and she lifted her arm to key into her comms.

"Enact emergency shutdown. Release all the chosen," she ordered, and the Moshae looked down in anger.

"Commander Heckt, your job just got a lot easier, all the Angara prisoners have been released, you
just need to round them up before those cruisers get here," I informed over comms.

"Excellent work Pathfinder, I think we can do it," he returned. "Heckt out."

"Thank you… Scott," Jaal sighed, relaxing.

"I thank you too. I see you begin to understand the gift the Kett bring to all Andromeda," the Cardinal spoke, beginning to walk towards one of the elevators. Like she expected to get out of this alive. Ha! Stupid bitch.

"Don't count on it," I growled, lifting my rifle and pulling the trigger, a triple burst of energy rounds burrowing into her skull, killing her instantly. Her body fell to the floor, half inside the elevator, half out. The doors began to close automatically as they bumped against her waist, jerking the body slightly and forcing the doors to reopen. And then repeat the process.

"She deserved much worse," the Moshae growled. "And you are incredibly short sighted, you will ne-" she began to accuse me.

"Hold on there Moshae. Don't worry, we're still blowing this place to hell, she just presented me with a golden opportunity to get both done much easier," I explained, calming her down.

"I have placed automated sub-routines within the systems of this facilities reactor. They are on a countdown timer, with the best firewalls I can give them placed. The countdown is linked to thirty seconds after all Resistance fighters have evacuated," SAM explained through the armor's speakers.

"This was the plan Evfra put together. This was simply another opportunity," Jaal calmly mentioned.

"Good… good, yes. Please, let's just get out of here," she pleaded. I was happy to oblige.

"Evac team, this is the Pathfinder. We have the Moshae, and are proceeding to the upper landing pad for extraction," I informed.

"Acknowledged, should be there in five," he replied. We entered the elevators once more and SAM sped us along. The doors opened, admitting us to the landing pad, a long corridor out in the open, crates and walls strewn about for cover, the cold air of Voeld helping with my chest. Three minutes left. Jaal hurried the Moshae along behind what may have been a large fuel container as several Kett patrolling the landing pad moved to stop us. Jaal set her down gently as he joined Vetra, Peebee and I in clearing them out. Three Chosen and an Anointed. A burst from my rifle neutralized one Chosen, and a well-placed shot from Peebee's pistol killed another. Vetra fired a concussive round at the final Chosen allowing us to focus on the Anointed before he could open fire. An energy drain from me and a round from Jaal's rifle putting him down as the last Chosen stood. Vetra finished the job with a short burst from her Cyclone, allowing Jaal to pick the Moshae back up to move her along. We made it to the landing pad itself without more resistance, Jaal setting the Moshae down behind a stack of Crates as the rest of us took cover along the pad's low barriers, on our knees and weapons up ready to open fire. A squad of Chosen rushed out from the elevators and to make it worse, a large door back by the facility opened, allowing a Fiend passage. I tried to form a Singularity as close to those Chosen as I could, but only left it out in the open with many ways around, a single unfortunate Chosen being the only one in range.

Jaal put down another as a pair of Anointed walked through the lift room doors, already revved up and ready to fire, with a Fiend lumbering its way towards us.
"They… will not… take me…. Again," the Moshae growled, as she stood and summoned her bio-electricity to form a bubble around us, acting very similar to a barrier.

"Moshae, no! Save your strength!" Jaal pleaded as he attempted to take down one of the Anointed. I followed up on his efforts with a pair of bursts from my own rifle, managing to compensate for the range.

"That is my decision to make, Jaal," she retorted, keeping the barrier up, her breathing labored.

"Focus on the fiend! Do not let it get close!" I ordered, swapping my Sweeper for my Black Widow. Peebee launched a warp to attempt to eat through its natural armor, Jaal threw a grenade, and Vetra turned off her armor's safeties and just let er rip. The fiend staggered, and let out a roar at all the attacks and I saw my chance. As it roared, I lined up a shot straight into its mouth and fired, the armor piercing bullet finding nothing but flesh as it buried its way deep within the beast. It staggered back again, falling onto its side still writhing in pain and exposing its unarmored underbelly to Vetra's hail of bullets, all tearing through as blood began to pool around the beast. It was dead. Two minutes. While we were focusing on the Fiend, the Chosen and Anointed had gotten closer, and more reinforcements appeared. A fresh new squad of Chosen and the telltale mist of Destined seeping across the field. The remains of the first squad were quickly wiped out given their proximity and another combo from Jaal and I put down the Anointed. I blindly threw a grenade towards the mist, hoping it may take out one of the bastards as another large door opened, admitting another Fiend and a pair of Anointed. Fuck.

"Shuttle! We need that evac, NOW!" Vetra yelled into the comms.

"Going as fast as I can! One minute out!" he called.

"We don't have a minute!" she yelled back, returning to killing as many Kett as possible. The only benefit to so many Kett appearing in our way was that they were close enough together for another Singularity. I stood and formed one in the middle of the mist semi-close to where I had thrown my grenade. The mist was quickly sucked in, revealing a Destined and a trio of Chosen with him, all being sucked in towards oblivion. As if to spite me, two full squads of Chosen burst through the lift doors and Another fiend lumbered out of the large doors. Fuck. The other fiend was getting close, this wasn't good. I summoned up my biotics yet again, and poured as much strength as I could into them, launching out a massive shockwave down the middle of the landing pad. The Fiend was slammed back into a wall, growling as it got back on its feet, a handful of Chosen now missing, either off to the sides getting back up, or off the edge entirely. I had bought us some time, but that's it. And I don't think it's going to be enough.

"They won't take us alive," I growled, loud enough for the team and the Moshae to hear. A nod of agreement from each as they seemed prepared to die fighting. Vetra put as much power as she could into her tech armor and once more flicked off her Cyclone's safeties, bypassing even a few that she had put in place, and stood to unleash hell one last time. As she began to fire, an attempt to mow down Kett, large green bolts of plasma, a telltale sign of Angara firepower washed over the landing strip, obliterating Kett after Kett as the evac shuttle raised into the air to hide us. The rounds had even burned straight through the Fiend, leaving a massive pile of sizzling, melting blood and guts and dismembered corpses of Kett strewn across. It was short lived, as simply more Kett spewed out from the facility, but it didn't matter, we were clear for evac as the shuttle turned and opened its doors for us. The Moshae collapsed, breathing heavily as Jaal carried her into the shuttle and the rest of us leaped inside, the doors closing and the shuttle speeding off the moment we were inside.

"Heckt, how's the evac coming along?" I asked over comms.
"Excellent, we should be done much sooner than expected, the prisoners are practically coming to us," he responded. "We've been setting charges within the facility as a backup as planned. Have you extracted?" he questioned.

"Yes, and with the Moshae. Need some help with evac?"

"Negative, just get her out of here," he ordered.

"Wilco, Pathfinder, out." I sat back and allowed myself to relax, removing my helmet. Unfortunately, that only resulted in the adrenaline wearing off and the pain from my chest burns returning. I groaned in pain as I applied more Medi-gel. The others had removed their helmets as well and Vetra looked over with concern, before keying her comms.

"Lexi, prep the med-bay. Scott's wounded, burns on his chest," she explained, Lexi saying she'd be ready and waiting. Jaal ran another scan of the Moshae before keying his own comms.

"Commander Do Xeel, this is Jaal Ama Darav. We have the Moshae, but she needs medical assistance," he began. I couldn't hear the other end of the conversation. "Only basic medical treatment? No, that won't be enough," he muttered. "Scott, can your doctor help her?"

"Lexi's a highly skilled Xenobiologist. While she's never studied Angara, if your doctors can send her everything she'd need to know, she can do it," I answered.

"Good. Commander, have your doctors send everything about the Angara immune system to the Tempest, they have the facilities to treat her, they just need the knowledge of how. Send any immunoboosters you can spare as well," he requested. "Thank you."

"Lexi, get ready to receive medical data and supplies from the Angara, turns out you need to help with the Moshae as well, Jaal says her immune system is wrecked," Vetra called once more over comms. "You ok?" she asked me.

"Yeah, I," I coughed. "I think so. Just hurts like hell. Help me get the chest piece off?" I asked. It would at least take some weight off it. She bent down to help and I leaned forward, unstrapping it. Vetra grabbed the front and helped me lift it off and over my head, sliding the back of it out from behind me and I breathed a bit easier. "Thanks. Think the armor can be fixed?"

"Course it can. Just need to get it back to the Nexus and give it some time. Maybe buff the shields a bit," she reassured. My under suit was blackened from the heat and I attempted to remove some of the top a bit just to look at the wound itself. The small robe I had worn beneath it was also charred in the same spot and was marked by several small punctures from when the armor poked through to dispense the Medi-gel. Think I might need a new one. As for the flesh itself, it was a decently sized burn mark in the middle of my chest, blistered a bit but Medi-gel had kept it from getting too bad. Seems like I've gotten a nice scar out of today.

"Really, Scott? A coat?" Peebee teased, lightly. We may be safe now, but we all still had the same nightmares in the back of our minds.

"I told you, I hate the cold," I reminded.

"You aliens have done good work today. Maybe it's true, maybe you are alright," the pilot stated from the cockpit.

"I just wish we could have saved more. Maybe, found a way to reverse… it," Jaal muttered as he sat next to the Moshae.
"It? What's it?" the pilot asked incredulously. Shit, no one else knew. Not yet.

"Something I wish we never learned about the Kett. The most painful truth. I… I can say no more. You will learn soon enough, though you will wish you hadn't," he muttered, barely above a whisper as he stared blankly. We continued to sit in silence as the shuttle made the journey back to the resistance base, maybe even the Tempest.

"Hey kid, you there?" Drack called over the comms.

"We're here Drack, what is it?" I answered.

"We're pulling out now, evac complete. Thought you might want to see this," he rumbled with laughter as my Omni-tool's display lit up, as did Vētra's, Peebee's, and Jaal's even. Jaal moving his arm slightly to show the Moshae. It was the Kett facility, from the view of a shuttle as it was lifting away, Kett cruisers barely visible in the distance. There was a large explosion at the base, followed by a chain of more detonations along its height as it began to crumble into the snow. *Burn in hell you bastards,* I thought. Drack was roaring with laughter and I could hear the cheers of Angara in the shuttle with him as the facility was destroyed. "You did good, kid. You did good. See you on the Tempest," he finished, ending the call.

"At long last, it's gone," the Moshae whispered, her eyes slowly closing shut as she allowed herself to rest.

---

I was laying on a cot within the Tempest's med-bay, the Moshae occupying the other one as Lexi worked. The entire time Jaal was sitting in a chair beside her, holding her hand. For now, Lexi had simply given me some stronger painkillers and bandaged my chest, ordering me to rest as she focused on the one who needed her help the most. She had confirmed that I indeed had a bad burn on my chest, and a broken rib. At least an hour had passed as Lexi silently worked, injecting some medicines, running blood tests, generally ensuring the Moshae's vitals remained stable. I had remained awake, unable to sleep, checking messages for anything important or playing a small game like Solitaire or Chess as I waited for news.

"W-where am I?" the Moshae asked slowly as she awoke. Jaal shot out of his chair and stood above her and Lexi gently placed an arm on her shoulder.

"You are in the medical bay of the Tempest. The Pathfinder's ship, the aliens who helped me rescue you," Jaal reassured.

"I'm Dr. Lexi T'Perro. The resistance sent over medical supplies and information that has helped me heal your immune system. Though stabilizing, you still need rest," she gently ordered.

"I'm sorry we fought. But what we saw will set our cause on fire," Jaal murmured.

"Yes, it shall. My broken heart can't even process it," she muttered in reply. Jaal leaned down to wrap her in a hug, letting out a deep breath himself, knowing she was alright. She returned the hug. Maybe they really are… that close. I sat up, leaning by back against the cushioned back of the medical bed.

"Lexi, can you give us a moment?" I requested. She turned to face me. I was shirtless, yet my upper chest was wrapped in the bandages she had hastily applied earlier.

"I believe so. She's stable but I don't want to leave her for too long. Go easy, she, both of you, in fact, need to stay relaxed. Her especially, she's still in a fragile state. And I still need to redress those bandages, take care of the burn properly," she reminded, backing out of the room. Jaal and
the Moshae released her hug and she turned her head to face me.

"Did she just call me frail?" she questioned, unsure whether to be offended or not.

"Just fragile. You went through hell back there. You know how doctors are," I joked.

"Ha, quite. Who are you, exactly?" she questioned.

"Scott Ryder, the Human Pathfinder of the Andromeda Initiative. We come from the Milky Way galaxy," I introduced.

"I assume that Human is the name of your specific species? What of the others? I like your doctor, and the other one who was with you when you rescued me?"

"Lexi and Peebee are both Asari, and the other alien you saw earlier was Vetra, a Turian. Our pilot, Kallo, is a Salarian, and we also have a Krogan on board, Drack," I explained.

"A large mix, I see. Why did you come here to help me? Why are you helping the Angara at all?"

"Why help the Angara at all? Because it's the right thing to do. We made the journey to build new lives and explore, join our melting pot of Milky Way societies with that of a whole new Galaxy. As for you? Specifically? About fourteen months ago, the Nexus, the main hub of the Initiative arrived in Andromeda. They impacted with the scourge, lost a lot of leadership and lives. After months without any sign of the Arks, large ships filled to the brim with colonists in Cryo sleep, and the fact that none of the golden worlds we had scanned from back home were livable, food was running out. Some people mutinied, they were kicked off the station. The human Ark, Ark Hyperion, where I was, arrived about a week ago. We hit some scourge ourselves, but nowhere near as bad as the Nexus did. We arrived near a planet we were temporarily calling Habitat 7, but it was also, unlivable. There we discovered Remnant structures. And the Kett. I lost my father that day, and took his place as Pathfinder. We escaped the planet and linked up with the Nexus. Things were a mess and I was sent to a desert planet we call Eos, where two outposts had already failed, to try and make it livable. We activated Remnant Monoliths, and reset the Vault on Eos. cleaning up the radiation and settling down the weather. That Vault showed us a map of the cluster, a map of vaults. One of those vaults was different. It appeared active. Aya," I explained.

"I see. You found the Angara on Aya, and Evfra led you to me? That couldn't have been easy," she chuckled.

"You could say that. We were hoping that this active vault could help us find a way to activate all the Vaults, make the cluster livable. On our way to Aya we were ambushed by the Archon in a scourge cloud. We escaped but our ship suffered damage, and we landed, while on fire, on Aya. I managed to convince Evfra to not just send me away and never talk with us again, so Jaal came with us and brought us to Havarl. We helped some of your scientists there, and even found the missing third Monolith, resetting the Vault. That won Evfra's trust enough to allow us to help with your rescue," I explained.

"What Scott says is true. I was there myself as he spoke with Evfra, and on Havarl," Jaal supported.

"Then our home world is safe. It seems I will have many reports to read. What of the facility?" the Moshae questioned.

"Destroyed. Heckt believes they rescued everyone, but wouldn't have been surprised if there were stragglers, might be mere cynicism, however," Jaal answered.
"Then not only did you save many from a fate worse than death, greatly bolstering the Resistance's numbers, but you removed a large portion of the Kett's potential capacity for those horrors," she stated.

"And all it took was a lie to an utter monster. Even if she never offered the deal, we may have been able to rescue a good number, but I doubt we'd have rescued this much," I remarked.

"A fair price," Jaal muttered. "They believe what they do to our people is a gift! They snatch us away. They defile us! Shatter us! Or the ones we love. I... I can't..." Jaal began with a growl, ending closer to tears than anything else.

"From what I understand it's a complex genetic construct. An interchange of traits that the Kett use to advance their species," the Moshae explained. Wait, this is sounding an awful lot like Asari reproduction... at least with them it's willing, and doesn't change the partner.

"Why?" I questioned.

"Reproduction, apparently, they have been plagued by a kind of sterility. Their sexual organs have deteriorated, virtually de-evolved, and now they are left with this," she answered.


"Those as well, yes. And yet, the Archon did not take me to his ship to transform me. I was there once before, before being sent back to the facility here on Voeld," she revealed. "I was left in a stasis field, tortured, never allowed to sleep, brought to him on a whim. He showed me Remnant tech, demanded to know it's purpose, and would beat me when I wouldn't give him the answers he desired. It was pointless, as I had no answers to the question he asked," she explained.

"Remnant. Figures. Everywhere we've found Remnant technology, the Kett have been there studying it," I remarked.

"Yes, he's quite obsessed. Similar to you. Granted, where his obsession stems from ambition, and a way to dominate, yours stems from survival," she responded.

"We've traveled across dark space and we don't have a way back. Without a place to settle, we'll die. Eos doesn't produce enough, not within the time we have at any rate, to sustain us. These vaults might just be the key, for both of our species," I answered.

"I feel for your people. And the lengths you have gone to show that you feel for mine. Very well, I will lead you to Aya's vault."

"Thank you, Moshae Sjefa. We'll get you home to Aya as soon as possible. But I think both you and I need some rest before we can get into the Vault. You need some time with your best medical professionals, and I can't go on any ops so long as this burn and my broken rib makes it hard to run," I responded.

"And just how long would this take?" the Moshae questioned.

"Likely two or three days. Maybe four. Depends on if anything pops up in the meantime," I answered. I looked up as I continued. "SAM, have Kallo set a course for Aya, and send a message to Evfra requesting medical personnel on standby, but clarify it's not an emergency," I ordered.

"SAM? Who is SAM?" the Moshae asked.

"SAM is our artificial intelligence. He gave the Angaran shield bypass program the kick it needed
to break into the facility, and he set the reactor to detonate,” I explained.

"And just how much of this intelligence is… organic?” she asked.

"SAM is linked with my mind via a neural implant. He sees the world through my eyes, hears what I hear, feels what I feel. All allows for a rather organic experience. My dad made him, and my mom designed the implant," I explained.

"I believe I'd have enjoyed a conversation with your father,” she remarked.

"Moshae, I am going to return to my room for a while. I… need to think,” Jaal requested, standing up, yet not letting go of her hand just yet.

"I understand Jaal, be well," she ended.

"Might as well send Lexi in too, if you don't mind," I remarked as he turned to leave. He nodded acknowledgement and the doctor returned. Making a beeline straight for me to fix the bandages. By the time the doc had finished, the Moshae had fallen back into her sleep for some much-needed rest.

"How long until I can get back in the field?" I questioned.

"Although I’d much rather you rest for a week, I know that won't exactly be possible. The rest of today, tomorrow, and then I'll see how you're feeling the day after,” she relented.

"And as for walking around?" I asked.

"So long as you aren't running or getting your heart rate up,” she answered.

"Good to hear. Lexi, remember how you gave me an evaluation of the others a few days ago? Well, what's your read on how Jaal's doing? Especially after today?” Lexi shook her head as she began.

"Even Drack is feeling an impact from what you've learned today, I think he sees a resemblance between the fate of the Angara and the Krogan. No one is taking today well. Jaal the worst of all. Saving so many of his people and the Moshae helps, but what he's learned today… that's something that may never heal," she answered sadly.

"I should go talk to him," I remarked quietly, putting my feet onto the ground and moving to stand.

"Go ahead, he seems to respect you. Let me know if your chest begins to burn or if it continues to blister. Or if the rib is causing any pain. And DON'T, remove the bandages," she warned. I nodded understanding and first went to grab a shirt from my room before making my way to the tech lab. I could hear a few low voices in the mess, and the sounds of bottles hitting a table. A tempting way to try and forget. The pain he must have felt, then his mind just being… gone. Replaced by something, someone else. I shook it out of my head as I entered the tech lab, where I figured Jaal had gone to be alone. He was crouched in a corner, staring at his bed in utter silence.

"Jaal?" I spoke lightly. He turned his head to face me, he still looked upset, of course, but a small smile crossed his face as he noticed.

"Thank you for checking, Scott. But I'm alright. Are you clear to be out of bed?" he asked, slight concern.

"Think Lexi would have let me leave if no?” I let out a sigh. "Jaal, I'm not even Angara and I think this is going to haunt me for the rest of my life, I can't imagine how you're feeling. You sure you're
alright?" I continued, walking closer and placing a hand on his shoulder.

"I have to be. How else do we go on?" he replied, standing, turning to face me. "You know, right?"

"Jaal, you can talk to me if you want to. I care for my crew, and something I learned growing up with a sibling is how to have a good shoulder to cry on," I remarked.

"That's… kind. You're kind, thank you. I really miss my family at times like these," he sighed. "Are you close with your family?" Ah, I don't really want to add more sorrow to this.

"I hear you talk of family a lot," I remarked, partially hoping to avoid the question.

"Heh, really? I guess it's just part of our culture. Our families are large, and we share our parents with the community. We all have 'mothers,'" Jaal explained.


"And are you close?"

"I was, er, am. I guess. Sara and I were both very close with our mom. We were close with dad too, but he was gone or distant a lot. Military man, he tried, though. I think I told you that Sara is in a coma, but she and I were inseparable, a pair of little mischief makers," I chuckled, remembering better times.

"Heh, I can imagine. I'm sorry you've lost them," Jaal replied, concern and sympathy clear in his voice.

"Yeah, well, I'll admit: this little group of misfits here is starting to feel like a family. A slightly dysfunctional family, but a family," I joked. Jaal smiled at that.


"That kid on Aya looked up to you. What would you like?" I questioned.

"To do something important. Which is exactly what I feel like you're going to do. I can't wait to be a part of it."

"And I'll be more than happy to have you along for the ride. But hey, WE'RE going to do something great, all of us here on the Tempest, not just me," I retorted. "So, tell me, why do Angara seem so open with their feelings?" I asked. I was hoping to get his mind and my own off today.

"Are we? Well, we certainly aren't ashamed of them. We're taught that we need to keep our feelings open so that we can deal with them," Jaal explained.

"Doesn't that just lead to pain? Or someone using it against you?"

"If it does, then we deal with it, and it no longer affects us. That's how it works."

"Well, more power to you. Guess we're just a bit more paranoid with them. So, what about the Moshae. Is there anything more to her role? Or her personally?" I questioned.
Beyond our top scientist? A significant figurehead for our people. Very wise, and a great leader. She's beloved. I love her," he stated. Oh, so it is like that, huh?

"Really? Huh, one of those professor student things?" I joked. A look of confusion crossed Jaal's face before he realized what I meant. Then he broke out in laughter.

"No, no. Not in that way, Scott. Moshae Sjefa is 115 of your years old," he smirked.

"Wow, that is a long time. I couldn't tell she was that old. Guess Angara age well," I remarked.

"I suppose we do. Go on Scott, thank you for coming here, for taking my mind off things. I'd like to work on my rifle a bit," Jaal requested.

"Sure. Let me know if you want to talk about anything Jaal," I stated, exiting the room. Guess I might as well go to the mess, see what the others were up to. I entered to see Vetra, Peebee, and Drack, sitting together and sharing a few drinks.

"I can't help but think of the similarities with Kett exaltation and Asari reproduction," Vetra muttered after taking a swig of her beer.

"I can see it. Kett take other species' genes, Asari take other species' traits," Peebee responded with a murmur.

"I've been with Asari before, but now? I think Blue is off my menu, I'd never be able to 'embrace eternity,' without thinking about that Angara we watched. Just… ugh," Vetra shuddered.

"I've seen a lot of shit over the years, but this? Turning the Angara into Kett? Fuck… I've seen people like the Archon before. We need to take him out. All we need is a plan. The Archon thinks he knows what's best for us. The problem is that he can follow through. This exaltation turns people into slaves. Someone like him, you take out fast and hard. Cut off the head of the Thresher Maw…” Drack began.

"And the body dies. I sure hope you're right at least, but they seem to have a stable chain of command, there may be someone below him that can quickly take his place," I warned.

"Drop a nuke on his head, blow up a sun if you have to. Take the collateral damage and likely anyone close on that line of succession," Drack suggested.

"I don't believe it needs to come to that. There has to be a better way," I retorted.

"Maybe, but I ain't gonna let an enemy get close enough to pry my plates open and go for the soft kill. Messing around with this kind of thing ends badly. Each and every time.

"Seems some things are universal," I muttered. "When I was on security duty at the relay, colonies were attacked all the time. We trained the colonists, they started fighting back. Raiders didn't expect that," I remarked.

"But the Angara already know how to fight, and the Archon has an army to back up his crazy," Drack retorted.

"Ah but I've got you, Drack! And everyone else on board," I joked, trying to change the subject.

"Here here!" Vetra cheered with a slight slur.

"True enough kid. Never underestimate a small, capable strike force," Drack chuckled.
"So, what did Ms. Nosy say about the wound?" Peebee questioned. Obviously, she meant Lexi.

"Broken rib and a bad burn, but not too bad. Obviously, I can walk around, but supposed to take it easy for a few days. Guess I got a good scar out of this," I explained.

"And the plan right now?" Vetra questioned, still a bit slurred.

"Drop the Moshae off, maybe we'll get to hang around Aya, not sure yet. Tomorrow for sure we'll probably just spend the day on the Nexus, bit of leave. Maybe I'll help Kandros with APEX ops, not sure," I answered.

"Good a plan as any. Wouldn't mind spending more time with Kesh," Drack.

"After this they have to let us walk around Aya right? I'm dying to see the place," Peebee exclaimed.

"Their choice, but probably right," I remarked. "Still, we won't push it if no."

"Said you got a scar, let's see it," Vetra suggested.

"It's covered by bandages, probably not a good idea to remove those," I answered. Vetra let out a mock boo, as I shrugged.

"How long till we get there?" Drack asked.

"Approximately, one hour," SAM answered for me.

"Gah, hate knowing we're always being watched," Peebee muttered.

"SAM's in my head, and connected in your comms. You can turn your comms off, I can't kick him out of my head. Ignoring the fact that it would kill me," I reminded Peebee.

"Which is why I'm glad I'm not a Pathfinder," she chuckled back. I pulled a beer out of the fridge and sat with them. Talking. Felt good to get my mind off the horrors we've witnessed today. I damn well know I'll be stuck with them all night.
Recovery

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Moshae Sjefa, we're here," I stated, entering the med-bay, Jaal at my side as Lexi was running a final check.

"I was trapped in that hell for so long, it will be good to see my home again," the Moshae muttered, Jaal offering a hand to help her up. She accepted and seemed able to walk on her own, though I doubted Jaal would leave her side until she was in the hands of the medical officers.

"SAM, inform everyone on the crew to report to the hangar bay, let's show Aya the men and women who helped save their Moshae," I ordered.

"I'll be there in a moment, Scott, just making a final log of what supplies we've used for you and the Moshae," Lexi stated, writing down what she needed. I walked with Jaal and the Moshae to the docking bay, waiting for everyone to arrive. Once everyone had, SAM opened the cargo bay doors to another sunny day on Aya. I led the team down, to my left, the Moshae, and to her left, Jaal down the cargo ramp, and then the bridge. There was a crowd waiting for us, to no one's surprise. At the head of the crowd was Governor Paraan Shie, with Evfra at her flank. The many faces of the crowd were mixed between joy, shock, relief, or curiosity as they watched us approach. I could hear the Moshae breath a deep sigh of relief herself, her eyes closing for a moment and lowering her head just slightly. She raised her hand above her head and waved.

"Stars and skies light our way," the entire crowd returned, bowing in response.

"Someone knows how to play to a crowd," I murmured.

"Hmph. She's the Moshae," Jaal chuckled in return. Paraan stepped further to greet her personally, and the two pressed the backsides of their arms together, fists clenched in the same form that Jaal had attempted to make me do when he had decided to join my crew.

"Welcome home," Paraan greeted warmly.

"I never thought I'd see it again," the Moshae returned, a large smile on her face. She continued, raising her voice louder to ensure everyone could hear. "Were it not for the Resistance, and the Pathfinder, I wouldn't be here."

"Together, we freed more than just the Moshae. We freed all prisoners trapped within that facility, the Pathfinder killed a Kett leader, and we destroyed the facility," Jaal continued, voice loud to proclaim to everyone what exactly we had done. Still, there was the bitter taste in my mouth knowing just what we WEREN'T saying. I couldn't help but wonder if these people knew the horror. I'm sure Evfra knew, likely even Paraan Shie. But the others? I had my doubts.

"Please, we made a good team. There was no way my team would have been able to storm that facility all on our own, let alone with the results we had working together," I retorted.

"But first your immune system needs to recover. Hell, I need a rib to heal first too. Take your time, Moshae," I cut in before anyone else could. She let out a sigh as Evfra waved a few men over. 
"Speaking of which I have those doctor's you requested," he remarked as they ran a scan.

"Who is your ship's doctor?" One of them calmly asked.

"That would be me, Dr. Lexi T'Perro," she introduced, stepping through the crew.

"For having a limited knowledge of our physiology, you've done remarkably well. We'll take it from here, thank you," he complimented with a smile.

"We've been alone 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," Paraan Shie stated loudly, so that all those watching could hear her. Murmurs spread amongst the Angara crowd, but I couldn't make out what any of them were. I hoped positive. Evfra seemed uneasy, but he wasn't protesting, it may just be his heightened sense of caution.

"We'd be more than happy to make room for you on the Nexus," I smiled back.

"And we shall provide an embassy here in turn. Our city is open to you, all of you. Join us," she welcomed, parting to the side slightly as did the crowd. The Moshae was led by the doctors away to their care first. We were about to follow when Evfra stepped forward to speak with Jaal.

"Well done, Jaal. Report for reassignment." Shit. Jaal's face fell before being set with a more determined look, as I turned to glance at him.

"I need to stay with the Pathfinder," he stated calmly yet firmly.

"Evfra, please. Jaal has already become a valued member of my crew. More importantly, a friend. We'd benefit greatly from having him aboard," I began, ready to begin arguing my point. I noticed Jaal smile at my response, and Evfra let out a sigh, and to my surprise, a light, barely noticeable chuckle.

"Of course he has. I see the benefit. Request granted." I patted Jaal on the shoulder at the response.

"Thank you, Evfra. Scott, I need to file a mission report. Try not to leave without me, would you?" he joked, walking down the lane that had been opened by the crowd. I chuckled in reply and followed, the crew following me as well into the city. Paraan joined us as she cleared a few things up as we walked towards the city proper.

"Everyone here has known that you would be welcome in our city once we knew of the Moshae's rescue. They have left messages for the people of the Nexus in each of the city's main districts. We will also need to transmit a full copy of our laws, especially economic and military to you and the Nexus, but I hardly expect you to simply turn away from our city now to read them, just as you were permitted to enter. For now, any trade deals should be kept simple, but I have also assigned an Arbiter to guide you and your crew through any arrangements made today, just to be safe. However, next time you visit I will expect that the Arbiter will not be required," she warned.

"Arbiter huh? That totally doesn't make me think of a certain alien character from a certain old and legendary video game franchise… Not at all you hinge heads… I Thel you what I'll be Vadam(ned) if it did remind me of one.

"Sounds good to me. I can lay a foundation for a few arrangements and cement them next time we come here. Where do most of the merchants hang out?" Vetra questioned.

"Just ahead, you cannot pass through to the rest of the city without walking through them. I suspect you will be the one she will be working with most?" Paraan replied as the doors to the city opened.
"That's right. Vetra Nyx, got contacts all over the Nexus. Many of them will want things the Angara have, and I'm betting you got merchants who want things the Nexus has," Vetra remarked.

"I see. These are the Memorial gardens. The Mural here commemorates the centuries of hardship our people endured thanks to the Scourge, and the reunion of our people to form the society that has withstood eighty years against the Kett," she explained. The Mural was a simple blue background with one Angara figure dressed in ceremonial armor and a ceremonial staff, one for each home world. "And here is a public message terminal. Normally our people use them to post bulletins for aid or notify others of something. You will find a data packet within of messages from our people to the Nexus, there will be others in the Markets, outside our Tavetaan, and outside the Resistance HQ."

"What's a Tavetaan?" Liam asked.

"In this context, it is a place for friends to come together. Drinks and food are normally served. And the drinks are normally alcoholic," Jaal explained.

"A bar! I know where I'm going," Liam laughed.

"I'll join you, kid. Let's see what the Angara call a drink," Drack chuckled. What's the worst that could possibly happen...? I interfaced with the message board and pulled out the data packet, I'd read it later on the ship and send them to the Nexus. We continued down the memorial garden, a narrow walkway with benches, large collections of lush plants of vivid colors on either side, windows on the left looking out onto Aya's plains and the more volcanic regions in the distance. We came to the end of the gardens, another statue with a total of five holographic worlds, likely Angara worlds on a tower.

"And this is a monument to all those we have lost to the Kett. Both worlds, and people," Paraan Shie explained. "In fact, many of the plants you see here come from worlds we have lost to the Kett."

"I see the Marketplace. Guess this is my stop, anyone joining me?" Vetra spoke. Beginning to part with the group as she moved towards the stalls, vendors making deals with other Angara.

"Ooh, I will!" Suvi called out, lightly pushing her way through the group to join her.

"Where can I talk to people about tech?" Gil questioned.

"We have many engineers around our landing pads, working on shuttles. I can message them to provide an escort to them and answer any questions," Paraan offered.

"The grand tour? Why that would be splendid," Gil remarked. Paraan quickly sent off a message and Gil leaned against a wall to wait.

"Well, I would do that but for now I suppose I'll stay near Suvi," Kallo muttered. Wonder why they don't like each other.

"May I visit a hospital, or wherever your doctor's work? I'd like to learn more about Angaran physiology, so that I may treat any wounds Jaal may sustain while in the field," Lexi requested.

"Ah, yes that would be perfect. Please, I'd greatly appreciate you allowing her to do so," I supported.

"Of course. It is within the lower levels of the Resistance HQ, we shall reach there soon," Paraan replied. "Now, Vetra, here is Arbiter Renaav," Paraan introduced, walking us up to the
Marketplace. Renaav was a woman with a purplish green toned skin, and smiled in greetings. "She will be the one overseeing your time here in the market today."

"It is a pleasure to meet the saviors of our beloved Moshae," she greeted warmly.

"We weren't the only ones. Lots of those Angara who helped are still on Voeld," I remarked.

"We can go back and forth with this all day, but let's do some business," Vetra cut in. Renaav nodded and led them to the market.

"If you ever need anything of me, my offices are just up the stairs right there, in the building here overlooking the marketplace. There is a room in there that I believe will make a suitable place for your embassy as well," Paraan explained. She led us up another staircase at the other end of the Marketplace, but not before I grabbed the message packet, to a small plaza, with a small crowd of Angara discussing amongst one another. "Our Public forum, many Angara come here to debate, we are a social people." We followed Paraan to the right, to another small plaza with another message panel, and a ramp leading down into... something. Not sure yet. She led us around another bend, through a shaded area, and I linked with the message board for another packet. When I was here last, she had led me along the rock underpass ahead, and this route was blocked by civilians. The waterfall on our right lightly spraying us with water.

"And this, is the Tavetaan. If anywhere in our city will be a good place to get to know our people, this will be it," she explained. On the left was a staircase down into what appeared to be both a brewery, and a dining area, to the right, the bar itself, the bartender giving us a friendly wave.

"Hey there! Roaan, Aabel. Get you a drink or some nutrient paste? I'll give you a free round of each, but I don't have enough real food to give it out for free," he explained. Odd that they've resorted to nutrient paste, they have worlds for agriculture. But again, many details I don't know. The Quarians use Nutrient Paste almost exclusively when not in their fleet, but are able to eat more real food while on it. Largely they do so as it's the simplest, and easiest way to have sterilized food. The Initiative still had enough supplies for MREs and other long-lasting rations when Hyperion arrived, but they'd have needed to resort to nutrient paste soon enough, the Quarians passed on that method easily enough. Liam and Drack happily accepted and I was about to grab one myself when Lexi grabbed me by the arm.

"Go easy," she warned. At least she wasn't telling me to not drink at all. I accepted as well, the drink tasting fruity just like the one I had on Havarl. I nodded my thanks as I continued following Paraan. Drack and Liam staying by the bar, leaving only Peebee, Lexi, Cora, and I remaining. Peebee ensuring she was as far from Lexi as she could. Around the bar was another door to another district. To the left, just a few people standing, gazing out across Aya, or a few Angara sitting on benches, obviously taking notice of the aliens in their streets.

"The building on your left is our Repository of History, it shows various relics from our past and some Remnant technology. Anything important to our history can be found within. The Curator has taken quite a liking to your people," Paraan remarked with some humor.

"I spoke with Avela on our first visit here, she asked me to search a site on Havarl for a relic, and I found it too. Mind if I stop in and let her know?" I requested.

"And I'd like to take a look as well. See what the Angara know about the Remnant," Peebee stated.

"Of course. The only thing left is the Resistance HQ, which you already know, Pathfinder. I'll ensure your Doctor meets with ours. And just so you know for the future, once she has recovered, the Moshae also spends most of her time in her office within the Repository," Paraan informed,
guiding Lexi and Cora along to the HQ. Suppose she wants to see more about the Resistance. We entered the Repository to see on the right, a shelf half empty, half Kett tech. On the left, collections of stone, likely Angaran make. Avela was looking out a window to the left, yet hearing the door open and curious to see who her visitors were.

"Oh my, the Pathfinder and one of his team! I'm sorry, I did not expect the visit," she hastily explained, the immediate surprise wearing off as she moved to speak with us.

"Peebee here wants to see what you have on Remnant, and I have a little something else for you. Head on over to the docking bay when you have time, you'll find an Ancient Angaran pilot's helm from that crash site you told me about. It looked damaged by the scourge, and filled with Rem-tech," I explained.

"Truly? You reached the site? This is wonderful! I will stay to answer any questions you have, but the moment you're done I will add this to our exhibits," she stated excitedly, a large grin on her face.

"I'll be fine for now, just looking around," Peebee remarked.

"Go ahead, I can come back later," I reassured.

"Thank you, by all means do, I'll be happy to discuss just what this find could mean," she exclaimed as she raced off.

"Well, she's interesting," Peebee chuckled.

"I'll say. I think I'll go talk to Evfra, get his thoughts on the last mission, and the resistance's next move," I informed, letting her indulge her curiosity. I left the Repository to continue to the Resistance HQ, finding another message board with the final data packet for me. As I was interfacing, SAM spoke through our private channel.

"Ryder, you are currently the subject of a detailed scan by an Angara standing nearby," he informed. A detailed scan? I want to know what this is all about. I glanced up to see an Angara woman, blueish skin staring at me avert her eyes, her wrist-held computer glowing with activity. I think I know who was scanning me.

"Hello there," I began.

"I'm working," she replied sternly, focused on the message board as she lifted her arm again.

"I gathered as much. That was a rather detailed scan you ran. Guess that's not your way of saying hello?" I mused, sarcasm evident in my voice. She turned to face me directly now.

"I had wanted to be discreet," she explained.

"So it seems. Why the scan?" I questioned.

"An alien on my home world, how would someone not be interested?" she retorted. A rather fair point I must say.

"Generally, doesn't hurt to ask first," I replied.

"So, will you submit to a full-spectrum analysis of your biology?" she requested.

"Not keen on being fully scanned by men or women I've never met, so tell me, who are you, and
what you hope to find? Then you can scan to your heart's content," I stated.

"Daanfre. Biological researcher. We share many external similarities, I wish if it's the same internally. May I?" she requested one more time.

"Well it's not like you won't be getting readings of our biology sooner or later, go ahead," I allowed. She keyed the computer on her wrist and a less than subtle blue light ran over my body a few times as she completed her scan.

"I'll admit, I did not expect you to comply," she remarked, friendlier than before.

"Hey, I surprise even myself sometimes," I chuckled.

"So it seems. When we face extinction, family is our final comfort. Do you understand that?" she questioned. The Angara just love asking about family, don't they?

"More than you know..." I muttered. "I came to Andromeda with my family. Lost my dad the day I got here," I answered.

"And you carry on his legacy. I believe he knew that, in the end. Family is everything, not only the one we have now, but the ones that follow us," she stated philosophically. The ones that follow us? Huh... Yeah all I really have any more are Sara, and now my crew. And that's starting to feel alright. "What will your family look like in five generations? Ten?" she continued. "How many of you will there be?" Oh, so she meant descendants, not like that. Still, the point I got from it seems true.

"You worried they'll be more of us than you?" I questioned.

"I have twenty-three grandchildren. I want to know what their grandchildren will inherit," she explained.

"Well, for what it's worth, most Initiative species rarely have more than two or three kids," I remarked.

"So it seems. Goodbye, Pathfinder," she ended, turning to look at her scans. Well, that was interesting, if nothing else. I entered the Resistance HQ and could immediately feel a complete change in the atmosphere. People were going about their business, yes, but it was all distracted. As if each and every one of them had something on their minds. It's not hard to imagine just what it could be. I got a few sideways glances and nods from various members of the Resistance as I made my way to Evfra's office which he shared with his top advisors. Evfra was stood at his desk, hands on his desk, and head down as one of his officers was speaking with him. Upon hearing the door, he looked up and saw me, giving a nod to his officer to leave for a moment, standing straight to speak with me.

"Still trying to wrap head around what you discovered at that facility. Exaltation," Evfra muttered. He wasn't handling it well either it seems.

"I don't think I'll ever forget his face. The agony he felt as he was transformed. It's going to haunt me for a long, long time. I can't even imagine what it's like for the Angara," I murmured in reply. Evfra sighed:

"Still, doesn't change what we have to do. It's war."

"How many know?" I asked.
"Word's slowly been spreading throughout the Resistance, either through seeing the reports themselves or hearing about it from friends who were at the facility. I haven't tried to keep it quiet, but… how do you tell your people about something like this… I haven't even managed to tell Paraan yet," he revealed.

"She doesn't know?" I questioned, some surprise on my face.

"She knows we've learned something big, something that has left even me uneasy, saw right through my facade. In the end, everyone will know. They need to," Evfra stated. I sighed and moved around the desk to the window, looking out across Aya. Evfra joined me, likely able to tell I still had more to say.

"The Cardinal said we'd all be exalted, you know. Not just the Angara," I muttered.

"They plan to do the same to your people. Can't say I'm surprised," Evfra remarked.

"We have intel that one of our Arks is being hunted down by an elite Kett strike force. And two others that are still just missing. I just can't help but wonder… is that happening to all those people right now? There are twenty-thousand people on each ark. That's sixty-thousand people who might have only me as their last hope. And here I am, just standing here? How do you do it Evfra?"

"Fight like hell to save them, bring them back, keep them safe. It may be cold, but I've also learned to keep myself alive, because my corpse won't do any good for those I'm trying to save, let alone the Resistance," Evfra replied lowly. I sighed again.

"Well, I can tell you that even before this mission I knew damn well that the Initiative would be willing to help you kick the Kett out of the cluster. Now? Not even Tann will put up any kind of argument," I stated, turning to face him.

"Tann?" he questioned.

"Thick headed bureaucratic dumbass who was seventh in line for being the Initiative's director. Everyone above him was killed by the scourge or in the mutiny. Want my advice? You ever need to talk with Nexus leadership, aside from myself, talk with Tiran Kandros, he runs our Militia. Level headed, takes the Kett seriously, comes from a long time military family. He's a good man and set up the militia from scratch after the mutiny," I explained.

"Sounds like a man I can respect. Hmph, the Initiative. Sounds so unthreatening, like a city planner meeting," Evfra half scoffed, half chuckled.

"Heh, if I remember right, the name was in fact a big piece of the Initiative's development. 'What can we name ourselves to minimize the odds of the locals outright shooting us if there are any?' Would you rather we named ourselves 'The Milky Way friendship making intergalactic cruise line, here to make best friends with everyone?'" I joked. I actually got a laugh out of him for that.

"With a name like that, we'd definitely shoot on sight," he smirked. His face lost the smirk, still lacking hostility, when he continued. "Especially given that people looking to make 'best friends' don't walk around in battle armor with rifles on their shoulder.

"True, the only thing I can really say in response, you know, without repeating the same phrase that's on the brochures a million times over is this. Would you travel to a new galaxy without knowing what you'd find there without weapons or armor?" I questioned.

"A fair point, yet still the kind of thing invaders would say to deter suspicion," Evfra argued.
"And a fair, difficult to argue point. I respect your suspicion Evfra, I won't try to argue it with you, that would be circular and stupid. I won't try to talk you out of it, but you're a good man, who may just be the sole reason your people have anything left worth fighting for, and I'd love to sit down, have a drink with you someday, and trade stories," I stated with a grin.

"And I can respect that in turn, Pathfinder. Anything else?" he asked.

"Sure, a favor. Call me by my name, Scott. People calling me Pathfinder all the time, at least when we're not in the field makes me feel like a pretentious ass. So, with that, I'll get out of your hair… which you don't have… alright, I'll talk with you later, Evfra," I chuckled, turning to leave. He had let out a snort in turn and slowly shook his head with a slight grin as his advisors returned to speak with him. I left the room and took the chance to explore a bit more, following the staircase down, seeing a pair of doors. A smaller one and a larger one, the larger one being marked as a med-bay according to my translator, so I went through the smaller door. It revealed a corridor with Cora leaning over a railing into what appeared to be a cave. Curious to see what she was looking at, I made my way down.

In the cave, there was a kind of obstacle course, crates, platforms, and in the back-left corner, an officer briefing her soldiers on their practice run, tips and advice, their objective for the exercise. She ordered them to get in position as lights around the course glowed red and the team got in position, taking cover behind various crates as several holographic Chosen glowed to life. They raised their weapons and immediately opened fire, attempting to hit each target as precisely and quickly as they could, and with as few shots as possible. Each time a hologram took a round, it fizzled out and a new target would take its place elsewhere on the field. The Angara wouldn't just stay in one place however, they would move about the field for better sightlines or to avoid a line of Kett that appeared, as the holograms could send out a signal to lock down the armor of a player in the field if they were in range or the line of sight for too long. The trainees mopped up the last of the targets and their training officer called them back.

"Enjoying the show?" I asked rhetorically.

"Just taking the chance to pick up a few new tricks. Evfra's letting me record some training sessions. JUST, a few. But they have plenty of tricks up their sleeves. Starting to see how they've lasted this long," Cora remarked.

"I figure any species that can last eighty years against a hostile invading force can develop a few special tricks of their own. You've just been watching?" I questioned.

"Pretty much, and getting plenty of stares. Reminds me of being on Thessia. We're the aliens here," she muttered.

"I figure any species that can last eighty years against a hostile invading force can develop a few special tricks of their own. You've just been watching?" I questioned.

"So, what does your experience of navigating an alien society recommend?" I asked a bit jokingly.

"Other than anything the old man may have told you? Be polite about scanning your food," she chuckled.

"That just seems like good advice in general," I joked.

"True. Do they even know? Any of them? The whole time we've been walking around today I've just been wondering who knows? And what will they do when they do know? Should they even know in the first place?" Cora muttered quietly.

"You're not the only one thinking," I muttered. Starting to watch as the trainees prepared to run the course again. Brought to mind my own Alliance training.
"Scott, the Nexus have been informed of the proposed Embassies, they would like to know when an appropriate time for their arrival shall be," SAM informed via the comms.

"Hold off on a reply, I'll talk with Paraan and get a time for the ambassadors," I ordered SAM. Cora threw me a confused look for a moment, thinking I was talking to her, but given my odd habit of looking up when I talk to SAM, knew that I was indeed talking to SAM. I made a beeline out of the Resistance HQ and towards Paraan's office. Inside the waiting room were two Angara men working, one of which I recognized as Enroh Bosan working at a desk, likely taking care of the more insignificant day to day for Paraan.

"Governor Shie is through the doors here, she's kept her schedule open today just in case," Enroh explained, pointing to the doors behind him. I entered, and she was sat at a desk, working on a terminal. Upon seeing my entry, she stopped typing and gave me her full attention.

"Greetings, Pathfinder. Do you require assistance?" she began.

"By all means, Scott, or at least Ryder. Anyways, the Nexus wants to know when the best time for their ambassadors to arrive would be. They're waiting for me to get back to them, but I can set up a call for you and them easily enough," I explained.

"Of course, call them," she requested. I keyed my Omni-tool, hoping that of the two members of leadership that I don't like, that are also the only ones with the proper authority for this, that it would at least be Addison, as her head isn't as far up her own ass. To my dismay, it was Tann who would be negotiating these proceedings. But not without me stepping in…

"Pathfinder, what's been taking you so-" Tann began.

"Maybe if you wait for me to speak, you'd find out. I'm here with the Governor of Aya, Paraan Shie. She's willing to discuss the time that the Initiative Diplomats will arrive here," I explained.

"And the best way for our own Ambassadors to reach the Nexus," she informed.

"We'd be happy to bring them on the Tempest, it's not a long flight," I remarked. "And we have more than enough room in our cargo hold for whatever supplies they may need to bring along. It's our next stop anyway."

"I can agree to that. I've already selected a few of my best," Paraan replied.

"And I know of a few open places that we can house them. Should we be expecting supply drops?" Tann questioned.

"Most likely, yes. At least for a while. There are some necessities that currently only we can provide," Shie answered.

"Then the proper clearances shall be provided. Now, as for our own embassy, we too will require supply drops, especially for the Turians we send," Tann explained.

"That can be arranged. However, I need numbers as to exactly how many diplomats are being sent here," Shie replied.

"Well I was hoping to send a small handful of scientists to Aya as well, study the Flora and Fauna that reside there, the planet itself, that sort of thing. I believe a total of twelve would suffice," Tann answered. Paraan glanced down a moment, as if deep in thought before continuing.

"Yes… twelve will be acceptable. Arrangements shall be made. We should be able to receive them
in... two days," Paraan answered.

"Why n-" Tann began. The fucking idiot.

"Tann, don't be an idiot. Don't push something so small. If you even finish that sentence I am personally going to drag you by the collar, and bring you to Voeld, show you exactly why the Angara can take their goddamn time with us." I half threatened. Honestly, I wouldn't mind doing that. Tann glared as Paraan looked back in slight surprise.

"Fine, two days it is," he grumbled. "Is there anything else?"

"No, I believe that's it for now. Goodbye, Director Tann," Paraan stated, and I hastily ended the call, letting out the sigh.

"I take it you aren't fond of him," she remarked.

"He's an insensitive and pompous ass with his head up his... cloaca, I guess. If he even read my report, he must not understand the connection between the Angara fighting Kett for eighty years and new aliens popping up looking for a home where you already live. Take my advice, and this advice is heavily similar to what I told Evfra. You want to speak with leadership, you're better off speaking with Nakmor Kesh, Nexus Superintendent. But given you are outside her authority, you may be able to at least settle for the Director of Colonial affairs, Foster Addison. She's marginally better than Tann," I explained.

"And yet they are your leaders?" she questioned.

"Sometimes it seems like in name only. Before I arrived, Tann and Addison were two of four leaders, the others being Kesh and Tiran Kandros. Now it seems like I count as leadership. Kesh and Kandros agree on many topics, most of which also gain more public approval, Addison and Tann are... something else, I guess. Hardly anyone really seems to listen to either, and given that I've squarely been in the people's camp, which normally coincides with Kesh and Kandros, that means Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum are the minority. Er, sorry, those names are two characters generally regarded as idiots from an old work of Human fiction," I explained.

"Hm, I see. I'll be sure to keep that in mind, thank you, Scott. Now if you would excuse me, I need to work on the arrangements for your people," she requested.

"Of course. We'll leave for the Nexus after our next sleep cycle, it's getting a bit later in our day as it is and my crew likely want to hang around a bit more," I remarked.

"Wonderful timing, as it will soon be night on Aya. The ambassadors will report to your ship in the morning, and supplies will be loaded in the meantime," she answered.

"Understood, thanks Paraan," I ended, leaving the room. Well... what now? Guess I'll go see what's going on in the market. See if Vetra has made any deals. I made my way down to the market, seeing Kallo and Suvi both browsing the wares of one of the stalls, inspecting some Angaran food as the vendor answered their questions. Vetra was speaking to another merchant across the market, the Arbiter listening intently. Not wanting to interrupt whatever deal was being enacted, I went to see what Kallo and Suvi were up to. As I got close, I could tell that Kallo was a bit bored, looking around, not paying much attention as Suvi was enjoying her time with the... fruit. He quickly noticed me approaching, smiling at the prospect of something happening.

"Hello, Scott!" he called out, waving me over. Suvi raised her head as well and the Angaran woman running the stall glanced over with a smile, one I could tell was strained. 'Another one,
why?' I could tell she was thinking. Maybe I could help her out.

"Hey Kallo, hey Suvi, what are you two up to?" I asked.

"Oh, hello Scott. I've been looking at Angaran foods, getting to know their culture. I also got an idea for our next movie night," Suvi exclaimed. "Angara have these little treats that they give to their kids or eat during celebrations. They're a kind of sweetened, candied seed. We should try those!" I looked at the stall to see just what she was talking about. It did not look appetizing, not to me at least. But… maybe someone other than Jaal would like it?

"Uh, sure, go ahead and get some," I began. I glanced over at the Shopkeeper again, a slight 'help me,' look in her eyes. "So, did you know the Angara have a museum here? Maybe you could learn a few things about the Remnant? Or the Scourge?" I suggested. She lit up like a lightbulb.

"Really? I'll go right there, thanks!" she exclaimed as the vendor breathed a sigh of relief, working out the transaction at last.

"She's been at this stall almost the entire time we've been here. A part of me wouldn't be surprised if the vendor ran off and jumped off the balcony," Kallo whispered to me. There's no way Suvi was trying to be acting like that, but it had to be her natural curiosity getting the better of her. It's hardly a bad thing, but it's good to keep track for the sake of others. The deal was finished and Suvi raced off, searching for the museum. Avela would have a handful with this one.

"Stars above, that one is more curious than my grandson," the Angara muttered.

"You have no idea. Thank you for indulging her. We'll leave you alone now," Kallo spoke. The woman nodded her thanks and awaited her next customers, Kallo and I backing away.

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked.

"Either return to the Tempest or have a look at the Angara's shuttles myself," Kallo answered.

"Why didn't you go with Gil?" I prodded. Kallo let out a sigh.

"We… just don't get along. Really, Scott, it's nothing you need to concern yourself with," he answered vaguely. With a sigh, I accepted his right to privacy and told him I'd see him later. Vetra had appeared to have finished her trade deal and was looking throughout the whole market, searching for her next opportunity, the Arbiter waiting to her side. I walked over, curious to see how things had been going. She noticed me easily enough, no doubt years of experience knowing to watch her peripherals for anyone approaching, but obviously made far easier that I was a familiar, friendly face. She gave a small wave as I began.

"Hey Vetra, how're the deals going? Already building up your corporate conglomerate for when this is all over?" I joked. She let out a mild laugh at that before answering.

"Honestly, it wouldn't be that hard to turn it into that. The only difference between my style, and corporate, is that corporate is a lot more official. Ah but then I need to get employees and warehouses and all that boring shit. This is more fun, personal," she replied.

"What? Not interested just sitting in an office all day doing fuck-all as you watch your bank account fill with credits?" I chuckled.

"I'd sooner steer the Tempest right into the black hole," she smirked back.

"Good, I'd hate to wake up and see nothing but black outside my viewport. I might shit myself. So,
"What have you set up so far?" I questioned.

"Just set up a deal with the merchant behind me, armor and weapons. Could be good stuff for the Initiative eggheads to study. Was thinking I might try that stall over there next. Looks to be selling materials. Metals, skins, tech components, all things the Nexus needs. Who knew that rescuing a respected, hell, revered member of Angaran society would open so many doors?" she asked rhetorically.

"You, that's the safe bet," I joked again, earning a snort of laughter from her. "Just so long as the Nexus still has everything it needs at the end of it. Though it wouldn't be like you to not be accounting for that, would you?" I continued.

"Course not, it's why I'm running it all by Kesh. That also keeps Tann and Addison off my back and from burning the bridges I'm building," she explained.

"And yet another smart move by… what was it Kim called you? The Queen quartermaster?" I replied.

"Heh, something like that," she smirked.

"Speaking of Tann, would you by any chance believe what he almost tried to do when arranging when our diplomats would arrive here?" I asked.

"I probably would. Spirits, just how bad is it?" she asked rhetorically.

"Paraan said that they could arrive in two days. He was about to ask why it couldn't be today, why they couldn't be on their way here now," I answered.

"I'd say you're kidding me, but I know him too well for that," she groaned, shaking her head.

"Fortunately, I told him to shut the fuck up, or I'd drag him to Voeld and show him just why the Angara can take their bloody time," I explained.

"I'd like to see you do that anyway. He needs reality to slap him in the face," she remarked.

"That he does. So, been learning much about their laws from the Arbiter here?" I asked. Hearing her title being called, she focused in on the conversation.

"Remaav's been letting me know if I was getting close to a line, explained why and what that line is, maybe a few things linked with it. I think I'm starting to figure out the pattern these laws take. May even be able to do more than lay a foundation," she explained.

"Vetra is a quick learner, and clearly a skilled trader. I am impressed, if she had a stall here, I believe she would be very successful," the Arbiter supported. Vetra stated her thanks and I continued.

"So I've noticed. I think I may hang around a bit, learn a few things myself. You said you were thinking of materials next, why don't we see what we can secure for the Nomad?" I suggested.

"Sure, big reason as to why I was thinking him. Just let me do the talking for the deal itself," she requested.

"So long as I get to ask you questions about your thought process here, or your methods. While not the kind of thing I ever plan on doing myself, I'm curious, and it wouldn't hurt to see if I can't pick up some of those skills," I explained.
"A wise request. I would be happy to answer any of your questions myself," the Arbiter spoke up.

"Sure, we can talk about them on the Tempest," Vetra nodded, leading the way to the merchant. The stall housed a collection of metals and minerals, with a few crates at the sides likely filled with a larger selection. He looked at us curiously, knowing we were coming to him.

"I see they let you past the gates. Huh," he remarked casually. No hostility, no accusations, just a statement of fact.

"That they did, we worked hard for this honor. We'll be respectful," I answered.

"All right. Everyone deserves a chance to prove themselves," the merchant replied. "What can I do for you?" the man questioned.

"So much for letting me do the talking, huh Scott?" Vetra teased, stepping forward.

"First, I'd like to see everything you have in stock, know what I'm working with here," Vetra requested.

"Reasonable. Here, a list of everything I have for sale right now," the man offered, handing a data pad over to Vetra. She read it thoroughly, reading aloud what she found.

"Weapon and armor mods, metals, both common and uncommon, Remnant alloys, Kett alloys, what about these meditation crystals?" Vetra asked.

"We use those in weapons, armor, many of our computers, things like that. These crystals have their own little electric field around them that our Bio-electrics can interact with," the merchant explained.

"Huh, our scientists would love to have a look at some of those. So, this is what you have in stock now, what about other days? Other things you get in stock that you don't now?" Vetra continued.

"Mods of other varieties, various other metals," he answered.

"Alright, I can work with this. So… sorry, didn't catch your name?" Vetra asked. Heh, the man never gave it. I see what you're up to.

"Merivaas, and you two?" he introduced.

"Vetra, that's Scott," she replied. "So, Merivaas, you have materials and mods the Initiative needs, or at least could make use of. So, I plan to be a regular customer, at least in one way or another. I have a network of contacts I use to secure and trade goods. Some of those contacts will be coming to Aya when I can't and may want to pick up supplies that you sell. Thing is, I'd bet you have competition. We have credits, but I know Angara don't want those, not yet at least. They're worth nothing to you. What we CAN do, is trade other resources. Tech, metals, other supplies, that kind of thing. So, what my contacts and I could do is simply scour the city for the best deals. Or…" she trailed off. Pausing for dramatic effect. "We can work out a business arrangement, one that guarantees we keep coming back to you, and not your competition. We trade with each other for less than we do with others, but still enough to profit off the deals, but we both gain a steady, consistent source of income and goods. Willing to at least investigate this opportunity?" Vetra questioned. Merivaas took a minute to think, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Before we continue, how do I know you're telling the truth about these contacts?" he retorted.

"A very reasonable question. First and foremost, Scott here is the human Pathfinder, and I've used
this network to secure him and the crew the best weapons and armor the Initiative has, and whatever materials or tools they need. And I'm also running everything by Nakmor Kesh, the Superintendent of the Nexus. Part of her job involves keeping track of our resources and how they're being used," Vetra explained. "And I'm not asking you to give me anything now without an immediate return. All I'm asking is that we lay a foundation for the future. You can make the final decision as to whether you agree to this arrangement when me or one of my contacts show up with a crate full of goods, right to your stall," Vetra answered. Damn she's good at this. She's not even trying to sell to me, and I don't need what she's selling, but here I am ready to buy it. Merivaas once more appeared thoughtful.

"Alright, it wouldn't hurt to see then. Why don't we run comparisons on how much these goods are worth in our own economies, find an acceptable middle ground," he suggested.

"An excellent idea," Vetra replied as she activated her omni-tool. Heh, of course she must have a VI in it programmed to sort it, linking with this guy's stock, waiting for his input. I watched curiously for a while longer as the two discussed, an occasional input from the Arbiter for the value of Angara goods, and ensuring that the numbers Vetra gave remained consistent. Soon enough, it was done.

"Alright Vetra, I find this satisfactory. I look forward to your next visit, or one of your contacts," Merivaas stated.

"It's been a pleasure. I look forward to doing business with you," Vetra ended, turning to leave, myself and the arbiter following.

"Well, color me impressed. You got a real talent for this," I remarked.

"Oh, it's not that hard, just need some charisma and a bit of flair," Vetra retorted.

"Please, you told him everything that a merchant wants to know. You'd only learn that with experience. I did catch what you did with the names, by the way," I replied.

"Ha, yeah it's the oldest trick in the book. Would you be surprised if I told you that one of the earlier jobs I had was a salesperson? Learned a lot of valuable skills there. Boss was a dick though," she chuckled. "So, any other merchants you think I should talk to?" she asked. I looked around the market, there was still a woman selling fruit, but given her callouts it was expensive and for Angaran celebrations. Better to leave that for the Angara. The other stalls were the same woman Suvi and Kallo were speaking with, best leave her be for the rest of the day. And the only stall left was a man who had been glaring at us whenever he wasn't speaking with a customer. I doubt he'd be open to deals.

"Why don't we call it a win for the day? It is starting to get a bit late anyway," I remarked.

"Fair enough, maybe there'll be more stalls next time," she replied, turning to the Arbiter.

"Well Renaav, I think we're done for the day. Thanks for the help," she stated.

"It was a pleasure to be of service, good evening to you both," she replied, taking her leave.

"So, what now?" Vetra asked.

"Well, I may see how Avela Kjar, the woman who runs the Museum here, is finding that helmet we found in the crash site on Havarl. She was… really excited, when I told her I got it," I chuckled.

"Then I think I'll go back to the Tempest, let my contacts know what I've set up," Vetra remarked.
"Sure, see ya 'round," I ended, as we went our separate ways. For now, at any rate. Making my way back to the Repository was uneventful, some people staring, some doing their best not to stare, all allowing me to go through my business. As I entered, Avela was placing the helmet on a podium near where I had found her here earlier.

"Pathfinder! Great to see you again, thank you so much for this amazing find!" she stated. "It's pre-dark age design. These black marks are certainly the results of the Scourge, it targeted the pilot's ship. It's PERFECTLY preserved! I can almost imagine the pilot. Stars, he must have been so afraid," she remarked. "I have never, seen one of these intact. I think only the Moshae has before. I can't even begin to repay you," she ended.

"Hey, I was in the area, it was nothing, really," I retorted. "If you must pay me back, do so by piecing your history back together."

"Why… thank you. This helps, you have no idea how much. I wonder… Pathfinder," she began.

"Please, Avela, just Scott," I replied, cutting her off for a moment.

"Apologies, Scott. We wouldn't even know this helmet existed, if not for you. Who knows what else we're missing? There could so much out there just out of our reach. So… I'm requesting your help once more."

"I'd be more than happy to help, whatcha need?" I asked.

"I have been to every Angaran home world, though there are places I've missed. I can hardly search the whole planet after all. But there are some areas I believe may hold something, yet were too dangerous for me to investigate. A Pathfinder, however…" she hinted.

"So, when I'm at these worlds, just pop over and have a look if I have the time?" I clarified.

"If you could, I would be very grateful," she answered.

"Then I promise I'll keep an eye out," I replied. Two other Angara, a man and a woman approached. I think they may have been the same who were standing with Avela when I first came to the city.

"Giving away our job already Avela?" the woman joked with a smile.

"Oh? Of course not, simply another set of eyes," she answered. "Scott, this is Elihn and Nalon. They would be my escorts in the field, and do their own exploring when I receive word of a possible site, yet am unable to go," she introduced.

"Nice to meet you both, Scott Ryder," I replied, a smile of my own.

"And you as well. We watched you land, when you first got here," the man, introduced as Nalon explained. "And... sorry, if you overheard me call you... it," he muttered, clearly embarrassed. "That was ignorant of me."

"Don't worry about it, you were hardly the only one and my skin's a bit thicker than that," I remarked lightly.

"Is it true you entered a vault on Eos?" Elihn questioned, changing the topic.

"And on Havarl," I answered.
"Wish I could have seen that," she muttered.

"Is Peebee, my crewmember still here? I'm curious to see what she's learned," I asked.

"Over here Scott," she called out from around the corner. I gave a farewell and walked over. She was investigating a Remnant artifact on display.

"So, learn anything interesting?" I questioned.

"A few things, not much to help us with the vaults though. But apparently the Angara and the Remnant, as in the people who made the bots, existed in Heleus at the same time," she remarked.

"And yet they don't seem to have any records of them. Least, not that they've recovered," I replied.

"Maybe someday. You know, the more we interact with the Angara the more I feel for them. Especially with what we learned today. Still can't imagine how Jaal feels," she muttered.

"I still feel pissed on their behalf. But the Angara are strong, they'll find their way past this. And hey, maybe we can help them along," I suggested.

"True enough. We need to make things right," Peebee muttered. That we do, Peebee. That we do.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The crew was slowly filtering back into the ship as night fell upon Aya but I didn't exactly want to go to sleep yet. Call it prolonging the inevitable. I remember that Cora wasn't exactly in the greatest place either, when I spoke with her as we watched the trainees. Might as well see, right? I entered the bio-lab to see her leaning on the wall, a bottle in hand. Her eyes even looking a bit red. She glanced up, hearing the door and looked back down at the ground.

"They aren't just conquerors. Or slavers. The Kett turn everything you are to their advantage," Cora muttered, taking another swig of her drink. "I thought I had gotten away from that. They're the worst kind of enemy. The kind that makes you fight your own damn people…" Thought she had gotten away from it? Wonder what that means. Might not be the best time to pry into that however.

"And now that they know the truth, Jaal must be going back and reevaluating every encounter he's ever been in, let alone from here on out," I remarked.

"Friends. Neighbors. Family. All changed," Cora continued, taking another swig of her drink. "And they're loyal to what changed them!" she exclaimed, throwing her bottle, which I would assume is now empty at the wall, the glass shattering.

"This is hitting you hard," I stated a bit uneasily.

"I've been working with Kandros for strategies on handling Kett, Remnant too. I talked with Drack, piecing ideas together. Expand our guerrilla tactics, get Angaran military advisors. Research exaltation…” she continued, ignoring the implied question. "Wish your dad could give us his take," she sighed.

"Though I'd love nothing more than to have him back, have him here, I'm not sure what his take could have done. Not against exaltation at any rate. But come on, your ideas seem sound to me, have a bit of faith in your own abilities," I argued.

"Nisira, Alec, they always had a plan that I could follow. Without one, it's too easy for people to get hurt. Like now. The Initiative's plans are shot, and people have died because of it. More probably will," Cora tried to counter.

"Then MAKE a plan, Cora. Just because you're not leading a squad or that you're not the Pathfinder doesn't mean you can't provide tactical advice, that you can't create your own plan. Look, no one could have ever prepared for the challenges we're facing. Not hostile aliens, that's why we brought arms and armor. But the scourge, every ark going out of contact, all the leadership who died. But we're here now, and we know things we didn't know before we left. We need to adapt, Cora," I continued my argument.

"Well… at least we can prepare to fight the Kett. Sarissa will have a strategy. Just need to find her and the other Asari," Cora went on. I let out a sigh as she didn't seem to listen to what I was saying.

"Alright, you want to continue your hero worship, be my guest. It's only going to bite you in the ass," I muttered, walking back out the door. Why does she make it so difficult? I didn't want to go to bed crabby either, as that would likely just make what was to come worse. The only member of the ground team I had yet to speak with since Voeld was Liam. I know he's sensitive. He's either riled up, or using it to push himself. I made my way down to his room in the cargo hold to see him...
shirtless again, wearing the standard initiative pants, and doing push-ups. Seems like he's using it as motivation.

"Someone's going to sleep like a log tonight," I remarked. He continued with his push-ups as he responded.

"Working hard. Started young. Smart little kid with a temper. The side effect of giving a shit," he grumbled.

"Voeld?" I asked.

"Voeld. We got in there, kicked them in the teeth, that's great," he began casually, no real pride in that statement, just a statement of fact. Liam stopped his workout and stood, clearly agitated, placing his hands on his hips. "But those bastards steal what people ARE. Everyone should have a stake in that! So, I reached out, trying to get resources moving in a real way. Bridge that gap, like I did with Jaal," Liam began to explain.

"I spent some time in the marketplace with Vetra earlier. She was setting up some trading arrangements, and doing well. Getting friendly with the merchants," I informed.

"I said in a real way, not the back-alley kind!" Liam retorted.

"And it wasn't. Everything was being checked by Kesh, and there was Arbiter Renaav ensuring nothing broke Angaran law. The deal boiled down to 'Let's give each other mutual discounts so that we are better off trading exclusively with one another, in exchange for tech and materials each of us have,'" I explained.

"Then how the hell was it so hard for me damnit?!" Liam exclaimed, throwing his hands into the air. "I can't get permission, coming or going. The Nexus, Aya: everyone is all 'Can't take risks with outsiders.' It's bullshit! I didn't come here so everyone could be goddamn outsiders!" he yelled.

"Liam, I respect what you're trying to do. But save yourself the aneurism by leaving this to Vetra. I know you don't like her but she knows how to do business, and has the contacts to get permission. Kesh approved because she knows Vetra is reliable and fair with her deals. The Merchants accepted it because she sold the deal the right way," I explained. I lowered my voice a bit more and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You don't need to make all of Heleus your problem." Liam let out a sigh.

"It IS our problem. We're not going back. We have to make it work."

"And we will. We all have what we're best at, and what we're not great in, someone else here is," I retorted. Liam let out another breath, calming down.

"I wanted this. Everything new. But eventually, it all has to be normal, right? I need something… familiar," Liam explained, walking over to his couch. "Can I show you something?" he requested. He looked sad, I think he was trying to help me understand. He sat and gestured for me to sit with him. "Did you bring anything from the Milky Way?" he questioned, activating and searching through his Omni-tool.

"Course I did. Brought what I could, but you know those weight limits were strict," I answered.

"Which is why I made 'arrangements.'" he stated, showing me a picture. It was a car. And not a Sky-car. Rubber wheels with metal rims, headlights at the front with a grill, four doors, looked like a brown color. "Heh, proper petrol-burner. Twentieth century. British, from when that mattered. My whole family worked on it together. Weekends. Like those are a thing in space," he joked.
"Know what we did? Friends of mine in HUSTL set us up. They 'borrowed' a transport. Right before I went into cryo. Me, my father, my mother, loaded up our car into it, and pointed it at Andromeda," Liam explained.

"Huh, you know that's really cool. But… you know that shuttle doesn't have the same kind of engines the Arks did, right?" I questioned. Hoping that he wasn't holding out for it.

"I know. It's a couple million light years away at standard light," he remarked. At least he was realistic about this. "But that's not what's important. What is important is that it's coming, and it always will be. I don't know what that means," Liam muttered.

"What it means is that you care a lot. Your family, the Angara, this team. You care about all of it, and we're lucky for it," I stated.

"I'll probably just screw it up, Scott," Liam murmured.

"Then join the club. The screw-ups started six-hundred years ago," I retorted.

"Heh, true enough," Liam replied, a small smile crossing his face. He let out another breath as if to calm himself one more time.

"This will be home. It has to be. I won't let being outsiders top that," Liam stated, an air of finality about it.

"Good on you. About the car, you know what an old drill sergeant of mine used to say? That Sir Isaac Newton is the deadliest son of a bitch in space. Normally, he explained this using a Mass Accelerator cannon, but now it kinda seems like it's best to use a shuttle. You fire off a shuttle at light speed or close to it, you are ruining someone's day, somewhere, sometime," I joked.

"Hey, maybe it will land right on a Kett's head," Liam chuckled back. I returned to my room to do one last thing before attempting to get some sleep. I read through the messages from the Angara I had received. Some positive, some cautious, some curious. Some fair, some not. As I sent them all off to the Nexus, entirely untouched. I sent one copy to Tann, but I also sent another message to Davis Qar, the man running the Heleus News Service, requesting that if even one message is not released to the Nexus as a whole by Tann, that Davis do so himself, and ensures everyone knows why. After that, I had considered that it may not be a bad idea to publicly address these messages before we leave, let the people know that they have been heard. At long last done for the day, I removed myself from my couch and stripped down to a pair of boxers, reluctantly plopping myself into my bed.

"Chosen to be Exalted!" Kett voices called out from around me. I opened my eyes to find myself side by side with Destined. In front of me, more Destined, and behind them Chosen. To the right, a group of Ascended, I couldn't quite make out how many, as I suspected there were more behind me. I looked above them and felt my stomach drop. All lined up, hands across their chest, floating in the air:

My friends. My Crew. I and the rest of the Destined turned to face the line. I could see everyone. From left to right: Cora, Liam, Gil, Suvi, Peebee, Lexi, Kallo, Drack, Jaal, Vetra, and… Oh no. Sara. The Ascended too began to raise up into the air. Oh no. Oh no oh fuck. I tried to struggle, to move and free them from what was about to happen. I couldn't. I felt frozen. I watched as the Ascended neared their prey. I tried to turn my head, and managed to turn it oh so slightly. I saw glass. I moved my eyes to look into it. I couldn't find myself anywhere. Instead… oh fuck…
I saw a Kett looking back. It looked different than a Chosen, Anointed, Destined, any that I had seen before. I looked lower on the Kett in the glass. Five fingers. Knees that didn't bend backwards. I felt myself freeze in full realization. I was now them. Whatever force that was keeping me moving in sync with the other Kett wrestled my head back to look at my crew and sister. Their eyes opened, and they cried out in shock, trying to struggle in air. Most calling out profanities. But Sara...

"What the… SCOTT! SCOTT HELP! SCOTT! SCOTT! SCOOOOOOOOTT!"

The Ascended plunged their arms down.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Scott. Scott. Wake up," a Synthetic voice pleaded as I woke. I shot straight up, another cold sweat. I placed my hands in front of my face, relieved to find that they were still fully human. "Scott, please, it is urgent," SAM spoke again.

"What… What is it SAM," I asked, my breathing beginning to slow. I glanced at my Omni-tool to find that it was very early in the morning for our schedule. Aya should still be deep within its night cycle.

"I have detected an attempt to hack into the ship's mainframe. Someone is trying to override and open the Cargo bay doors. External cameras show several armed and armored Angara, with the Roekaar emblem," SAM explained.

"The fuck?! Are they getting in? Wake the others!" I ordered.

"That may not be necessary. Their attempts are pitiful and I am easily able to counter all attempts. They remain unaware of me, believing that the ship simply has very thorough firewalls," SAM reassured.

"Well we can't just leave them there, or they'll give up and get away before any guards spot them. Order the ground team to suit up and head to the cargo bay, and order everyone else into the bridge, grab spare arms from the weapons lockers up there but stay there. Patch me in to Evfra. Ensure he knows it's urgent," I ordered, finding and donning my under suit.

"Pathfinder, is there a reason you're calling me in the middle of the night, instead of coming down to see me yourself if it's urgent?" Evfra questioned over comms, clearly tired.

"The middle of the night, because it's urgent. Why I'm not there personally, is because we currently have a team of Roekaar trying to hack their way into my ship. SAM's informed me that there's no way they'll be able to get past him so we're safe, but we're gearing up in the cargo bay just in case. Thing is, this is Aya, and you may want this handled a certain way," I explained. As I was explaining, at the first mention of Roekaar, Evfra's expression changed from skepticism, to no nonsense mode.

"Understood. I'm sending teams of Resistance guards to surround the area and sniper teams for over watch. But whatever you do, DO NOT, open those doors. DO NOT, let them see a single one of you. They may surrender to us, but the moment they see an alien, they will kill you or die trying. Once they are safely within custody, then you may exit," Evfra ordered.

"Read you loud and clear, we'll be waiting," I replied, ending the call and heading down to the cargo bay. I felt some pride to see that the entire ground team was already waiting in the cargo bay, simply grabbing their weapons by the time I arrived.
"The hell's going on kid? I thought we were still on Aya," Drack questioned.

"Roekaar, trying to hack their way through those very doors," I began to explain.


"That his cronies would slit our throats in our sleep I'll bet," Vetra muttered in reply. "How're we handling this?"

"WE, aren't. But I wanted us all ready in here just in case. SAM's confident that they'll never hack past him and into the ship, apparently their attempts are pitiful. I've contacted Evfra and he's having Resistance fighters stationed here set up all around the docks and landing pad, sniper teams as well. The hope is that they will surrender to the Angara, but we are NOT, to let them see us, else they'll die first," I explained.

"Smart. The Roekaar were likely already here before we arrived. Eyes and ears of Akksul placed here after your first arrival. Or sympathizers relaying information. It's likely that these Roekaar will know most of the men and women sent to apprehend them. They will find it much harder to fight them," Jaal remarked.

"Precisely. If all goes well, the Roekaar will be taken into custody and Evfra will send us an all clear. Jaal, when this is over and done I'd like you to be involved in the interrogations if possible. Looks like we may be hanging out for a bit longer," I stated.

"I'm sure Evfra will allow it. And I'll keep my comms open so you can hear," Jaal offered.

"Was just about to ask about that too, thanks," I replied, finishing getting my armor on, my dad's Pathfinder armor, as the N7 needed repairs. I grabbed just one of my weapons, the Sweeper, and leaned back against a crate near Vetra. I was tired.

"You alright Scott? Looking a bit pale, and sweaty," Vetra questioned in a whisper.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm… fine. Just peachy…" I muttered. Vetra raised a brow plate, likely seeing right through me, letting out a small sigh.

"Yeah, I understand. Me too Scott, me too," she whispered in reply. I wouldn't be surprised if half the damn crew understood. A few minutes passed and SAM spoke through our comms.

"The Roekaar have halted their hacking attempts. I am detecting several lights shining on them and raised voices calling for their surrender," SAM informed. "The Roekaar are looking amongst themselves, I believe they are discussing what to do." SAM paused a moment longer as the Roekaar committed to whatever their next action would be. The team was awaiting the next piece of news in absolute silence, I think a few of them were holding their breath as well. Hell, I was.

"Come on, come on…" Vetra whispered.

"They have surrendered," SAM spoke. I released my held breath in a sigh of relief, as did most of the others.

"So… what now?" Drack asked.

"We wait for the all clear," I reminded.

"Well I'm going back to bed, doesn't matter to me what happens with them," Drack muttered, placing his weapons back and heading to the mess.
"Anyone else?" I asked. The others glanced amongst themselves. Vetra shrugged:

"Got nothing better to do," she muttered. My comms pinged with a call from Evfra.

"Pathfinder, the Roekaar have surrendered and we're bringing them to holding cells. As I expected, all of them were here and watched when you first arrived. They knew most of those that demanded their surrender. Whether or not they've been Roekaar before your arrival, I can't say. Regardless, you're clear to leave the ship as you please," Evfra informed.

"Understood. Two things, Jaal would like to take part in the interrogation, and I'd like to know if Paraan is awake. I'd like to run something by her if she is," I requested.

"I see no problem in allowing Jaal to be involved, so long as he leaves the questioning to the one I appoint as interrogator. As for Paraan, yes. We have an… agreement," That means she must be involved with anything involving security in Aya. "She'll be by the door to the docks in the memorial garden," Evfra explained.

"Thanks, Evfra, let her know we'll be there soon," I requested, ending the call. "Anyone who wants to join me is free to do so. I understand if you want to remain armed, Evfra would probably allow it for now, but only pistols. Keep em' holstered," I ordered, placing my Sweeper back in the locker and grabbing a Carnifex from the armory. The others did the same, grabbing their choice of Pistol, and followed me out of the Tempest. Several resistance were still patrolling the area, and I wouldn't be surprised to see more security here whenever we land. As Evfra said, Paraan was in the Memorial gardens beside the Mural, speaking with a Resistance security officer waiting for us. As the door opened for us, she gestured for him to wait and closed the small gap between us.

"On behalf of Aya, I apologize greatly for tonight," Paraan stated.

"No apology necessary Paraan. The Roekaar don't represent the Angara. You've met the exiles and you understand that they don't represent the Initiative, this is no different," I retorted.

"Nonetheless, there shall be additional security protecting your ship, and the diplomats when they arrive," she informed.

"Thank you. If anything, I ask that you allow at least my crew the right to carry a sidearm onto Aya. This alone was bold of the Roekaar, I have no idea if they may grow bolder in the future," I requested.

"Perhaps. I'll discuss it with Evfra. He said you wished to speak with me?" Paraan replied.

"Ah, yes. This is actually about something unrelated to tonight. I've read all the messages your people left and I also sent them to the Nexus. As I was reading, it occurred to me that I'd actually like to address some of the questions, and that I might as well do so to all of them. Think there might be time where you could gather people and hold a gathering or something of the sort later?" I asked.

"You wish to place yourself out in the open, even after this attempt on your life?" Paraan questioned.

"Again, the Roekaar don't represent all Angara. And if I go unarmored and unarmed, it shows that I trust the Angara. Plus, they get to know that their voices have been heard, with me reading their messages. Even the ones that aren't entirely positive," I explained.

"I see your reasoning, and there will of course be Resistance fighters acting as security, but if they're quick enough on the draw, it won't matter," she argued.
"Did Evfra tell you about my biotic abilities? I can make a barrier around myself, without anyone knowing, that can protect me. Peebee and Cora here are also biotics and can strengthen that barrier if need be," I defended.

"Well… if you're certain you'll be safe…" Paraan answered.

"Scott, aside from the Archon, you are likely the Roekaar's main target. They will take this as a challenge, a taunt," Jaal pointed out.

"Then they'll also know that I'm not afraid of someone who tries to slit their enemies' throats in their sleep."

**Jaal Ama Darav**

"You do realize that the very aliens you attempted to kill tonight had just returned from rescuing the Moshae, correct? The only thing you've accomplished, the only thing you would have ever accomplished is staining your own cause," the interrogator pointed out. I looked at the Angara man sat in the chair, firmly secured to it, I might add. I had seen him walking around Aya on many occasions. Sometimes with his family, yet I never had the chance to speak with him. He was calm, he clearly felt that his actions were justified.

"No, had we succeeded, we would have had more dead aliens. And one of them would have been their best chance for survival. Cut off the head, and the body dies. Then we would have taken every single bit of data on that ship, and show it to our people. We'd find the proof of their foul intentions. To enslave us all, just like the Kett," the man defended. I scoffed.

"The Pathfinder is not the leader of the Initiative. I've been to the Nexus. They have four other leaders as well. And they still have the knowledge of the Remnant that Ryder has gained, and their SAM, the very AI that made your task impossible. With SAM, anyone could use the vaults. And you'd never get anywhere close enough to hurt him," I stated.

"Then it would have been a symbolic victory, you traitor," the man growled at me. "And we would still have shown to all Angara that they have been deceived by these aliens."

"Aya is working with the Initiative. The Resistance is working with the Initiative. Havarl was saved by the Initiative. That's a lot of Angara on good terms with them. Are they all traitors too? Seems like the Roekaar is the minority," the interrogator remarked.

"Truth, isn't a democracy," the Roekaar countered. Not a point one could well argue. I knew that Scott, and likely others were listening in through my comms. Scott, after all, had decided against sleep, at least not until after his public display in a few hours. "And what of the aliens on Kadara? They took the port from our people! Now they beat and extort both them and each other as they please! I will not allow that to become Aya," the Roekaar argued.

"Those are exiles. They mutinied months ago, when their food was running low and the rest of their people had still failed to show. They do not represent all of the Milky Way species. Just as Scott understands that the Roekaar do not represent all Angara," I countered.

"Hmph, a likely story," the Roekaar grumbled.

"Enough, we didn't come here to debate ideals. We want information. Akksul, other Roekaar on Aya, other bases of operations," the Interrogator threatened.

"I'd sooner kiss a Kett," the man grumbled in reply.
"Security teams in position? Jaal, how's your sightline?" the security officer near me questioned over her comms. Jaal had almost demanded that his role in my security today be a sniper, watching the proceedings from the roof of a nearby building. And after the unsuccessful interrogation from the night, I think a part of him wants to shoot something. As for me, the night was largely uneventful, simply coordinating security with Evfra with a stim or two to keep me on my feet with the lack of sleep. In the morning, a squad of Resistance provided an escort for us into the city proper. While we could explore the city as a whole, the areas beyond where we all spent most of our time yesterday was either residential, a landing pad, or barracks for Resistance fighters stationed on Aya. They had led us into a courtyard at the center of their main residential district, where there was already a raised platform waiting for public speakers, and many benches or other kinds of chairs for the listeners to place themselves. I knew that any members of my squad who were attending would be staying within the nearby home of a Resistance fighter whose family had volunteered their home for the morning as a place for my crew to stay and listen out of sight.

As the security officer was finishing her final checks, I keyed my Omni-tool to prepare the notecards I had made. They contained nothing but the messages left to the Nexus by the Angara. Everything else I would be saying today would come from the flow I had decided upon. Basic introduction to who I am and why I'm speaking today, and then reading back the messages, and addressing them all. On 'stage,' I'd be speaking from a podium so that both a microphone would be able to bring my voice both to those in physical attendance, and anyone listening in over radio channels or the Angara's main news network. But the other reason is so that my Omni-tool can discreetly display the note cards in front of me on the podium, make it look neater, I suppose.

"All security teams in place, all Angara in attendance have been checked for any weapons, though that doesn't mean one wasn't smuggled in. They're waiting, Pathfinder," the security officer informed, and I stepped out of the building I was waiting in, the same one as the rest of my crew, and a pair of Resistance escorted me towards the podium, and then flanking either side of the stage. There was a crowd alright, and while I was never a great public speaker, I also never was one who would continuously stumble over their words. Men and women of all ages, as I could see some particularly small Angara who had to be children, and a few men and women holding something wrapped in a blanket, likely a baby Angara. I wonder what they look like exactly. Almost everything looks cute as a baby, right? I was hoping I'd look decent enough for the crowd, I picked out a polo I had found in my closet and a pair of dressier pants. The only thing that might make this difficult, is splitting my focus between reading, and keeping that barrier around me. I stood at the podium and took a deep breath as I began.

"Morning everyone! I'm Scott Ryder, Human Pathfinder of the Andromeda Initiative. You know, we crossed dark space, leaving our home behind to explore and what-not. But that's not what I'm here to talk about this fine morning. And no, I'm not here to talk about what happened last night either. What I am here to talk about, is this. So, while my crew and I were on our way back to Aya from a join operation with the Resistance to save the Moshae, I understand that some of you were leaving messages for me to send off to the people of the Nexus, so that you all could feel as if your voices are being heard. Last night I read through each and every one of them, and sent each and every one of them to the Nexus, where they will be spread across my people. As I was reading them, I felt compelled to address them. Regardless if the message was positive, negative, or simply curious. What I would love, is that if the person who wrote the message I am responding to is in the audience today, would make themselves known, so that I can respond to them directly, help it feel a bit more personal. Thanks. So, let us begin," I began. I took a moment to look amongst the crowd. They seemed curious, at any rate. And even the children were watching intently.
"First message. Why did the Initiative come here? What's more is that this person is also asking if we expect you all to believe that we are explorers who want to live in peace. This person believes we fled something terrible, and that it might follow us here. Well, that's dark, and it seems we aren't starting off on a light note. Sorry. So, I don't really have much to say about this one. You could say that some people were fleeing their terrible past, but that's a stretch for this question, I know. But no, as far as I'm aware, we were not fleeing from anything. You can choose to believe that or not, but it's the truth," I stated firmly. "Next message. What species controls the Initiative? Are we all different species or customized genetic constructs? What did we look like before we left the Milky Way? And do we walk on two legs because the Angara do? Someone was a ball of energy," I joked.

"OH! OH! THAT'S MINE! THAT'S MY MESSAGE!" A higher pitched voice called out from the crowd, a hand barely sticking over the heads of the others. Others turned to look at the source of the voice as a small Angaran figure found itself in the center of the seating aisle, a smile beaming over its face. Given the way the head flaps were shaped, I believe it was a girl.

"Should have known it was a kid, if anyone is going to be this energetic, it's the little 'uns huh? What's your name?" I asked happily. I noticed that plenty of adults smirked and chuckled at my little joke.

"I'm Anaaf!" the girl introduced.

"Well it's nice to meet you Anaaf. So, allow me to answer your questions. Not one species controls the Initiative. Instead, we have leaders who were appointed based on their skills. Unfortunately, when we arrived in Heleus, the Nexus struck the scourge and a lot of leadership didn't make it, which left some people filling the roles as shown by our order of succession. We have Nakmor Kesh, a Krogan, who's the Superintendent of the Nexus, she ensures that construction on the Nexus and its distribution of supplies is done properly. We have Tiran Kandros, a Turian, who founded the Nexus' Militia to protect our people from the Kett, hostile wildlife, and Remnant. Foster Addison, a Human, like me, is the director of our Colonial Affairs, overseeing anything to do with the colonies we create. The Director of the Initiative as a whole, is Jarun Tann, a Salarian. However originally, the Director was an Asari Matriarch, that's a very old Asari, by the name of Nuar. I myself inherited the position of Humanity's Pathfinder from my father, who passed shortly after we arrived. You also asked if we were really different species? The answer is a definite yes, and your people will soon have plenty of medical scans as proof. I can also safely say that we all look exactly the same as we did before we left the Milky Way. Aside from any scars we acquired after waking up, that is. And we walk on two legs like the Angara because that's what our evolution deemed necessary. I hope that satisfies you Anaaf," I answered with a smile on my face.

She nodded her head happily and rejoined her family farther in the row, to the chuckles of other Angara.

"Kids really are great, aren't they?" I asked rhetorically as I prepared to read the next question. "This next message is essentially telling me and any other Milky Way people to stay off Havarl. Arguing that it is your most sacred world and that even the Kett stay away. Well, sir or Ma'am, I'm sorry but I've already been to Havarl, and not only that but several of my people were invited to stay alongside some of your scientists to assist them in their research. What kind of research? Well they're researching how the Remnant Vault of Havarl that I reactivated is fixing Havarl, saving it from an ecological collapse. So, it's too late for me to stay away," I explained. I easily noticed murmurs amongst the crowd and many Angara looking back and forth between themselves. I gave them all a moment as I began to continue.

"The next message is from an Angara asking that we show you how to make Arks like we did, so that you can leave Andromeda, and go to the Milky Way," I began. I let out a sigh as I ensured I
had the best way to respond to this. "I'm sorry, but it's not that simple. The amount of fuel it took to
take us all the way here, the amount of resources to create an ark, the amount of time and resources
it would take to ensure that the cryo pods would be safe for Angaran use is… well it's a lot. And
it's likely something that would require nearly all Angara to agree on. I'm sorry, that's all I can add
to this question," I answered solemnly. "Well, I have more messages… This one is a thank you.
This Angara wants me to know that when the rumors began about the Moshae's fate, she had lost
hope for the future, and claims I restored it. I didn't restore your faith. Not alone at any rate. I had
my team, and the Resistance there the whole way. Without a single piece of that elaborate puzzle,
the results of that day would likely have been much worse," I answered.

"That was my message, Pathfinder Ryder. And you didn't read to us a part that I find very
important," a younger Angara man stood up in the crowd. "I don't care what anyone says. I believe
you came to save us," he recited.

"I thank you that you have such a belief, but that makes it sound as if we're a godsend or
something. I don't want a claim like that following us. Our scans of Andromeda before we set out,
showed what Heleus looked like six-hundred years or so in the past. And that was before we left.
Our journey took six-hundred and thirty-five years. We had no idea the Angara were here, so it
was a coincidence. But since we're here, we are more than happy to help," I clarified.

"And that's more than enough for me," the young man replied. "Thank you." He sat back down.

"Well, it's appreciated. The next message. The subject reads as 'Go home.' Sorry to say we can't
really do that as we don't have the fuel. Regardless, we've left everything we know and love
behind. There's nothing for us there anymore, just familiar streets and cities filled with unfamiliar
faces and the graves of everyone we ever knew. This Angara states that we don't belong here. That
anyone who thinks we're different than the Kett are fools. This Angara claims to see me for what I
am, and that there are many more who think the same. Well I'm certainly aware of that last bit,
some of those people were trying to hack their way into my ship and slit the throats of everyone
inside as they slept," I remarked casually. That earned a few snorts from the audience as they could
see the little jab I was making towards the sender of this message.

"Moving on... No subject on this one, just a simple message. 'If you come in friendship, paavoa,'
sorry if I butchered the pronunciation there. 'If your hearts are filled with deceit, you will die. That
is all you need to know.' I read off exactly as it showed in the message. "Simple yet fair, and
understood loud and clear," I stated casually. "Ah, this message has a name attached. From Vjaka.
Their family said they could write to me. Vjaka has never met an alien before, but would like to
meet me. Vjaka thinks we can be friends. Vjaka, are you in the audience today?" I asked. I gave it a
moment and waited, scanning the crowd. Another small Angaran figure, another child, a boy, by
the looks of it shuffled out into the aisles between seating rows.

"Uh… H-Hello," he mumbled shyly, I probably could only hear him thanks to SAM boosting my
hearing. I smiled warmly.

"Good to meet you Vjaka, I'm Scott. You've met one alien; would you like to meet a few others?
My crew have a bunch of aliens of different species, and they're good friends of mine. You can
make friends with them too if you like," I offered.

"Really?" the child questioned, not quite believing it.

"Only if your family is ok with it, and you bring at least one of the Adults with you, we'd be happy
to meet them too before we leave later," I answered.

"Thank you!" the boy exclaimed, running back into the aisles, no doubt unable to wait for an
answer from his parents.

"The next message is longer, and I also believe it needs to be read out fully to be properly addressed. 'Let there be unity. Before the Scourge, Angara were one people. It took centuries after that disaster to find each other again, and by then we'd been divided too long. That's how the Kett were able to conquer us. The war forced us back together, but now you've upset the balance. Some don't trust you. Others want you to save us. Divisions are forming. If you're really here to help, keep our people united.' I hope I can. I really do," I answered solemnly. A few heads in the sea of people nodded.

"And this one should also be read aloud as well. 'Paavoa and Isharay to you all. I'm writing this in my final days. I've lived a long life that now comes to its natural end. I've known great loss and pain, but also joy and hope. I think we have that in common,'" I stopped my quoting to add something. "Believe me, we do. Both my parents, for one. Anyways, 'My fate is to leave at a turning point in history. Part of me is angry I won't see what happens next, but I've made my peace. Whatever becomes of your people, mine, and the Kett will reverberate into the lives of my great-grandchildren, and that gives me strange comfort. I know there's more to this life than war and hardship, and I've seen enough to know your people understand that too. Be well. Take care of each other. Change life for the better. Goodbye,'" I ended. Letting out a deep breath as I felt the impact of that message hit home again. And it certainly seemed to strike a chord with the Angara. I moved a hand to wipe a bit of mist forming by my eyes. "Wow, I read this last night but it still has an effect on me. If you're listening, whoever you are, I promise you, my crew and I will do everything in our power to change life for the better. Thank you," I stated. More nodding heads amongst the sea of onlookers.

"Well, bit of a step down from the wisdom of ages that sticks with you throughout your life, but hey, I did want to read every message after all. This Angara wants us to know that there are more to the Angara than violence. That you're scientists, inventors, artists, caretakers and explorers. So are we. This person also believes that though this is your home, there is enough room for all of us. That you told the Kett the same, yet they didn't listen. That you hope we do. Well, we do. And we already know that there's more to the Angara than the Resistance. I've learned a lot about your people with Jaal in my crew, and it's an honor to have him along, both as a squad mate, and a friend," I answered. "Ah the next message has an interesting Subject to it. No one will read this. 'This message will never be read by the Pathfinder, much less reach the Nexus. We're so desperate for allies against the Kett that we're willing to make the same mistake with new aliens. This little stunt by the governor won't change anything. We may as well be screaming into the wind.' Well, my friend, the wind has answered. Here I am, reading your message, and plenty of notches on my belt from dead Kett, with many more to come,'" I stated confidently. No one stood to claim the message as their own, but I did notice several heads turn, converging into a single area where one Angara was lowering his head, almost as if hiding from view. "Make of that what you will," I ended for that message, watching for the next notecard to appear in front of me.

"'Join our fight.' Summarized, this Angara wants us to stand alongside the Resistance, push the Kett back to their home, and show them the terror and despair that they have caused the Angara. Look, I want the Kett defeated, I want Heleus to be free of them. But we must ensure that in fighting the Kett, we do not stoop to their level. We are better than them," I argued. Nods and murmurs across the crowd.

"Hm, this one will be a bit harder to answer. Are we at war with each other? The person who asked this question pointed out many things that I would assume you have witnessed of the exiles. Violence, greed, selfishness. From one another and others. The mutiny brought out the worst in people. Everyone thought they were going to starve to death, people wanted their family out of cryo, people were unhappy with leadership. Some people made it a survival of the fittest deal. I
don't approve of it in the slightest, but I can see why it began. Then people just went off the deep end. Things back home were hardly perfect, there were pirates, slavers, mercs. The Terminus systems, a region outside of the control of the main galactic government, was absolutely lawless. Thing is, we didn't let mercs, or slavers, or pirates in. At least not knowingly. I'm sorry. But this is a mistake of ours that we will rectify, I promise," I attempted to reassure.

"So… next message. Two left, by the way. It's from a parent. They've spent their life wondering what other beings may exist. And also, that we are nothing like what they imagined. Believe me, and if you ask any of my crew, before humans were spacefaring our imaginations went wild too, nothing was as we imagined either. So, this parent thought they were done being surprised in life, and that their children draw pictures of us and ask all kinds of questions. Guess they want to know all about us. I hope they learned a few things as well today. And yes, we do feel the same about the Angara. We both have much to learn here. Now, the final message," I began. Taking a deep breath. This was ending on a high note, and I wanted to read this one fully.

"I believe in our future. Help arrives when you least expect it, and your arrival was unexpected. You came to Aya wounded and in need, and we didn't welcome you. You went to our other worlds and helped our people overcome terrible challenges with no promise of reward or friendship. You wouldn't do that if there wasn't a goodness at your core. You want to understand and be understood. This is the start of a great alliance. That it is my friend. That it is. So, that was the last of the messages I have received and sent to the Nexus. I'll also be willing to attempt to answer any questions you may wish to ask after; however, I would like to ask that anything about our biology simply be left for when our diplomats and the scientists accompanying them arrive. If you have a question, simply raise your hand and I will try to get to you," I explained. Several hands in the sea of Angara appeared over the heads of them all. I'd start with the one closest to the front, an Angaran man. "You in front," I called out. The man stood, I could clearly make out a scar on his features, a large cut on his right head flap.

"Just last night, Roekaar attempted to infiltrate your ship and kill everyone aboard, and yet here you are, in the open, and no armor. You know you are a target, yet still you are leaving yourself vulnerable. Why?" the man questioned.

"A good question. I had wanted to go over these messages before the failed attack, yes. And the attack in fact only made me that much more determined to stand in front of you all today. I trust the Angara. The Roekaar do not represent the Angara. I know this, just as you are understanding that the Exiles do not represent the Nexus and the Initiative. More it's to also show the Roekaar that my team and I are not afraid of cowards who attempt to sneak their way into someone's home and slit the throats of all those inside as they sleep. Akksul, if you, and any other Roekaar can hear me, I will prove you wrong about us. I promise you that," I stated firmly. During my message, I looked straight up to where I knew one of the cameras were watching. "Any other questions?" Fewer hands were raised into the air, but there were still there. I chose a hand a bit farther back, to my left.

"In the back right," I called out. The owner of the hand stood, this time a woman.

"How many species are a part of the Initiative?" she questioned.

"Most species from back home in fact. As I said earlier, I'm Human. We also have Turians, Asari, Krogan, and Salarians. There were a few Batarians who came along as well, but I think most, if not all of them are still in Cryo. But we also have others on an Ark that was delayed, and they probably haven't gotten here yet. That ark had Quarians, Volus, Elcor, Hanar, and Drell," I answered. The woman sat. "I'll take one more question. Few hands rose now, one to my right, another man. I chose him for the final question.

"And all your species lived in peace, in the Milky Way?" he asked.
"Heh, sort of. Our society is far from perfect and there are sometimes tensions. Over a thousand years before we left there were the Krogan rebellions, and still, Krogan, Turians, and Salarians don't always get along. Thirty years before we left, Humanity had first contact with the Turians, and because we were colonizing in their territory, there was what we call the First Contact War, but it lasted six months with only a few engagements. And just before we left Humans and Turians were getting along well. We've had our issues, and likely still will. Some people will hold those old grudges, some won't. But I'd bet the Angara have faced similar ordeals. I think it's just a part of people being people. Not a pleasant part, but a part," I answered thoughtfully. "I thank you all for your time today, and I hope you've all taken away at least something positive from this. Vjaka, if you're family has agreed, speak with one of the guards, and they'll bring you up," I called out, stepping away from the Podium as the crowd began to talk amongst themselves. Security escorted me back to where the others were staying, just waiting for me. On our way, I commed Jaal:

"You gonna join us? We're going to hang out for a little while, see if the kid is coming, then head out," I explained.

"Already on my way. You did well today, Scott. I believe that all those listening have at least a few things to think about," Jaal answered.

"Then I'll call today a success. See you soon," I ended, opening the door to the others.

"Hey there he is! Good work out there Scott," Liam called out happily. In the room, there were two buckets of ice with several bottles of our choice. One for the Levos, one for the only Dextro. The others were all nursing their own drinks and I was parched after that speaking, and happily grabbed one of the beers, nodding my thanks to Liam.

"You got a way with words that I don't, I can tell you that much," Cora remarked. I had to be very careful to suppress the laugh I felt coming, as I thought to myself how a lot of people seem to be better with words than her. Fortunately, I managed to suppress it, simply shrugging in reply.

"Did you have to invite the kid though?" Drack groaned slightly.

"Why not? All he's gonna do is talk with us a bit," I replied.

"Look, kid, in my experience, an Adult will be afraid of Krogan because they know our reputation, but kids? He may try to climb all over me," Drack explained. Vetra snorted in laughter:

"I can only imagine Kesh doing that when she was little. I swear if she ever has kids I will love watching you get covered under a mountain of tiny Krogan."

"Uh huh, you do know they'll be doing the exact same thing to their 'aunty Vetra,' right?" Drack questioned, some humor and snark in his voice.

"And it'll be worth it," Vetra retorted. There was a knock on the door, and the security officer opened it, allowing in Vjaka, and both a man and woman behind him, likely the parents. Vjaka was beaming, while his parents were a bit more nervous. Or perhaps just awkward.

"Hey Vjaka, I assume these are your parents?" I greeted.

"Y-yes, I'm Mishren," the mother introduced.

"And I'm Erso, Pathfinder," the father too introduced.

"Please, we're not doing anything official. Just Scott, please," I offered. I looked down at Vjaka as I continued. "How'd you like to meet my crew?"
"Shit, that kid reminds me too much of Kesh when she was little," Drack groaned. Now we were just helping clean up before returning to our ship. The house we were staying was after all from a family allowing us to take their place for the morning.

"I almost died of laughter when he asked to climb onto the top of your hump," Vetra laughed.

"And then, you let him," Jaal teased.

"Oh, come on! The kid was begging! I may be an old bag of Krogan bones who kicks Kett ass but I'm not heartless! I got two of them!" Drack retorted.

"And I thought his parents were going to shit themselves in fear when he got close to you," I remarked.

"Just as I said. The adults are afraid, and the kids don't know enough to be afraid," Drack reminded.

"Here I thought today we'd just be helping Angara feel better. Guess we're feeling better too now," Liam remarked.

"I still can't get over how cute Angara kids are. I can't imagine what the babies are like," Suvi giggled.

"Hmph, just you wait," Jaal chuckled. We finished the room and returned to the Tempest, the diplomats already waiting.

"Greetings to you, Pathfinder. I am Isa De Navar, head diplomat. And this is Andraknar. He will be serving as both my bodyguard and chief of security. The rest are either security or aides of mine. Shall we?" he introduced.

"Good to meet you both. It's not a long trip to the Nexus, let's get you situated," I suggested, leading them towards the Tempest. The diplomats already waiting.

"Greetings to you, Pathfinder. I am Isa De Navar, head diplomat. And this is Andraknar. He will be serving as both my bodyguard and chief of security. The rest are either security or aides of mine. Shall we?" he introduced.

"Pathfinder, I understand your father was among the elite for the human military. That he had achieved a very unique commendation," Andraknar mentioned.

"You'd be correct. He was an N7, the highest of our N ranks. Even the first rank sets you above the others as special forces. But this? The elite of the elite," I answered.

"And you carry on his legacy? I'm aware that you've worn armor with the same commendation," he remarked as I led them towards the cargo bay.

"I have. It's his armor, he left it to me in his will, and I wear it as a way to remember and honor him," I answered a bit more defensively.

"A good reason. I myself am a Heskaarl, we too are elite, special forces. Our training has been passed down through the ages, even before the Kett came," he explained.

"Heskaarl? I've never had the honor of meeting one of you before," Jaal stated, coming a bit closer.

"Indeed. There aren't many of us. Never have been," Andraknar remarked. "Perhaps while the diplomats are having their own kind of cultural exchange, you and I can have our own. A soldier's
exchange. I'll be reading up on the N7s and the other elite forces of the Milky Way while I'm on the Nexus, how about you participate in some Heskaarl training? Maybe you'll even beat my time," he suggested.

"Always up for a challenge. Unfortunately, I have doctor's orders to take it easy for two more days. Where's the training?" I questioned.

"Voeld. Near our HQ. There's a few beacons that I have the codes to prepare. You activate them, you receive your task for the training. Given that these are the elite of the elite, it's live fire, real danger. You'll be going up against Remnant, Kett, and the Wildlife. A true test," he warned.

"Though I can't say I'm eager to return to Voeld, I know I'll have to anyway. Might as well do the training while I'm there," I remarked. We had just entered the cargo bay by the time I finished speaking. "You're free to stay wherever you wish for the duration of the journey. Just down here, to the doors around the cargo ramp you'll find the med-bay on the first door to your right, and the first door on your left will be the crew-quarters, it has room to relax if you want to. Second door on your left will be our bathroom, but you can also access it from the crew quarters. Brought snacks and want a place to eat them? Mess hall is the second door on the right. And I think I'll be in my quarters for a bit, the room at the end of the hall," I explained. They nodded their understanding and I let them be.

Damn was I tired.
**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

I woke up from the nap I had taken a bit over an hour later as planned. Enough to provide a moment of rest, and not enough time for another nightmare to take hold. We should be coming out of FTL soon, and it would be fitting to have, if nothing else, Isa and Andraknar on the bridge to watch our approach. As I was getting up to get dressed, there was a knock on the door. "Just a second," I called out, finding a pair of shorts and putting them on. I called for their entry as I searched for a shirt.

"Don't bother putting that on yet, I need to examine those bandages," Lexi ordered, stepping into the room. Shrugging, I tossed the shirt I picked out back onto my bed and sat on the corner, allowing Lexi to do what she needed. Lexi sat down another roll of bandages as she began to remove those already applied. There was dried blood and other gunk from the blistering which I noticed had gone down considerably. What was left was a patch of skin around the center of my chest whiter than the rest. I generally grow body hair at a decent amount and a decent rate, and the only hair I ever need to shave grows on my head. But now, right at that scar, it looks like I'm going to have a permanent bald spot. Ah well, not like anyone's ever gonna really see it.

"The burn is healing nicely. I'll need to check your rib, then reapply more bandages just to keep it clean. And I may want to check later today and in the morning as well. Remember, DON'T, get your heart rate up, and two-drink maximum every four hours," Lexi ordered. With that and the bandages out of the way, she began applying slight pressure along the broken rib, checking its resistance as well as my reactions. My reactions, as to be expected, involved a slight grunt or hiss in a spike of pain if she poked a spot where the bone was still mending. Lexi slowly nodded her head as she thought to herself. "Here, take two of these, and one of these. Those two should help bolster the bone's healing rate and that one should numb any pain for the rest of the day," Lexi explained handing me three pills, two in one hand, and one in the other, and reapplying my bandages. I thanked her, tossed my shirt on, and entered the bathroom so I could get some water out of the sink for this, swallowing the pills with one gulp of water. With that done I made my way to the bridge, and offered Isa and Andraknar a view of the Nexus. We'd be exiting FTL any moment now. The bridge doors opened, and admitted the two.

"Exiting FTL in twenty seconds," Kallo called out, for their sake. They stood in silence as they waited for the pitch black of FTL travel to fade away. Exactly when Kallo said it would, the black faded, replaced by the light of the nearby star as it illuminated the system. And just ahead, the Nexus.

"Alright, I'd rather not say exactly the same thing I said to Jaal when we first brought him here, so… yeah, here we are," I remarked a bit awkwardly. Kallo contacted the Nexus, as per docking protocols, transmitting the proper codes. Dot the "i"s and cross the "T"s, all that. Kallo flew us through one of the barriers keeping the atmosphere inside that still permits ships a way in and out, and instead of the blackness of space, with the gas giant just "below" the Nexus, and the faint light of the blue star, Zheng He in the background, was replaced with yellow artificial sunlight, and plenty of buildings that for now, at least, mostly stood empty. We sped along towards our personal docking pad.

"The size of this station alone is impressive. Yet the inside is quite beautiful. As if the Nexus holds its own planet within," Ambassador Isa remarked.
"I didn't notice any gun batteries on our approach. Is the station not defended?" Andraknar questioned.

"The Tempest, Arks, and Nexus don't have any exterior gun emplacements, no. However, there are fighter squadrons, though I'm not sure how many are within the Nexus, and some of our shuttles are also armed. But we have placed gun batteries along the main ground paths to our outpost on Eos, given the amount of Kett activity there," I answered.

"So, you've purposely left this station, your ships, virtually defenseless. No doubt a decision made by the politicians and not the soldiers," he muttered to himself. I'll admit some unease to those questions, but I highly doubted that either the Resistance or the Roekaar had the means to launch a true attack on the Nexus. At least one that wouldn't involve them needing to infiltrate the Nexus. And that is where they would face the most difficulty. We approached the landing pad and Kallo began our descent, as I led them back towards the cargo bay. The Angara were waiting there, as was my crew. I grabbed a Predator pistol out of the weapons locker and holstered it to my thigh. The clothes in my locker all were made so that a pistol could be concealed within them and yet still be easily, quickly accessed in case of emergency. So far, in Andromeda, the only places I had left my ship unarmed, have been Aya.

"Hey, Vetra, any idea what the food situation is on the Nexus? I've only ever eaten while on the ship," I questioned.

"Not much different. But you may be able to find some things that Eos has grown, maybe some vat-meat. There are better selections, but those merchants are holding onto those for a lot. You're better off waiting until things are a bit more stable to treat yourself," she answered.

"So canned foods and anything that lasts a while huh? Aw well," I remarked.

"Bah, alright, fuck it, I'm tired of eating the same shit too. I've been saving some actual Varren meat for a while. Kesh has been holding it onto me here on the Nexus. I left everything we'd need to make a genuine Varren roast there. That's our dinner tonight," Drack called out.

"Uh, are you forgetting about someone?" Vetra retorted playfully.

"Hmph, count yourself lucky that you got on my good side before we left. Let alone Kesh's. Just you wait and see, there's something waiting for you too," he grumbled.

"Oh really? Enough if I brought Sid along?" Vetra asked.

"Sure, should still be enough left even with both of you for leftovers. I always liked that kid," Drack remarked.

"Well the mess isn't big enough for all of us. Where are we gonna be eating?" Gil spoke up from the railings above.

"Kesh's place. Everything's already there and being leadership, she has a few extra things. Like two stoves. That way I can cook the Turians' food at the same time," Drack answered. The cargo bay doors began to open but I had one last thing I wanted to mention.

"Jaal, hang around the cultural center for a bit, would ya? Once I have the diplomats settled I want you to meet someone," I requested.

"Who is it?" he responded, as I began to lead the diplomats down the ramp.

"Call it a surprise," I stated. At the base of the ramp was Director Tann, with the liaison for the
"Greetings, and welcome, to the Nexus. I am Initiative Director Jarun Tann, and this is Sel'sha V'Nais, the Liaison of our Cultural Exchange center," he introduced. Isa stepped forward to my side to return the greetings, with Andraknar at his.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Ambassador Isa De Navar, and this is Andraknar, my personal bodyguard and head of my security," he introduced.

"I hope you enjoy your time here on the Nexus, and you find that each member of your group will have their own apartment to live in if they so choose, but each has two bedrooms, and a couch that can be used as an additional bed," the Liaison explained.

"And we'd be happy to help your guards secure their weapons," Tann stated. Damn it Tann. Still, if they can trust us that would be a good sign going forward. Isa turned his head to Andraknar, who looked back for a moment coming to a decision. He shook his head no.

"I'd prefer to keep them armed for now. You understand," Isa replied firmly. Tann and the Liaison looked between each other, before Tann eyed me, clearly wanting me to say something

"Is something wrong? Ambassador?" I questioned, slight nervous as I didn't want to make this worse. He turned to face his guards.

"Don't follow. Walk with me, Pathfinder," he requested. I followed him past Tann and Sel'sha towards the edge of the landing platform. He stood with his arms behind his back, looking out at a specific docking bay below us. A shuttle was there and a large group of people were moving back and forth. Humans, Salarians, Asari, and Turians were all in the mix. "So much life. All different, all united. The way it could have been," Isa muttered, just loud enough for me to hear. He turned his head to face me and spoke a bit louder. "Seventy-five years ago, we were scattered. Struggling to rebuild after the scourge. And then the Kett arrived. Alien life. It was monumental. But then they deceived and enslaved us. And now you understand my caution," he explained.

"Apologies, Isa, I already understood your precautions, your people have been through hell and back, it would be more out of place if you weren't cautious. I just didn't exactly know what to say on the ramp. I didn't think, but should have expected, Tann to see about the weapons being surrendered. But… I will give him is that it would be a step in the right direction for us," I remarked.

"And all this, your Initiative, it proves that there is a better way. That perhaps that might indeed be the right step for both of us. I want to believe in this alliance. The Moshae believes you're trustworthy, as does Evfra, as does Paraan. Please, help me trust you," requested. Almost like he was pleading. He wanted to believe, badly, but the doubt was there.

"Aside from how the Kett hate both of us and we can work together to kick their asses? Everything you see here, everything you will see, we're willing to share. Knowledge, tech, support, firepower, supplies, all of it," I answered.

"And the price?" he asked, slight skepticism.

"Whatever you're willing to share with us in turn," I stated. Isa let out a deep breath, closing his eyes as he inhaled, opening as he exhaled. He walked back towards the Tempest and his guards, as Tann and Sel'sha were waiting for results.

"Andraknar, you and your guards will surrender your weapons to their militia," he ordered.
Andraknar obeyed, handing over his weapons, and as he was doing so, he gave me an approving nod. Maybe it was a test?

"Thank you, Ambassador," I stated.

"Paavoa set jave jarevaon. Welcome, to Andromeda," he replied, stating it to both me, and the others.

"We thank you for your trust, and your welcomes. Would you like to see where you will be staying first? Drop off your supplies? Or shall we have your things moved to your rooms as I show you our cultural center? I'd be more than happy to arrange for your access to our archives wherever and whenever you please," Sel'sha offered.

"Ambassador, I do recommend the cultural center, I learned much the last time I was here," Jaal suggested.

"Then that is where we shall begin. Lead the way," Isa requested. The diplomats all made their way up towards the plaza and then the cultural center, but Tann lingered.

"Thank you for talking some sense into-" Tann began.

"Oh, for fucks sake Tann don't even fucking start. Did you even READ my report on the Angara? 'Talk some sense into them,' the fuck are you thinking?" I exclaimed. "You're lucky that I felt that this could be a good step, but if any species has the right to be armed around aliens at all times, it's the goddamn Angara."

"Yes, yes, I read your report, but clearly, we aren't Kett," Tann retorted. I sighed, lowered my head, and pinched the bridge of my nose in annoyance. I could just barely hear Drack chuckle, as he knew what was coming.

"The last fucking time they encountered alien life, was eighty years ago. They tried being diplomatic, they tried to be peaceful. And the Kett took their government, their military, and WRECKED IT ALL! They have been plunged into a FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL for EIGHTY FUCKING YEARS!" I yelled out. "And you don't have any fucking clue what we learned on Voeld," I growled.

"Speaking of which, why have you not written your report? I have oversight of the Pathfinder teams, I need mission reports right after they happen, not days." Tann accused. I scoffed as I began.

"I didn't write your fucking report because after we saved the Moshae, I spent the day either drinking to forget what we found, or distracting myself by being with the Angara on Aya. And I didn't send you a report this morning because we had to deal with an attempted raid on our ship by Roekaar. I haven't gotten any real sleep since before Voeld. You want your fucking report Tann? Here it fucking is. The Kett kidnap Angara. Some as slave labor, some get taken to unique facilities. Like the one the Moshae was being kept in. You know what they do to the Angara in these facilities? They turn them into fucking Kett. My team and I watched, unable to help, as an Angaran man writhed in absolute agony, bones breaking and reforming, his body changing, until he became an unthinking, loyal servant to the very goddamn monsters that have been fighting his people for decades." I growled. Tann appeared shocked.

"I… I see. And did you get into the Vault on Aya?" Tann questioned. Fucking jackass doesn't seem to even care. I glanced behind me to see that my team were also glaring daggers into Tann, a snarl barely appearing on Drack's face, even. But it seems they trusted me to handle this, and know they don't need to say a word.
"No, I didn't, I will, they've promised me. And don't you dare start demanding to know why I didn't get in right away. The Moshae's immune system was fucked, she needs medical care before she can go anywhere, and I was wounded there too. But if you want to fucking care about what happened? They plan on doing the same goddamn thing to us. Why don't you go and think about all the missing colonists we've lost track of that were likely captured by the Kett. Go think about what the Kett are doing to them, and what they're trying to learn. I goddamn know I have," I growled, storming past him. Making it a point to shove him with my right shoulder. The crew followed, most simply ignored Tann entirely. Drack, shot his face back towards him and growled, intimidating him. He no doubt got pleasure from it, but he was genuinely tired of Tann's shit too. "Oversees all Pathfinder teams," I scoffed. "He can fucking try to wave his authority around me. He doesn't lead shit." As we entered the plaza from the landing pad's docking ramp, a familiar Asari face was waiting for me.

"Pardon, Scott, do you have a moment for an interview?" she questioned.

"Not… Not right now, Keri. I'm sorry but you don't want to have an interview while I'm pissed. Meet me back around here in two hours, I'll have a calm head then," I stated. I began the sentence a bit aggressively, but stopped and calmed myself. Keri didn't deserve the fury reserved for Tann, after all. A bit rudely, but still understandably, I continued walking away. "Jaal, come on. Time for you to meet someone, and hey, this will probably be the best way to calm me down," I called out.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Any progress, Harry?" I questioned a bit nervously. Jaal stood behind me a bit awkwardly. We were in the Hyperion med-bay again, and Sara was slept on the cot in front of us.

"As time goes on we can see that her brain becomes, granted only through smaller increments, more active. But your visits clearly provide a small boost. However, we still have no idea when she'll wake up, even with our medical advancements the brain is still a very tricky organ," Harry explained.

"Damn it," I sighed. "She ok for another talk?" I asked. Harry nodded and began setting up the connection to her implant.

"How is this going to work, exactly?" Jaal questioned.

"Sara has a neural implant identical to Scott's. While my connection with her is not as thorough as Scott's, I am still able to send signals to her brain, and receive the signals her brain creates. She thinks, and I can 'hear,' them, for lack of better words," SAM explained as he prepared for the connection at his end. Jaal glanced at me and I shrugged.

"Hey, it works, and I can talk with my sister. That's all I really care about," I remarked. A moment later, Sara's body jerked with the connection. "Sara? Come on Sara, wake up, time to go to school," I joked.

"Shut up Scott, it's Saturday," Sara groaned in her thoughts. I snorted as she steadily became a bit more aware.

"Did I catch you during your beauty sleep princess?" I teased.

"Wha- oh, right. I've been doing nothing but 'beauty sleep' for… how long has it been now?" she asked.
"Hey, maybe you'll win Miss Universe when you wake up," I teased a bit more. "It's been almost a week."

"Feels more like years. Do you know how bored I get just laying here? So, who do I get to meet today?" she responded. I glanced at Jaal and nodded my head towards my sister, signaling that he should introduce himself.

"Er, hello, Sara. I am Jaal Ama Darav, of the Angara," he introduced.

"Oh, Scott and Vetra told me about you guys when they were here last. What have you been up to since?" she asked a bit cheerfully. Shit, I don't know if I want to talk about that. She doesn't need to be thinking about that. Jaal looked at me questioningly, and I shook my head no. I'd tell her about this when she wakes up.

"We've uh, been to Eos, I think I mentioned that last time, and we stormed a Kett base there, and took it down, no casualties. So, our colonists there are going to be much, much safer. Also, while using some seismic hammers, which you would have loved, by the way, they shook the ground with a big ol' boom. Anyways, we used those to help Prodromos shift their water table which was unstable thanks to some quakes. Thing is, with the last one, we woke up a massive fucking Remnant machine that flew!" I exclaimed. "SAM, show her a picture?" I waited a moment for my sister to "see the image."

"Holy shit that's big. How the hell did you kill that thing?" she questioned.

"Technically? We didn't. We weakened it so that I could interface, and SAM rewrote its programming," I explained.

"Well, shit," Sara muttered. "Anything else?"

"Well, what we did on the Angaran home world won us the trust to allow us on a rescue mission for an important Angaran figure," I answered.

"Moshae Sjefa. Our most revered scientist. As well as a highly important figurehead for our people. Extremely wise, beloved by our people. And she remembers a time before the Kett," Jaal explained.

"She had been captured by the Kett and taken to a facility on a planet called Voeld. We rescued both her, and all the other Angara captured there, as well as destroying the facility. She's recovering on Aya before she leads me to the vault there, and I was wounded too," I continued.

"So many damn adventures while I'm stuck here," she muttered. Yeah, that's not an 'adventure,' you'd have wanted to go on Sara. "How bad is the wound? Didn't lose your… personal arm, did you?" she teased. I laughed at her tease as I answered.

"You wish. I still have all my limbs and their digits attached thank you. A Kett leader at their facility shot a high-powered energy bolt at me. Broke through my shields and a barrier I tried to form. Almost melted all the way through dad's N7 armor. My chest has a nice scar forming from the burn and the force of the impact broke a rib. But I can walk around and will be back in action soon enough," I explained.

"Damn, guess Dad saved your life again, didn't he?" Sara muttered, a bit depressed.

"Yeah, I guess he did…" I muttered back. "But, the armor's being repaired, so it'll have the chance to save me again."
"Well, that's good. So, Jaal tell me a bit about the Angara," Sara asked.

"For starters, our families are much bigger than yours. I have over a dozen siblings, and several dozen more cousins," Jaal remarked with a chuckle.

"Fucking hell, I'm glad I'm not an Angaran woman, though, if I was, I just wouldn't have kids. I could not handle that shit," Sara almost groaned. "Besides, I can't imagine having a family that big. I can barely handle having one brother. Imagine having two of the shitheads!" she exclaimed jokingly.

"Now now, little sister, that's not a very polite thing to say to your big brother Scott," I teased. Jaal was smirking and chuckling to himself at our exchange, likely seeing similarities with his own family.

"Just you wait until I get out of this damn coma," she threatened playfully.

"Sure, but I'm going to try and enjoy every minute I have this advantage over you," I chuckled.

"Gah, I hate you. Jaal, how can you stand being on his crew?" Sara asked teasingly. He chuckled before answering.

"I enjoy it much more than I expected. A part of me almost thought I'd wind up killed by these, weird, unknown aliens. But... they've grown on me. Scott's been good to me, and it's been interesting, learning of your cultures. And watching old movies of yours during a 'movie night,' we had. Star Wars, I believe it was called," Jaal explained.

"What!? Scott, you watched Star Wars without me?! Why, why must you torture me like this," Sara groaned.

"It was episode four," I laughed.

"You're evil. You are a terrible brother," she stated.

"Older, brother," I reminded playfully. Sara just let out another groan as I once more got the last word with this. As my laughter, and Jaal's died down, we grew quiet for a moment.

"I miss you out there sis. Always thinking about you," I spoke, barely above a whisper.

"I miss you too, Scott," she almost whispered back. I stood slightly and leaned forward, wrapping my arms around her, my head over her right shoulder. "I'd hug back, but..." she remarked.

Chuckling, I took an arm and moved both of hers onto my back, one hand on the other. "Thanks," she stated softly.

"Please wake up soon," I muttered, tightening my hug. I remembered my nightmare, and the Kett facility.

"I'm trying," she whispered. I felt a tear or two form in my eyes, and I took a deep breath, trying to fight them back. I released her from my hug and placed one hand back at her side, but still held onto the other for a bit longer. Jaal seemed a bit awkward at being around for this, but I think he also... respected, the emotions. I knew he wouldn't judge them, if nothing else.

"We'll be staying on the Nexus overnight. Want me to come back sometime tomorrow?" I asked.

"Please." I gripped her hand tightly, though not too tight, and tried to fight back another onslaught of tears. Sara's plea that I come back tomorrow, despite being her thoughts, it sounded as if she was
I was crying a little bit too. I know a few broke through my defenses.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

As I had requested, Keri was waiting just near the Tempest, in the plaza, overlooking that fine ship.

"Hey Keri, I think I'm ready for that interview now," I informed, gaining her attention. She turned to face me, tearing her eyes off my ship.

"Hm? Oh, of course. What even set you off in the first place?" she questioned calmly.

"Tann, nuff said. So…?" I subtly suggested.

"Yes, sorry," she stated, turning on her equipment. "I'd like to know more about the Angara. I know it's been a few days since first contact but we have arrangements for embassies, I know that much. First contact rarely goes so smoothly. Frankly I'm just glad that the Angara are more peaceful for the Kett. High hopes across the station for this alliance."

"Heh, define smooth. Compared to Humans and Turians, sure. But it's been some thin ice. They're survivors. Fortunately, they're willing to help. And they'll be a great boon to us as allies," I responded.

"The Angaran on your crew, Jaal, has a few fans already, but what has everyone talking is Aya. We've seen the pictures. Vividly green plants, flowing water… Leadership has discussed whether we should send colonists there," Keri remarked.

"NO! Er, no. Absolutely not. We cannot. Aya is by all accounts, a sovereign planet of the Angara. We have no right to settle there," I stated firmly. But I also let out a sigh as I continued a bit more gently.

"Maybe, MAYBE, someday, a long time from now, the Angara may invite people to live there. Maybe. But NO ONE, should ask if they can. And by the time it happens, if it ever does, will be when my head is full of grey hairs, if I'm even still alive."

"A tougher pill to swallow, but I suppose it is one that needs to be. Let's just hope we don't need to. Thanks, Sc-" Keri began, but her omni-tool pinged with a call, and she grimaced when she saw it. "Ugh, a call from the director's office. Talk to you later, Scott," she grumbled, though not directed at me. My plan was to head over to the Vortex for a practice poker game that most of the crew and I would be taking part in, all efforts to de-throne King Brodie, but a man nervously approached me. Light brown skin, dark brown, messy hair.

"Uh, hi, Pathfinder," the man chuckled awkwardly. "Gil Brodie is your engineer, right?"

"Yes, you a friend of his?" I questioned.

"Bailey. Used to work with him in the hangars here. You wouldn't happen to know if he's… available, would you?" he asked awkwardly again.

"Well he generally spends his time here upgrading our land vehicle with new supplies, or thrashing us in games of poker, but you could just send him a message to meet up youre-se-oh. Wait," I began, cutting myself off. Bailey turned beet red and moved his head down. I chuckled lightly to myself also as an attempt to not make this situation worse.

"Sorry, Bailey, I don't know. I haven't asked. I don't even know which way the man swings. If you
know, take a bit of initiative. If you're good friends, the worst that can happen is that he politely declines, and you stay friends. Believe me, it may hurt at first, but in the long run it hurts a lot less than not saying anything at all. Trust me on that one," I explained.

"Yeah," he muttered, awkwardly, turning away. "Thanks," I shrugged to myself and made my way towards the Vortex, the intent to grab a free drink from Dutch and Anan before sitting down for a game. I entered, and there was a Turian man on stage, awkwardly fiddling with the microphone. My crew raised their glasses in a mock cheer seeing me enter and it gained the attention of most the rest of the crowd. And unfortunately for him the Turian appeared even more nervous. Sorry bud.

"Uh, hi, my uh, my names Varro, and I have this poem…” he stumbled through his words. Shit, I feel bad with how badly I know I'm going to cringe during this. As I was near the bar, I heard Dutch groan in a whisper.

"Ugh, poetry." Anan promptly elbowed him in the ribs, earning a slight cry of pain as he rubbed his side. Glancing at my crew, I could tell they didn't see this going well either.

"I, um, I'll just," Varro mumbled, clearing his throat. He held a piece of paper out in front of him. Below his head, but where he could see it. "Her face all silver splendor, traced with green and cold," he continued to mutter. Thing was, I think his voice was steadying a bit, his voice barely beginning to become clear. "Is precious, more than ever, now the hour is growing old." He seemed more in pace with his poem now, as if he was pretending he was alone in a room reading his poem aloud. "She'll watch my final parting, sketched bright upon the sky." Ah shit, this is about to get depressing, isn't it? "While I stay young and sleeping, she will age, forget, and die. Her sweet and shining memory, is safe within my mind, but," Varro choked on his words, almost as if coming to tears. "Why couldn't I say, 'I love you,' to the girl I left behind?" Everyone stared at the stage, eyes wide or mouths agape, no one expected that. And I swear Varro was about to cry on that stage. Jesus, that hits home. With nothing else to try and do, and the shock wearing off, I clapped. Slowly, at first, but gaining in pace as others in the bar snapped out of it. Soon enough, just about everyone in the vortex was clapping for him, and Varro thanked us. Returning to a table, alone, and poured himself a drink. A big one too.

"Remind me, I owe Varro an apology," Dutch whispered to Anan. I turned back to the bar to get myself a drink, gaining Dutch's attention. "You again. Oh, I mean, hello! Welcome to my lab. Bar. Whatever," he mumbled. I see he's trying to be more welcoming. I'm sure that has nothing to do with the presence and help of a certain Asari behind the bar.

"Aw, look at him, getting all used to things," Anan teased.

"Things are fine. It's people I don't like. They talk back," he remarked.

"Maybe they just can't resist your charm," I joked. Anan let out a chuckle at that as Dutch actually seemed to be considering it.

"I know I can't," Anan smiled at him.

"I hadn't thought of that… Wait, you're messing with me, aren't you?" he questioned.

"Who? Me? I would never," I answered, sarcasm dripping from my voice. Dutch raised an eyebrow as he began to pour a drink.

"Right, here, have a drink. Rotten Scoundrel," Dutch answered.
"Ooooh, hah," I laughed. "You're learning!"

"What? Oh, the drink, not you," he mumbled back. With the drink poured, I took a sip. Tasted like it had some rum in it. Had that kind of Caribbean taste. Not bad. I thanked them and sat with the crew.

"Was not expecting that poem," Vetra muttered as I sat.

"Yeah, it was something else. So, any special rules for this game?" I asked.

"Nope. Not even playing with creds on the line. Pure practice game," Peebee answered.

"And together, we will de-throne the king," I chuckled. "So, what has the Pathfinder crew been up to today?" I asked.

"I've been coordinating with Kandros a bit more. Apparently, some Angara are volunteering for our APEX forces. No doubt it's Evfra's way of keeping an eye on our troops, learning our tactics, but they're also willing to show our guys a few tricks. And it's not like we have things to hide from the Angara, so we should be seeing them here soon enough," Cora informed.

"Intriguing. While they may follow Kandros' orders, I do know that they will obey Evfra's first and foremost," Jaal remarked.

"I arranged for your armor's repairs, got Gil more supplies for messing with the Nomad, talked a bit with Sid. Recent events kinda make you value what you already valued more than anything else, more than you thought you ever could for anything," Vetra muttered.

"Your younger sister, correct?" Jaal questioned.

"Yeah, been taking care of her ever since our dad vanished," she murmured. Sensing the sadness, Jaal tried to shift the focus a bit.

"I myself have many siblings. Most of them older. One of my sisters is off leading a black ops squad… somewhere," he remarked.

"A lot to live up to?" Vetra responded.

"Putting it lightly," Jaal chuckled.

"Then you should meet her. You'd have a lot to talk about," Vetra smirked.

"By the time my mom had me, I had a sister who was already in her Matron years, wasn't even a mother herself yet. The two of them always bickered over how to raise me best. Hated it None of them ever asked me what I wanted," Peebee grumbled.

"Heard that one from her. I think the only moving plan she was ever in full support of was coming here. She bought the pitch from Kesh just as much as I did," Vetra remarked.

"You don't think she lied to you, do you?" Drack questioned, a bit confused.

"Course not, the pitch was made by someone else. Sold to Kesh, and she sold it to me. Bamboozled, as Sid would say," Vetra mused. I almost spat my drink out at that.

"The hell?" Drack asked. I was about to start pounding my fist on the table as I tried to not simply die at the use of that word. It was even starting to hurt my rib.
"Yeah, Sid's into a bunch of weird old human shit," Vetra chuckled to herself.

"Sounds like a good name for a drink. The Bamboozler," Drack joked. They weren't making this any easier.

"I'd try it," Vetra smirked. She turned to face me as I managed to swallow my drink and just laughed. "The hell has you laughing?" I managed to calm myself, a tear almost forming in my eye from the laughter.

"Vetra, your sister is just so incredibly pure. I cannot believe she even knows that word and it's amazing she even uses it. It's just... amazing," I laughed. Vetra just looked at the others and shrugged, turning back to Drack.

"What about you, old man? What have you been up to?" she asked.

"Talked with Kesh a bit, let her know that I'd be at her place preparing the Varren Roast, and the dextro treat. It'll start cooking after the game," Drack answered.

"Come on? Are we going to play or what?" Peebee pushed. Vetra dealt the cards.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

For the most part, the game was on an even footing. I think I managed to pick up a few of the others tells, though I wouldn't be surprised if I had one or two someone else picked up on. Drack had a horrible poker face, his brows would rise or fall with the quality of his hand, and even show a slight grimace or smile. Peebee would occasionally stick her tongue out a bit, Cora's eyes would dart over her cards or she'd rub her chin. And Vetra's mandibles would sometimes flare, ever so slightly. Jaal was still learning how to play, so sometimes couldn't even tell if his hand was good or not. Liam would get a bit too balsy with his cards, especially after a streak of bad hands. Have a few folds, eyes barely light up, immediately bet a relatively significant amount. Thing was, he'd do it so long as his cards weren't total shit. A bit of haste on his part, and we could push him a bit more. But still, in the end, it was a practice match.

"How long till everything's done cooking, Drack?" I asked as he cleaned up our game.

"About an hour, give or take. Everyone will want to start making their way to Kesh's soon enough. It's actually just on the level above us, first door on the left for the small residential area to the upper left," Drack explained.

"I'll go fetch Sid, she should be heading back to our apartment by now," Vetra remarked.

"Mind if I go with ya? Got nothing better to do," I asked.

"Sure, but you'll just get hounded by more questions from her, she's always asking for details about what we've been up to," Vetra warned.

"Just like Sara when I visit her, it'll be fine," I reassured. Vetra shrugged and led me on the way towards the trams. A slightly evil thought came to mind as I thought of a way to mess with my Turian friend.

"So, just how much ammo do you have for that Cyclone of yours?" I asked.

"I always bring more than enough onto the field, even spare ammo blocks. Speaking of which I'll need to make sure we get our delivery of those later. Your sweeper doesn't need them but the rest
of our weapons still do," she explained. The Milky Way weapons all had a block of metal inside them, a sliver would be sheared off, and used as ammunition for the mass accelerator within our weapons, propelling it along like a railgun with extreme, lethal force. The thermal clips just help keep the weapons cool, but it was better when you didn't need to swap clips.

"Do your safety overrides ever screw with that?" I continued.

"Depends. You know how I bypassed some of the safeties I had set up on Voeld? But never got the chance to fire? If I do that it sometimes melts the ammo block, and that just screws with the entire weapon. Let alone what it does to my damn plates. Nothing irreversible but they definitely need maintenance afterwards" Vetra answered.

"So, whatever happens if you run out of ammo?" I questioned. Now we were getting to where I wanted to be.

"With all that I bring I've never gotten to that point. If it were to ever happen, just keep my head down and leave it to the biotics. Or Krogan," Vetra mused. We entered the tram and it sped along to her apartment block. Fortunately for her sake, we were alone.

"What? No backup weapons? Like a baton?" I grinned evilly, staring right up at her. Vetra Nyx may be a Turian that's taller than me, has skin literally thicker than mine, has talons that could gore me without issue, and isn't suffering from a broken rib, but she does not scare me. Why? She's not like that. Not to friends, that is. Which damn am I lucky I am. My smile grew larger as she stared at me in shock.

"What-What do you mean? Scott?" she muttered, almost coughing.

"Oh, I think you know. You are a Turian after all. Your people always keep a backup weapon in… nature's pocket," I teased. Vetra groaned and placed her head in her hands.

"Of all the things she could have told you…"

"Oh that's not all she told me about that. She also told me about your dancing skills," I chuckled. She groaned again, and a bit louder too.

"Please, I don't strip dance. It was awkward and I felt... Disgusted. Completely uncomfortable with what I was doing, but the others were counting on me so we could all make away with a big payday. I have been known to tango though, and that I can actually do well," she remarked.

"And how do you think I feel looking back on the consort hm?" I retorted playfully. "Hey, remember, it's war," I chuckled. She glanced at me again, no doubt planning on gaining more intel from my sister in turn. "And a Turian tango? That'd be an interesting sight. Where, and why, did you learn that?" I prodded.

"For another heist, believe it or not. Bekenstein, in the Serpent Nebula near the Citadel. This big-time scumbag, Donovan Hock, weapons drugs, slaves even, all that dirty shit, was throwing one of his annual parties where the scum of the galaxy are invited. There was this human in the group, Corinne Sparr, who knew how to tango. Only one in our group who could dance. And again, I'd be acting as a distraction. Find someone, put on a dance with them, steal everyone's attention as they tried to break into his vault. Filled with valuable loot," she explained.

"And why were you chosen for distraction?" I asked. Vetra chuckled as she began:

"I never found out for certain, but I'm certain it's for this Turian guy I was having a fling with in the group. Caelus Posmus, he wanted more than a fling and probably begged Corinne to teach me for
it. Sure, I can move well on the battlefield but that alone isn't normally enough. Thing was, the amount of commitment he wanted was more than I was willing to give. Sid, he seemed to feel as if she was getting in his way. No way in hell was I going to put her in that kind of position. Anyways, given my height, and how odds are that anyone I'd be dancing with would be smaller, I learned the moves that were more of the masculine style. While I was doing the distraction with this Asari, it was working. And just as I bent down, dropping her close to the floor with her in my arms, that one very dramatic bit, there was this huge explosion just off the balcony. Some people thought it was fireworks. My team used too many explosives and tried to exfil closer to the party than intended. We got out with a few choice pieces, but we also lost a few people, and Hock was going to be hunting us down," Vetra explained.

"Was Caelus one of them?"

"Part of me wishes. No, he got away and the fling went on a bit longer. Got a bit pushy trying for that commitment, and made the mistake of saying that Sid can fend for herself. I decked him," she chuckled.

"Think I would have payed to see that," I remarked. "Do you have a story for just about everything?" I asked with a laugh.

"Shit, sometimes it seems like it. And I know we'll all have quite a few more stories to tell when this is all over," Vetra mused.

"Let's just hope they're good ones," I stated. The tram stopped and we got off, Vetra leading me towards the apartment she and Sid lived in. There was a small entryway, nothing more than a hallway with around a bend being the main living room. A couch, vidscreen, kitchen, and dining room packed into a decently sized room. The kind that would remind you of a college dorm. Sid was on the couch with the vidscreen on, a white shirt, short sleeved and jeans that followed her leg's backwards curvature, though with a "pocket," so to speak, for the leg spikes all Turians had. She had heard us enter, likely figuring it was just Vetra.

"Hey sis, whe-, oh! Hi Scott!" she exclaimed, not expecting to see me too. Her mandibles flared a bit in a Turian grin.

"Hey Sid, whatcha watching?" I asked curiously.

"Oh just some old shows I saved. Something to do, you know," she answered.

"Drack's getting the food in the oven. May as well go hang out with the crew. A few of them I think you'll like talking to," Vetra remarked. "Anything you need to do before you're ready?"

"Casual fine?" Sid asked.

"Sure, I'll be going in what I have on now. Drack will probably just take a few pieces of armor off so he doesn't break any of Kesh's chairs," Vetra answered. Vetra was dressed similarly to Sid, same kind of shirt, but black, and she had a kind of shorts on. Ended below the knees so that it would cover the leg spike, but still not have the length of full jeans. Or whatever Turians call them. Oddly enough, her outfit still included the Tux-like flaps on the waist, going over the ass, just like on her armor. Wonder why she likes that.

"Are all the apartments like this?" I questioned.

"Pretty much. Layout varies but hardly enough to make a real difference, same kind of accommodations though. Unless you're leadership," Vetra explained.
"Funny, I don't think I have a place on the Nexus," I remarked.

"But you do have your own personal quarters on the Tempest. Very nice personal quarters, I might add," Vetra chuckled.

"Sure, but there's only one bathroom on board. Come on, have you ever been stuck outside waiting, only to see a Krogan come out after half an hour? I thought it was bad enough just holding it in that long, but I thought I was going to die on the fucking shitter from the smell!" I retorted. Both Turians in the room were left laughing at that.

"Point taken," Vetra said, as her chuckling ended.

"And I'm expecting to be poked and prodded during the night by our doctor. Or at the very least before and after I get some sleep. Don't get me wrong, I like Lexi, and she's great at what she does, but I think she has a thing for needles," I joked.

"Ugh, hate needles," Sid shuddered.

"Fair enough. Tell you what, you can crash here tonight if you want, keep the doc off your back. Sid can take the couch one night," Vetra remarked.

"I may just take you up on that offer, but Sid can keep her bed. I get to sleep in a kingly bed all the time, I can take the couch just once," I insisted.

"You sure? I wouldn't mind?" Sid asked.

"I'm sure. Though I'll just hope I don't fall off in the middle of the night," I chuckled.

"It's a pull-out bed, you'd have to be rolling around a lot for that," Vetra reassured. We left the apartment and made our way back to the tram, keying it for the docking bay since Kesh lived near there. We were talking all the while, some jokes, some stories. Vetra telling Sid that she knew what her little sister had told me about. And good on her, all Sid did was teasingly stick out her tongue.

We arrived at Kesh's place, pleasant smells from the cooking greeting us. It wasn't done yet, sure, but it was a good smell nonetheless. Real food.

"Mmmm, Spirits, my mouth is watering just from the smell," Sid moaned, licking her "lips" slightly.

"Just what does the old man have for us," Vetra muttered. We entered and most of the crew was already inside, talking amongst themselves. Kesh, unsurprisingly, as this was her home after all, was joining us. The whole living room space was clearly larger, granted not by too much, and the kitchen had more appliances, all of a higher quality. Sid ran out and hugged the old bag of Krogan bones.

"Uncle Drack! It's good to see you!" Sid exclaimed.

"You too kid, been a while," Drack chuckled, even returning the hug.

"You must be Sid, I am Jaal Ama Darav," the Angara introduced to her, a smile on his face.

"I saw the news vid when you first came here, how do you like it?" she questioned cheerily.

"It's been very interesting. And enlightening. You know, I have many older siblings myself," Jaal began. That easily took Sid's attention and the two launched into a friendly conversation, leaving Vetra and I both chuckling.
"He's going to tell her all kinds of ways she can mess with me, isn't he," Vetra mused.

"Probably," I chuckled. "But, there's also a good chance he may impart some wisdom that helps you with her too."

"One can hope," Vetra muttered with a smile. The crew all talked, passing the time and enjoying themselves as we waited for the food to cook. Drack had even picked up some Dextro beers for Vetra, and some Dextro versions of soda for Sid, which she was very thankful for, that was clear. Eventually, Drack stood and got the Varren roast out of the oven, satisfied that it had been cooked properly. IT smelled damn good, a large hunk of meat on a platter. He set it on the counter and Kesh helped cut some of it into pieces so we weren't tearing shreds off the whole roast. While she was doing that, Drack reached out into the other oven and pulled out the meal for the Turians. The two of them eagerly sniffed the air and stared at their meal, unsure exactly of what it could be.

"For the lady Nyx's, I present choice cuts of Shatha," Drack stated, a bit of dramatic flair.

"You're shitting us," Vetra exclaimed, not believing it, as she stared back at the food as it was placed in front of her and Sid. Drack gestured for him to try it as the rest of us all got a plate of the Varren. I cut off a piece of mine and tasted it. I let out a moan of pleasure as the meat practically melted in my mouth. It reminded me of eating a steak, but was also clearly different. But in a very good way. I could feel my eyes rolling into the back of my head, though no one else could tell as mine were closed. Even Jaal seemed pleased with the meal. And the Turians were without a doubt enjoying their meal. They cut off a larger piece, and would use their predatory teeth to tear off a shred from their forks, let it linger a bit, enjoying the taste, swallow, and go for more. Drack waited a moment with a smile on his face, watching as everyone enjoyed his little treat, before digging in himself.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I think I might be pregnant. It's a food baby. And I think I'm about to slip into a food coma. Won't be as severe as my sister's, but it would still be one. I leaned back in my chair, groaning a bit and resting my hands on my stomach. The roast had been devoured, nothing was left but the bones the meat came on, Drack gnawing on one of them, picking off any bits of flesh still on it. The rest of the crew were in a similar state to me, and Kesh had lent a large bowl for Vetra and Sid to take their leftovers back home. Not that there was too much, mind you.


"I have had many fantastic meals in my life. But that? Was definitely the most satisfying," I remarked.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to eat the ship's rations ever again," Liam groaned.

"I want to see what you can do with Adhi meat," Jaal stated.

"Get me a fresh, Adhi carcass, intact, and I'll spend a day experimenting with it, I'll find something good with it," Drack informed confidently.

"Challenge fucking accepted," I chuckled.

"Thanks Drack, a lot. Been too long since we've had real food," Vetra remarked. "Come on Sid, let's get home before we pass out at the table." Sid nodded, giving her thanks and I remembered the offer. Really tempting, I'll be honest. If nothing else, it delays the inevitable. I stood, and gave
my thanks as well and followed them out the door, saying that I'd be on my way too, and joined the sisters on the tram.

"Think I'll take you up on the offer," I stated, just in case. Vetra nodded with a slight chuckle and we sat in silence, just trying not to fall asleep, and we reached their apartment without hassle.

"If you need anything, my room is at the end of the hall. Bathroom's on the left," Vetra yawned. "Need help with the couch?"

"No, thanks. I've done this plenty of times before, they all work the same way," I remarked.

"Suit yourself. Spare blankets and pillows in the hallway closet," Vetra informed.

"Night Scott. Night sis," Sid stated drowsily, heading off to her room.

"Night Sid," Vetra replied, stopping her and tapping her forehead to hers, before wishing me the same, and entering her own bedroom. I got to work unfolding the sofa bed, and pulled a blanket and a pair of pillows from the closet, putting them in place, before heading to the bathroom for a quick leak. Ready to at least lie down, I took off my shirt and removed the Predator pistol from the holster in my pocket, placing it on the counter, all safeties on, and folded. As I laid down I heard a groan from Vetra's room as she stormed out, anger across her features, grumbling to herself.

"Need help with something?" I questioned. Vetra turned to look at me, as I sat straight with my back against the back of the sofa-bed, bandages still across my chest.

"Fucking Spender. He's blocking contacts and shipments of mine from getting the materials and supplies we need. Most of them are for the damn Tempest!" Vetra growled.

"Want me to… persuade him to stop?" I suggested. She sighed, calming herself a bit.

"No, these are my people, and it's not the first time. Materials for Nomad upgrades, ammo blocks, thermal clips, even the repairs for your damn armor? He's saying it's all getting too costly, even though I know for a fact that Kesh has fucking cleared them all," Vetra groaned. "He's asking stupid questions like 'why do you need all these metal blocks? Just use the clips, or shoot less, improve your accuracy,'" she mocked. "He even has the nerve to say you should have been fighting better to avoid the armor damage!"

"Remind me why you don't want me there?" I muttered.

"These are still my own supply chains. If you show up because he had some insults, he'll see a way to screw with you. But if he's screwing with my supplies, if this time I confront him personally, I may be able to get him to back off for good. Besides, you're wounded, you need the rest," she ended with a tease.

"Alright, if you insist," I shrugged, relaxing more into the bed. She nodded her thanks and left. God I'd hate to be Spender right now. I pulled up my omni-tool to read some reports Kandros had sent me, as well as some of the news reports from HNS, see if they really were being fair and objective. Tonight would be a relaxing night as I readied myself for sleep.

Or so I thought.
Why does the station seem so empty? I walked through the corridors of the storage area, with no one in sight. It had been eerily quiet today. Only a few people about. I had come here from Nexus ops because a few more technical supplies were requested, and I offered to help. I always liked helping. I was heading back with the tech parts in hand as an explosion shook the ground and I could hear yelling, even some gunfire. I dropped the parts and immediately ran into a nearby supply closet, and hid behind a stack of crates. I was unarmed. All I could do is wait here until it seemed safe. The yelling and the gunfire got louder and louder, and soon I could hear people running on the other side of the wall, just where I was walking. I knew people were getting uneasy on the Nexus, with the Scourge, the Kett, no golden worlds, and all the arks are missing, but I never thought it could possibly get this bad.

More footsteps outside the walls. More constant, low voices. I think they said they were securing the area. And that they want Tann's head on a pike. It's a mutiny, I can't leave. I can't let them find me. She always told me to stay away from the people getting upset, that she didn't trust them. That they'd go too far. I didn't want to prove her right. I stayed in the corner, behind the crates, and my back against the wall, head down, and trying to control my breathing. I almost gasped aloud as I heard someone trying to open the security closet, pounding on it in frustration as it didn't immediately open. My eyes were wide open in fear as I hoped that they'd give up and walk away. My hopes were crushed as the door opened.

"Fucking finally," an Asari growled. Storming in and closing the door behind her. I covered my mouth with both hands and tried to hold my breath. I heard a zipper, followed by the sound of liquid hitting the floor. Ok, maybe she doesn't know I'm here. With the extra noise, I took another breath, as quietly as I could, my lungs eager for more oxygen as they started to burn. There was another sound of a zipper as she walked back towards the door, and as it opened, I made a mistake.

I exhaled. I froze as the Asari seemed to freeze in her tracks, hearing her footsteps slowly get closer and closer as the door closed. Maybe if I kept staying quiet... Her blue head appeared at the other end of the line of crates I was hiding behind, her eyes burrowing straight into mine, and the
pace of my breathing increased rapidly. She grinned.

I had never seen a grin so... vile, in my life.

"Well well well, look what we have here," she purred to herself. "Aw, look at you, such a defenseless little Turian, scared for her life. Why are you afraid of little ol' me?" she questioned rhetorically. I didn't respond, just sat there, frozen in fear. "ANSWER ME YOU LITTLE BITCH!" she yelled. I let out a little yelp in fear and began shaking.

"Hmph, normally, it's the hunt that excites me the most, that pleases me the most. Oh, but this? This... fear, this might be just as satisfying," the woman cooed. She slowly walked closer, and I struggled to my feet, removing my hands from my mouth, ready to try and fight back.

"St-Stay back, I don't want to hurt you," I muttered, making a show of my talons. She laughed, continuing to stride closer.

"Please, you don't scare me one bit. Didn't you forget something about Asari?" she asked. With a flick of her hands I felt myself shoved against the wall, unable to move. My breathing increased again in terror. I don't want to die. Spirits, I don't want to die. "Do you know what's going to happen to you? Little one? It's been so long since I've... fed. I was being hunted down by so many of those Goddess damned Justicars, and this Initiative gave me the perfect way to escape them forever, and to feed until the day I die," she purred, getting closer and closer. "I am going to do what I have longed for, for such a long time. I'm going to do what I want to you," she continued, cupping my chin and playing with my mandibles with her... disgusting blue hands. "And then, I will merge our minds, you will feel a searing pain as each and every one of your nerves overloads, and feel like your brain is melting inside that cute little head of yours. You won't die, not right away. But you will be trapped inside that little body of yours, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to respond to anything. Maybe your loved ones will find you, and spend days crying over your body as you wither and die right in front of them," the monster explained.

"No, please no, get away from me, SPIRITS, GET AWAY FROM ME!" I cried, tears beginning to stream down my face.

"Tsk tsk tsk, this simply will not do, little one," it responded, licking its lips as I felt a... presence in my mind. I screamed louder, and louder, and its hands moved lower and lower grabbing onto my waist. "No one who can hear you will care, but still, I'd rather not have them hear you. I don't want anyone finding out what I am. Not yet," she purred. Even as I tried to force my arms to struggle, my legs to kick, I felt my muscles relax. I screamed more, calling for help, but could feel my jaw weakening, and energy leaving my body.

And it's hands snaked lower.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"NO, NO GET OFF ME! SOMEONE HELP! PLEASE!" Sid screamed at the top of her lungs from her room. I shot out of bed and grabbed the Predator off the counter unfolding it as I ran into her room.

"WHO THE FUCK'S THERE AND WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING TO HER!" I cried out, absolute fury across all my features. Confusion laced my face as I found no one in the room except Sid writhing in her bed. She continued to repeat her cry and I grabbed her by the shoulder's shaking her awake, and hoping that her talons wouldn't strike me. She clearly struggled harder as I grabbed her but I needed to get her awake. "SID! WAKE UP! IT'S A DREAM! WAKE UP!" I
"NO NO NO! GET OFF ME GET OFF-AAAAAAAAAHHHHH" she screamed shooting upwards, eyes wide open, mandibles twitching, almost hyperventilating as she woke. What the fuck is going on? "Scott," she gasped, and wrapped her arms around me, burying her head into my chest, sobbing. It hurt my rib a bit, but like fuck was I pushing her away with whatever just happened. I simply returned the hug, holding her tight.

"Shhh, it's ok Sid, it's ok. No one's going to hurt you," I whispered soothingly, repeating it as she let everything out. Minutes passed, and eventually the crying stopped, and she removed herself from the hug. Her eyes bore back into mine, a mix of shame and hurt revealing themselves from them.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Sid, what was that all about? That wasn't a normal nightmare, believe me I know," I whispered back.

"I… It…” she stuttered. "I don't want to talk about it…” she muttered. I let out a sigh.

"Sid, whatever happened, it's something that needs to be talked about. I won't make you tell me everything right now, but when Vetra gets back…” I stated. Sid sighed.

"Ok." She had an air of finality about it.


"Stay," she pleaded. "I can't be alone."

"Of course, mind if I grab a chair? And my shirt?" I requested. Sid nodded that I could and I left the door open as I threw my shirt back on and dragged a chair into Sid's room, placing it next to her bed. As I sat, she lay herself back down and reached for one of my hands. I let her have it and she lay it next to her on the bed, gripping it tightly. I squeezed back firmly assuring her I was here and stayed awake as she hopefully drifted back to sleep. Jesus wept, the fuck happened? My presence seemed to help, as eventually, I heard light snores. Occasionally, her hand would squeeze mine, and I'd simply squeeze back, and she seemed to relax. Hopeful that for now, she would be fine, my eyes began to droop, and sleep took me once more.

Vetra Nyx

I had finally managed to deal with Spender's bullshit confident that he'd stay out of my shit now, and was finally back at my apartment, ready for some shut-eye. Scott would likely be asleep on the couch by now, but I know he hasn't exactly been sleeping well himself, and he ain't the only one. Sid would have to be asleep as she had work in the morning, and we'd probably be taking the Tempest out sometime tomorrow. I entered our apartment with a sigh of relief and turned the corner, surprised to see that Scott wasn't on the couch, and the covers had been thrown off in a rush. What alarmed me the most however, was the fact that his gun was missing from the counter. I ran into Sid's room, hoping she was alright, and was… very confused at the sight I saw. Sid, asleep on her bed, and Scott in a chair pulled up next to it, asleep, Sid grabbing onto his hand. I didn't know what to make of it. I trusted Scott, else I wouldn't have let him stay here in the first place, but this looks, well it looks odd. But again, if this really was the kind of thing that I'd rip his throat out for, wouldn't he be IN the bed too? I grabbed him by the shoulder and lightly shook him, hoping not to wake up Sid. Scott let out a snort kind of snore as he awoke, eyes locking onto mine.
"Your back! Good, we need to talk, right now," he whispered, standing and dragging me into the living room.

"I'll say, the hell is going on?" I questioned. He pulled out another seat and sat, gesturing for me to do the same. He looked concerned.

"I was reading a few reports on the couch when Sid just shrieked like a goddamn Banshee. Calling for help, crying out no, yelling for someone to get off her. I rushed into her room with my gun out, but she was the only one in there. Rolling all over the bed in her sleep, saying the same exact thing. I shook her awake and she just looked… petrified. She realized who was in the room, and just latched onto me, crying her eyes out. I just… sat there, trying to comfort her. Eventually she calmed down, and while she didn't tell me anything, we agreed that she'd talk when you were here. I asked if there was anything to do, and she just asked that I stay there. That I didn't leave her alone. So I pulled up a chair, and she held my hand. Guess I nodded off too," Scott explained fully. I listened to each word carefully, with my absolute attention. With the screaming I was confused. It had never happened while I was around. But still, I felt scared. This is my sister after all. "Vetra, I think something happened. I don't know what, and I don't know when, but whatever it was, it was bad," he stated calmly, apologetically.

"Spirits… I had no idea," I muttered.

"Should we… wake her?" Scott suggested.

"No, we'll let her wake up on her own. She needs the rest. Whatever this was, she deserves it," I murmured. "First exaltation, and now this? I was already paranoid about the Kett getting their hands on her, but now? I swear, anyone ever even tries to hurt my little sister," I began, resting my arms on the table and resting my forehead in my hands. "Imagine if it was Sarah," I remarked.

"I don't know what I'd do. We're all that's left of our family," Scott muttered, looking down at the table himself.

"And you already know she's all I have left. She was so little when our father left, and I was… well, just about her age now," I murmured.

"Yeah. Not a stranger to that feeling. Mom was a few months before we left," Scott reminded.

"Maybe our dad did die. Maybe he didn't. But he just never came home. I was yelling at him just the previous night. Angry that we'd have been taken from Palaven, that we were living on some backwater. Never got to apologize for how shortsighted and unfair I was," I mentioned. "I do know he was involved in bad things. Bad people. Guess it caught up to him. Guess he had nowhere to run. Sid and I got a whole new galaxy."

"That why you bought the pitch?" Scott questioned.

"When you're young and stupid, you make bad decisions. You piss off the wrong people. And that never goes away. It follows you home. Threatens the ones you care about," I could feel tears forming in my eyes, and I worked to fight them back. "I don't want to do what my father did. Not to Sid. I can't… not come home one day," I finished, a few tears breaking through, and my voice cracked even. "Especially with…whatever this is," Scott stood and walked over, wrapping an arm across my shoulder.

"Come on, you're Vetra Nyx. You're strong. Smart. It'll take a lot to keep you from coming home," he tried to reassure.
"Maybe it's just dumb fucking luck. Luck runs out on you," I retorted.

"I won't," he stated softly, firmly. Still rubbing my shoulder. I turned back to look at him, a comforting grin on his face, and I grinned too. Mandibles flaring out fully as I moved my head back down to the table. Yeah that was more than a grin, that was a blush.

"Thank you, Scott."

---

**Sidera Nyx**

I woke up in a way that I haven't for a long time, rested. I was confused to see a chair in my room, but then I remembered earlier in the night. There's no hiding it anymore. Most nights I wouldn't even go to sleep, just go until I couldn't anymore, pass out in my bed, and I'd be so drained of energy I couldn't even dream. Sometimes I'd try and sleep during the nights where Vetra is out doing work. At least then she wouldn't hear me. She already has so much on her plate, I don't want to be adding to it. Not to mention how just thinking about it nearly sends me into a panic. I got out of my bed and took a deep breath, stepping out of my room. The Nexus had some of its artificial sunlight creeping in now, both Scott and Vetra were awake, sitting at the dining room table.

"Morning Sid. Go ahead, get something to eat," Vetra suggested. I looked back at them both a bit nervously, Scott gestured for me to go ahead and I got a bowl. The Blast-oh's were already out, and Vetra got a spoon for me. I filled the bowl and began eating. They kept quiet, glancing at me every now and then, wondering why they hadn't said anything yet. I ate, and when the bowl was empty, Vetra took it and placed it in the dishwasher, and sat back down.

"Tell us everything," she requested. I let out a deep breath, I focused on the one sliver of good that I could focus on from everything that happened. If I could at least focus on that, I might be able to.

*Her hands snaked lower, below my waist, about to tug at my pants and I let out one last cry for help. A large lumbering form barged through the door. With my focus, and its focus being drawn away, I could hear shouting again, gunfire. It was a Krogan. And he was angry. Oh no, this is about to get a lot worse, isn't it? The Krogan's eyes darted from the left of the room, to the right, eyes resting on it as it held me in the air with its biotics, and where it was touching me. Not to mention my own look of horror. His features shifted into a snarl as he stormed towards the monster.*

"Shit," it murmured, finally releasing its grip on me.

"WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING TO HER?!" he exclaimed, utter fury. Is he here to help me? He charged the monster as the biotics faded from me, and I fell to the ground, once more curling myself into a ball, as I still had nowhere to run. It tried to summon it's biotics to fight, but was too slow. The Krogan slammed it into the wall, his large hand gripped tight around its throat. He looked at me once more as I tried to simply morph through the wall and escape, sympathy and compassion in his eyes. He turned back to face the monster, another grimace. "And many think my people are monsters," he growled. He slammed it to the floor, face first and cried out into its ear.

"So what's it like fighting someone who isn't completely fucking defenseless? You feel those tentacles on your head? I am going to take each and every one," he began, using his foot to pin it to the ground, one hand keeping its head on the ground, and another grabbing a single tentacle on its head. "AND FUCKING TEAR THEM OFF FOR WHAT YOU TRIED TO DO TO HER!" he exclaimed, shooting the arm holding one of the tentacles up into the air, as it screamed out in pain, just as loudly as I screamed for help. In the Krogan's hand was a piece of blue flesh, with blue
blood dripping onto the floor, and a bit of bone showing in its scalp. It was disgusting, and I didn't want to watch, but I couldn't tear my eyes away. I felt a sick kind of pleasure as I watched, knowing that the monster who tried to... do that, to me, would die, slowly, and painfully. The Krogan continued, and I continued to watch, unblinking, almost unbreathing. Eventually, the ground was littered with blue flesh, and it's skull was almost fully visible, coated in blue blood. It was groaning, trying its hardest to breath, to stay alive, or perhaps just begging for mercy. I don't want it to have any, and that scares me. The Krogan let out a huff of air and shook his head. I'm surprised it hasn't passed out.

"You deserved every bit of this, and so much more," the Krogan growled. "This is for her, and all your other victims." The Krogan removed his boot from its back, and slammed it down into its skull, shattering it, killing it instantly. He spat on its corpse, and the fury faded from his features. He turned to look at me, and I once more balled myself up in the corner, shaking. His features softened and he slowly approached. He bent down onto a knee and offered his hand.

"It's over now, little one. She can't hurt you anymore," he reassured. My eyes darted between his hand and his head, but my arms remained wrapped around myself. "I promise, I will not hurt you. My clan are mopping up the last of the mutineers, not one of them will hurt you," he continued.

"Why are you here?" I murmured, my voice shaking still.

"I heard your cry for help. I knew that it must have been someone taken prisoner. Helping them was the right thing to do. And then I realized that the cry came from no mere prisoner, but someone faced with a fate much worse. I would be even worse than her if I did nothing," he answered softly.

"But... I'm Turian," I responded.

"And? You were not the one who pressed the button. I do not see a Turian, I see a girl who needed, who needs help. We came here for a new start. What good are old grudges?" he responded. "What's your name?" he softly requested. I stared back for another moment, my shaking lessening.

"S-Sidera Nyx," I stuttered.

"And I am Nakmor Straxx. Please, let me help you," he introduced, still holding out his hand. I stared at him a moment longer, and slowly reached my hand out to grasp his. He stood, and gently helped me do the same, guiding me out from my corner, and past it's corpse. "We should not leave yet; my clan are still fighting the rest. I will need to join them, but not now. Now you need me more than they," he calmly informed. As the shock began to wear off, I began to sob. Almost collapsing back to the floor. Straxx ensured I did not fall roughly, and sat himself down beside me, gently rubbing my upper back with a hand. Just letting me release. Eventually, I just stopped. Breathing quietly, Straxx removed his arm and looked at me questioningly. He opened his mouth to say something but his omni-tool beeped with a call.

"Straxx, where the hell are you? We're pinned down and need back up, we've almost got the bastards!" another Krogan man exclaimed over the comms.

"I'm fine. I was aiding someone in need. I'm on my way to your location," Straxx responded, ending the call.

"I'm sorry, Sidera Nyx, I must help my clan. The way towards ops should be clear, find someone you know, you trust, stay with them, and they will help you," he requested softly. I looked up at him as he stood and walked towards the door.
"Thank you," I murmured, just loudly enough for him to hear.

I let out a deep breath as I focused on the end. Straxx killed it, and I got away without it succeeding. I'm alive. Vetra and Scott glanced between each other, concerned.

"Sid?" Vetra asked softly. I looked back up at them both.

I told them everything.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I sat there, across the table from Sid, in just… shock, at everything she told us. I don't believe a single detail was left out. Not to mention I was fuming internally about the Asari. Vetra immediately stood from her seat and wrapped her arms around her sister, I can't imagine how she feels right now. Jesus Christ, of all the people that… this, could have happened to… Sid returned the hug, burying her head under Vetra's.

"Spirits, Sid, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I had no idea," Vetra cried. I could see her shaking slightly as she wept.

"It's not your fault, V," Sid muttered.

"But I wasn't there to help you! I wasn't there to support you! Spirits, if I never brought you here… Why didn't you tell me?" Vetra pleaded.

"I… I just hate thinking about it. I…" Sid stuttered, beginning to cry again herself.

"You relieve it," I muttered. Sid looked up at me from the hug, eyes full of just… sorrow. Lost innocence. And nodded. "Sid, how can we help you? I promise we'll do everything in our power and then some, just tell us what you need," I suggested. Sid stuttered some more, just… not knowing.

"I'll call Lexi, she's a therapist," Vetra murmured.

"No! Just… no," Sid exclaimed.

"Sid, you need to talk with someone, someone with experience I don't have, why not Lexi?" Vetra questioned.

"She's… Asari. I just… can't. I can't be alone with them. I… I can't be alone at all," Sid murmured.

"Then you won't. We'll find someone else. We will help you Sid, I promise," Vetra cried. Shaking my head and calming myself of some of the fury I was feeling I stood and joined the hug, letting them both know that I was there for them both. "I… I need to call Lexi. Figure out what to do. I'll just be in my room, stay with her, Scott," Vetra requested. Well, if that's not trust… I nodded acknowledgement and pulled up another chair next to Sid, keeping a hand on her back.

"Scott, whatever the decision is, Vetra needs to be out there, on the Tempest. You have no idea just how much it means to her," Sid pleaded, another tear streaming down her face.

"And you know how much you mean to her. If she wants to stay, I can't stop her. And I won't want to," I retorted. "Hell, if I wasn't the Pathfinder I'd probably be staying too."
In a rush, I keyed my Omni-tool, calling Lexi as the door to my bedroom closed behind me. I began pacing in front of the bed. "Good morning Vetra, is everything alright? You appear stressed?" Lexi questioned. I repeated the same story Sid told Scott and I. Word for word. "Goddess… I'll put together a list of others you can see right away," she stated. "You're fine not being the one?" I asked. "Of course I am. She won't open up to an Asari. Maybe in time, but it's likely she never will be able to," Lexi explained. "Wait, I need the doc to be someone I can trust. It can't come back to be used against us. Against Sid. I know there are people who still want to get to me, if they get wind of this…" I continued. They have full confidentiality agreements," Lexi retorted. "But people can still slip up, just… who?" I asked again. "Hmm… Jaal? The Angara are prone to emotion after all, and he's seen his share of hardship," she suggested. "I… I think so. But, what do I do Lexi? The Tempest needs me for supplies but I can't just leave Sid," I exclaimed. "If you stay behind, will you be able to rest well knowing that it's in someone else's hands to make sure that Sid can live happily in Andromeda?" Lexi questioned. "I trust Scott, but… no, I won't," I murmured. "If you go will you be able to rest knowing that Sid is getting help and isn't alone?" she asked. "I'm her sister, it's my job to worry," I replied. "Which wouldn't be different than normal. The choice is yours, but I will send you the name and contact info of a highly trustworthy professional," Lexi informed. "Thanks. One last question, what the fuck was with that Asari? The things she said. Feeding? Hunted by Justicars?" I threw my hands into the air. "The hell does any of that mean?" Lexi sighed on her end of the comms. "Sounds like an Ardat-Yakshi. It's from an ancient Asari dialect. Translates to Demon of the Night Winds. It's an extremely rare genetic disorder that can only occur in pure blooded Asari and is entirely undetectable in any kind of medical scan. Once one is known to be an Ardat-Yakshi, they are given a choice. Live a life of seclusion within select Monasteries on remote worlds under high security, or die. Some escape, and are hunted mercilessly by Justicars. They can indeed influence minds and just as she told Sid, when they merge minds, their victim's nervous system is overloaded, burned out. It's a horrible death. I saw a victim once, long ago. A breathing corpse, by all accounts," Lexi murmured. "You have no idea how lucky both Sid, and all of us are that the Krogan appeared. Ardat-Yakshi who kill leave behind astronomical body counts." "How the hell didn't anyone know about these monsters?" I questioned. "If people knew wouldn't
those body counts be smaller?"

"The Asari Republics like their secrets. If everyone knew the Galaxy's most sexually beloved species had such a dark side, their political prowess would go down the drain. And I'm not defending their secrecy, for the record. I agree, more lives would be saved," Lexi clarified.

"Damn it… Damn them! Maybe if they told us about this shit then one of them wouldn't have gotten their filthy hands on my sister!" I growled. "Ok, ok, thanks for the help Lexi. I'll see about giving Jaal a call in a few," I stated, ending the call and returning to the main room. Scott had sat next to Sid, rubbing her back soothingly just… staring out the window, almost broodingly, and Sid just staring down at the table, deep in thought.

"Lexi is going to send us the info on a doc she trusts the most. I'll still want to do my own check on them though. I don't even know if I can go back to the Tempest, though," I muttered aloud. It caught both of their attention. Scott's face was set, his eyes firm on mine, I could still see anger hidden in them. Sid though, just had concern.

"I completely understand. We'll miss you, but we'll figure it out" Scott muttered.

"NO! Vetra, please, I can't let… me, keep you from doing this. I know how important it was to you!" Sid exclaimed.

"But I'm your sister damn it! You're all I have left! I don't want to just… not come home one day, or I do come home one day and you've… you've…" I began to cry again, and just wrapped my arms around my sister, not even able to bear the thought.

"I know, V. I know. But if you don't go, I'll just feel worse. I've survived so far," Sid muttered.

"It's my job to worry…" I reminded. "If you're sure, if you're absolutely, one hundred percent sure, I'll call Kesh and you can stay at her place. That way you won't be alone," I stated firmly. Sid nodded acknowledgement. "Look," I sighed. "I need to talk to Scott about… what's next. Want to watch one of your shows for a bit? We'll talk to you once we're done, just going to be in the kitchen," I explained.

"Yeah, that should be fine," Sid replied softly, standing and moving to the couch. Scott also stood and I threw my head to the side a bit as a sign to follow. He did and we stood against the window's out as the TV turned on.

"So, what did Lexi say?" Scott whispered.

"Well, she firmly believes that talking with an Asari would do more harm than good. I'm cautious about someone I don't know because if the wrong person finds out, it's bad news for her and I both. She thought Jaal might be a good idea. The two were getting along last night and he knows what it's like to hurt," I explained, also in a whisper.

"Did she have any idea what the deal was with that monstrous, psychotic cuntbag who got off better than she deserved?" he growled lowly. I think he and I both would have liked nothing more than to piss all over her corpse. Let alone what we'd do if she was still alive…

"Something called an Ardat-Yakshi. Rare genetic disorder in purebloods. Overloads the whole nervous system when she merges her mind with her victims, entirely undetectable in medical scans. Apparently, her mere presence on board was putting the whole Initiative at risk," I answered.

"Jesus, a goddamn sex vampire…” Scott muttered. "Yeah, blue is definitely off my menu."
"You and me both. So, see what Sid thinks, call Jaal over?"

"Sure. I planned on seeing Sarah again today. Maybe bring both you and Sid along for that one?" Scott suggested.

"So long as she wants to," I responded, and let out another sigh, staring out the window for a moment.

"Thank you, Scott. For helping me with her. Being here for us," I mentioned, turning back to face him. He half-smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder, giving it a small pat.

"You don't need to thank me for anything, Vetra. You'd do the same for me," Scott retorted. Scott and I both joined Sid on the couch and she paused it.

"So, Sid, remember Jaal from last night? Lexi thought it might be a good idea if you talked a bit with him. Would you like to?" I asked gently.

"Why him? Would he even want to?" she questioned.

"The Angara are open with their emotions, and Jaal is a good man. He's also no stranger to… hardship. Just how much he'd understand pain is something we'll let him explain, if you want to try," Scott answered.

"And I trust him," I reassured. She glanced between us slightly nervously.

"Ok. I'll give it a shot," she murmured. I let out a breath of air in relief.

"Good. Good. I'll call him in a minute. Scott also had an idea, if you're interested. You could come with us to talk with Sarah, his sister, sometime later," I suggested.

"I thought she was in a coma?" Sid asked, appearing confused.

"SAM's able to connect into her implant. Let's us communicate," Scott answered.

"Sure, but… I don't want her knowing, sorry," Sid muttered.

"Wasn't suggesting we tell her. Just someone for you to meet and talk with," Scott reassured.

"Thanks. Well, I don't want a lot of people knowing, please," Sid pleaded softly.

"Of course, sis, it's not something I'd want to go telling everyone either. The only people who will ever know unless you decide to tell anyone else is Lexi, as she's helping us help you, Kesh, to help her keep an eye on you, but I'll make sure she doesn't talk about it, Jaal, so he can help you, Scott, and I. Drack may figure out that something happened, though," I mentioned.

"That's ok. I like Uncle Drack," Sid responded lowly.

"Ok, I'll call Jaal," I stated, and moved into my bedroom again and called Jaal over the comms. His face appeared on the display of my Omni-tool, I think he was in the cultural center.

"Good morning Vetra. How are you this fine morning?" he asked cheerfully. Upon noticing both my lack of immediate, cheerful response, and the look in my eyes, which had no visor to mask them, his face fell a bit, concerned. "What happened?"

"Something… terrible happened to Sid a few months ago. Scott and I just learned about it this morning. We wouldn't have known had he not been crashing on my couch last night," I began. His
face fell even further, genuine, absolute concern. "She was almost… almost…" I tried to continue, to answer, but the very thought just made me choke up, brought tears to my eyes. I felt… pain, trying to say the word. "She was almost raped." Jaal's eyes widened, and his mouth opened in shock.

"Stars above… What can I do? You said almost? Is that… monster, alive?" he questioned rapidly, snarling with the last question.

"A Krogan barged in, hearing her call for help, and killed the Asari bitch who tried. If she was alive we'd be hunting her down right now, and we'd make it slow," I growled. "I had to leave during the night to deal with an issue blocking my supply chain and Scott heard Sid having a night terror about it. Happened back during the Mutiny. Spirits, that was almost a year ago," I explained.

"All this time, and she never told anyone?" Jaal asked, once more surprised. I nodded confirmation. "Stars, the pain she must be hiding…"

"Lexi thought you could be someone she talks to. I already trust you, so no risk of the wrong person finding out, and Sid already likes talking to you. If you could come over to my place, we're waiting for you," I requested.

"Just tell me how to get there," Jaal stated. I sent him the navpoint and he thanked me, he was on his way immediately. Thankful, I returned to the main room, Scott talking to Sid.

"So, Uncle Drack, huh?" he asked a bit more cheerfully than anything else he's said since I woke him up last night.

"Yeah, I met him not long after Vetra had. A week or so before we went into Cryo. I had already met Kesh and got friendly with her, then got friendly with Drack too. Kesh was one of the first to wake, and she woke Drack up. Vetra was woken up earlier too, and the Scourge messed with my pod and I had to be woken up. Had more time to get to know him," Sid explained.

"Still surprising that a Krogan, let alone one who probably remembers the rebellions, or at least shortly after them, to become such good friends with Turians," Scott remarked.

"I asked him about that once, you know. He said that it was because we knew what it was like to hurt a little…" I muttered. The three of us glanced about, the same unspoken thought. "Well, Jaal's on his way. Should be here soon." The thought occurred to me that Drack might know Nakmor Straxx. He's probably off at the Krogan colony on Elaaden. New Tuchanka. I want to meet him someday, and thank him for saving my sister. We sat on the couch a small while longer, Sid watching her show, likely to help distract herself as we waited for Jaal. Soon enough, there was a knocking at the door, and the beep of an electronic doorbell, informing us that someone was requesting entry. I stood and the TV was paused once more, and I walked around the corner to the door and the entryway. As I suspected, Jaal was waiting on the other side of the door. I let him in and led him into the main room. Jaal nodded a greeting to Scott and smiled at Sid, sitting down on the couch.

"Good morning, Sid. Do you have anything you'd like to ask?" Jaal questioned. Sid awkwardly shrugged.

"I guess… how do you know what will help me?" she returned.

"Through experience. When I was young, my father went off to work one day at the mines. He did not come home. Only a handful of the workers did. The Kett came, and abducted everyone else. We never saw my father again. That is just one example. I have lost family fighting in the
Resistance. I have watched men and women I've fought alongside for years be struck down by a stray round. Up until recently I was living with the knowledge that my home world was dying. The fear of never being able to beat the Kett, and being the messenger, telling family of dear friends that someone dear to them will not be coming home. And now I know of something much worse. I know of what the Kett do to my people. They kidnap us, take away their free will, and turn them into Kett, change their genetics. It has gone and made me re-evaluate every Kett I've ever killed, and it will do the same for those I have yet to kill," Jaal explained.

"Spirits, that makes what happened to me seem like nothing," Sid muttered.

"But it wasn't. What happened to you matters, it is important. It has affected you, and those who know. It is less bloody than mine, but no less tragic," Jaal stated. "Someone tried to take away your free will, to change you, to end you. But they did not succeed. You sit here, alive, today, while they are gone forever. That alone, is something to take solace in. You are a strong young woman, calling for help, attempting to fight back," Jaal reassured.

"I… I guess…" Sid muttered.

"Tell me, why didn't you tell anyone?" Jaal questioned gently.

"I didn't want to worry Vetra. And I don't like thinking about it," she murmured. She doesn't want me to worry? She's always been too selfless, to caring, for her own good. She's a better woman than I am.

"When I was faced with the fate of my father, all those years ago, I was furious at the Kett. How could I not be? But I didn't speak to anyone about it. I simply allowed it to build. While Angara are normally open with their feelings, we all go through a point where we are not, and we learn that we should be open. I had an older brother, one who had passed this point and had a method for helping others to learn the lesson. It never made him the favorite, but I think he knew and accepted that, just wanting us to learn how to properly deal with our feelings. While in my studies, he would mention how Father must have been weak, or that the Kett will win, that I could never join the Resistance. To his credit, I spoke to him years later, and he told me that he never meant a word. But one day, I simply had had enough. I tackled him to the ground, and I just punched and punched and punched. His cheek was bruised for a month, and his nose bent, but he was alright, and I was in trouble for… a long time," Jaal chuckled.

"The point is, that I bottled my feelings up, and let them boil. Eventually, I snapped, and hurt someone. I never thought about it, I never talked about it, but I also never healed the wound. It's like being stabbed. At first, you want to keep the knife within you, prevent blood from flowing out of your body, so that you can survive. But once you are safe, and ready to heal, you remove the knife. You let the blood flow, and sew the wound shut, and you let it heal," Jaal explained. "It leaves a scar, but it no longer harms you. Leaving the knife in longer than necessary will only lead to more pain and misery inflicted upon yourself. It is time to remove the knife, Sideris Nyx. It is time to heal," he stated softly.

"How?" Sid questioned quietly.

"To start, we need to understand. How do you feel about it?" Jaal asked.


"And when the Krogan came and saved you?" he continued.

"At first, still terrified. But I watched as he killed it. I couldn't tear my eyes away and… I felt good,
watching it. How could I have felt good about watching it die slowly and painfully?" she cried out. I glanced at Scott, he was noticing how Sid was calling the Asari an 'It,' as well.

"Because you're a person, it's a natural response to an unnatural, monstrous action. You cannot blame yourself for feeling what anyone else would have felt in your position. There is nothing wrong with you," Jaal reassured. "What did you feel when the Krogan was done?"

"Nervous, he tried to calm me down. I felt some relief, but was having a hard time trusting him. Eventually, I just… broke down," Sid explained.

"And what do you do, feel, differently, now compared to before everything?" he asked.

"I… I can never be one of two people alone in a room, unless it's someone I trust, like Vetra or Scott. Especially not Asari though. How easily they can keep me from fighting back…" she murmured. Jaal nodded his understanding.

"I see. Now, I believe that the knife has been removed. It's time for the stitches," Jaal remarked.

---

**Sidera Nyx**

I entered the med-bay of the Human ark alongside my sister and Scott. I guess I could say that I was feeling… better, but, this isn't a wound that heals from just one talk. Still, it's better than not talking at all. I didn't tell any of them, but ever since that day, I've been keeping myself away from sharp objects. I think the only thing that kept me from going to that length, was that knowing that if I was… gone, that Vetra would be close behind. I shook my head clear of those thoughts as SAM established a connection with Sarah's implant. SAM confirmed the connection as Sarah jerked slightly.

"Hey sis, sleeping well?" Scott asked. Her voice appeared over SAM's speakers in reply.

"If by well, you mean nothing but, yes. I've been sleeping very well. And bored," she remarked.

"Well, I'm hoping to see you wake up soon," Scott returned.

"Not as much as I'm hoping," she chuckled. "So, meeting anyone today?"

"Thought it'd be nice to have two little sister's meet. Brought Vetra and Sid," Scott answered.

"Good to speak with you again," Vetra stated warmly.

"Hi," I greeted as well. Not as warm as my usual introductions, but it's been an off day.

"Ooh, two visitors, is it my birthday, Scott?" Sarah joked. "So, how's the little war between you two been going?"

"It's been interesting, to say the least. Sid gave me quite the story to use against Vetra," Scott remarked.

"Has she now? Does it beat the consort?" she teased. Consort? What about the consort?

"You can be the judge of that. Wanna tell the story Sid?" Scott suggested.

"Sure," I grinned, and Vetra groaned. "Long story short, Vetra got assigned as a strip dancer as a distraction during a heist with an old crew. She was horrible at it, and had a baton hidden in her ass as a backup weapon. And she had to use it," I laughed. Vetra placed her face into her hands and
Scott smirked. Sarah seemed to grin through the coma, somehow.

"Wow, and here I thought you weren't like other Turians Vetra. Never thought you'd be the one for a stick up the ass," Sarah teased.

"It was one time, ONE!" Vetra exclaimed, and we all laughed.

"So, what's next on your agenda?" Sarah questioned.

"Well, I think the Moshae still needs a bit of time, but I should be good for action again. Maybe go back to Voeld, find a vault, melt the ice-ball," Scott thought aloud.

"And what have you been up to on the Nexus?" Sarah asked.

"Drack invited over the whole Tempest crew for some Varren roast last night, and he even cooked some Shatha for Vetra and I," I exclaimed cheerfully.

"What? You had real food too? Goddamnit I really hope I wake up soon. All I get is a damn IV, and that doesn't even have a taste!" Sarah groaned.

"All the more reason to wake up from your nap!" Scott teased.

"Fuck off, Scott," Sarah laughed.

"Well if you insist, it is getting close to noon here anyway. We… should probably be heading off to Voeld," Scott muttered, glancing between Vetra and I. Sarah sighed:

"Alright. Have fun, I'm getting shivers just thinking about a planet like that."

"I've actually been there, how do you think I feel," Scott retorted. "See ya sis."

"Bye Scott," Sarah ended, as did the connection.

"Should we really go? Just yet?" Vetra questioned nervously, looking at me.

"I'll be ok, V. I promise. You're doing good work out there," I reassured. "I'm reassured. Vetra sighed.

"I don't like leaving you, but… ok. Kesh knows to be expecting company. Want me to walk you down to ops?"

"Yeah, that would be nice," I answered. Vetra flared her mandibles slightly in a grin.

"The ship will be ready to leave by the time you get there, Vetra. We'll wait for you," Scott stated.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest was departing from the Nexus, a destination already set, as I had spoken with Kallo before calling the others to the meeting room. Nothing special, nothing ground-shattering, just a heads up on our plans. With everyone except the bridge crew and Gil, even the Pyjak, Shit-head, curled up on one of the couches, I began.

"As you all know, the Moshae is recovering from her wounds from the facility on Voeld. Her doctors tell me that they are still refusing her to leave their care as her immune system recovers, so Aya must still wait. So, lacking much else to do, we will be heading back to Planet Ice Ball. The Angara can confirm that there are constructs heavily resembling Monoliths not far from the Resistance HQ, and that means a vault. Our first goal, will be activating that vault." I was cut off.

"Hold on there, Scott. You're not ready for a run like that. I'm willing to clear you for combat, but not a full-on sprint in full armor," Lexi stated. A few of my crew were left chuckling. I sighed:

"So, if I do anything on Voeld it's going to be while the planet is still colder than your shoulder would be if I did go for the Vault then?" I remarked, the little joke earning more chuckles. "Just how long until I can?"

"I'll run another check tomorrow, but so long as your chest remains undamaged today, it will do," Lexi answered. I'll be honest, I was groaning heavily on the inside.

"So, Jaal, just what kind of things can we do while on Voeld in the meantime?" I questioned.

"I am sure the Resistance could use your help securing positions, freeing some prisoners, smaller military operations," Jaal remarked.

"Wait, Scott, the coordinates for Ark Leusinia's evac shuttle are near the HQ on Voeld. We find the shuttle, we find the Ark," Cora spoke up.

"Well, shit, that would certainly be a win. We'll be sure to do that," I answered.

"And I've got leads of Rem-tech in the area too," Peebee remarked.

"So, spend the rest of the day grabbing tech, find the shuttle, and helping the Resistance. Tomorrow, we warm the place up. Sounds good to me. You're free to do whatever until we reach Voeld, I'll decide on a team there," I ended the meeting. Wondering what to do in the meantime, I headed to the bridge. I haven't really talked with Kallo or Suvi that often. I opened the door, and, expectedly, the two were conversing. They seemed like good friends.

"I'm going to do it. I've run the scans. It's non-toxic. If we're going to live here, someone has to take the leap and actually eat things," Suvi stated confidently.

"Dr. T'Perro, do something," Kallo pleaded over a comm-link.

"Don't do it Suvi," she warned over the comms. Suvi turned to face Kallo, a look of surprise and mock anger.

"You told on me? I thought we were friends. You sir, are uninvited from all my parties," she teased.
"Parties? Where's my invitation been?" I joked, walking up to the middle of the bridge, between the two of them.

"Must have gotten lost in the mail, sorry," Suvi joked again.

"Speaking of things you shouldn't do, how's your tongue?" Lexi asked, once more over comms. A slight look of embarrassment came across her features again.

"The, uh, swelling has gone down significantly. And I think I can talk normally again," Suvi answered.

"Good. Keep me up to date. Remember, cool foods and liquids only. NOTHING, spicy," Lexi warned.

"Thanks, Lexi," Suvi sighed.

"I know that tone from her. Clearing me for combat but not the run for my life for reactivating the vault. Rules, rules, rules, huh?" I chuckled.

"Hey, rules I respect. Lexi does know what she's doing, she is taking care of us after all," Suvi smirked.

"You know, I always thought that the best way to learn your lesson is to have your mistake really bite you in the ass first," I joked. Suvi and Kallo both laughed at that.

"Which is precisely what I did. But without her I might still be wheezing and trying not to choke on a fat tongue," Suvi retorted.

"How'd that happen anyway?" I asked with a chuckle.

"You ever hear about the lick test?" she questioned, and Kallo groaned. "Back before scanners were portable, Earth scientists would employ this test in the field. They used it to tell rocks from fossils, even get a basic idea of their mineral composition," Suvi explained.

"Aaaaand you licked a rock, didn't you?" I snickered. Suvi sighed, but not without a grin on her face.

"I was distracted, and forgot it was a Heles rock. I do it unconsciously," Suvi defended. "When I was little, my father and I would go on these 'expeditions.' The lick test was always a huge part. He made science fun for me, and one thing led to another. Your mother was a scientist too, wasn't she?"

"Yeah, she was. Most of her research was on biotic implants. That research later adapted to the SAM implants. Unfortunately, we didn't know just how dangerous Eezo exposure was when she was doing her work..." I muttered in reply.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to open old wounds. I hope it helps to know that what she and your father achieved with SAM is truly astounding," Suvi attempted to comfort.

"Thanks. What about your parents?" I asked.

"I left them back home. They told me they were proud of me, and then lived out their lives while I slept," Suvi's features sunk, clearly upset, maybe even feeling guilty.

"Of course they were proud, Suvi. They were scientists, and that's why you're here. Science. That
takes courage. Some crazy, sure, but mostly courage. I'm sure they knew that," I tried to comfort.
Suvi smiled, letting out a deep breath as she looked at her console.

"Thanks, Scott. I needed that," Suvi replied softly.

"So, anything else been going on?" I questioned.

"The Angara have been sending loads of data packets full of their discoveries and wisdom. I still have folders that I like reading before going to bed. I'm thankful they're willing to work with us," Suvi remarked.

"It's certainly good of them. Though I wish all of them were willing," I returned.

"Some give trust easier than others. We'll get there," Suvi responded confidently.

"One can hope. What about you, Kallo?" I asked.

"Keeping Gil from turning the ship inside out for one," Kallo grumbled.

"Something I need to get involved with?" I questioned.

"Er, no, no, I can handle it, sorry, Scott," Kallo mumbled. I'll admit, I don't quite buy it. With such a thought, I made my way to the engine room, to see just what Gil was up to. Jaal had gotten himself involved with the Nomad again, investigating its inner workings and Gil was working away at the terminal in engineering. He heard the door opened and glanced to see me, walking up to me from his console with a purpose.

"You talked with Bailey, didn't you?" he questioned. He wasn't angry, not that I could tell, and I don't think he was annoyed with me.

"Yeah, what about him?" I asked. Gil said nothing, just keying his Omni-tool to show me something. It was a message.

Gil, I hope you are well. Our time together on Nexus was invigorating, and I'm sure you are invigorating your colleagues on the Tempest now. I envy them, and your Pathfinder. But I suppose the work you're doing now, and the pioneers you're supporting, need and probably deserve to be invigorated more than the rest of us.

The message continued, but Gil closed the message.

"It drones on for SIX whole pages like that. SIX. After all of that he asks if I want to get a drink. Now, I don't know about you, but I feel quite invigorated," Gil chuckled.

"Quite," I laughed. "Sorry, didn't know which way you swing so I encouraged him to find out and try."

"Oh, I do swing that way, I just don't swing his way," Gil casually remarked. Hm, I don't really want to say the wrong thing here so that I don't convey the wrong message.

"Guess that explains why you weren't in a relationship with that friend you told me about," I thought aloud.

"Guess so. Hey, least this means you don't have to worry about me hitting on your sister, right?" he joked.

"I'd hope not," I laughed. "She's still in a coma."
"Really that easy to joke about so soon?" he asked a bit cautiously.

"It helps that I've been able to talk to her. SAM implant, that kind of thing. When we talk we go right back to our old banter and trash talk. Helps keep both of us sane," I answered.

"I get that. While everything on the Nexus was going to hell that's all my friend and I did," Gil remarked. "So, why'd you make your way over to my throne room in the first place?"

"Ah, right. Kallo mentioned offhandedly about trying to keep you from turning the ship outside out. He tried to wave it off as something he can handle. I just wanted to see your end of it," I answered.

"Seems to have a stick up his ass about upgrades. But, credit where it's due, it has also kept me from going too far with them. Things that are better off worked in a lab first," Gil explained.

"Fair enough. Just keep it civil and don't fry his brain," I warned.

"Course not, then who'd fly the ship?" Gil replied with a grin. Satisfied that things would remain settled, for now at least, I returned to my room. Would be needing to get ready for Voeld soon enough.

I was the first to arrive in the cargo bay again, the same charred robe beneath my under-suit as I had forgotten to get a replacement, my dad's N7 armor, freshly repaired thanks to Vetra, and my weapons holstered. I had called down Vetra, Peebee, Jaal, and Cora. More than would fit in the Nomad, but that didn't mean the fifth couldn't be of use to us. Once the last of them had arrived, I began my briefing.

"Ladies and gentleman, you may have noticed that there are five of us gearing up for Voeld, while the Nomad sits four. Well there's a method to my madness. Vetra, Peebee, Cora, you'll be with me in the Nomad. Peebee will help with her tech, Cora because the Ark is personal for her, and Vetra as our heavy. Jaal, I want you to be at the Resistance HQ as a liaison. Keeping an eye out for us of anything we can help the Resistance with, maybe tracking down the shuttle, that kind of thing," I explained.

"I'll be sure to work with our specialists surveying the region. Keep you up to date. And I'll work with Commander Do Xeel to fully and properly link you into our systems. Our security is thorough," Jaal answered.

"Sounds good to me. Want SAM to help the Angara out with decryptions and such? Maybe find something for the Kett base?" I offered.

"I would, but I don't believe we have any intel that can lead us there first. The Kett are very careful with their security protocols. We'd need to raid the right location and find the right bit of data," Jaal replied.

"Fair enough," I shrugged. "I'd rather not deal with it until the vault is online anyway."

"Approaching the LZ now, Scott. Same location as last time, and oh joy! Another blizzard!" Kallo remarked over the comms. "I think I'll be staying inside the nice, warm ship while we're here."

"Kallo, don't make me come up there and drag you outside," Vetra warned playfully.

"Shutting up now," was his only response as we felt the ship land. Fortunately, no ice seemed to crack beneath us. The cargo bay doors began to open and I could immediately feel the freezing cold of the planet, and some snow blowing into the hangar from the open door.
"Of all planets that the Angara had to settle," I muttered as I began leading the team out towards the HQ. We wasted no time running as fast as we could to the first heat lamp the Angara placed within a rocky outcrop. Vetra and I may have been practically hugging the heat lamp, with some snickering from the rest of the crew. I promptly raised my middle finger towards them as I returned to the heat. But, as all good things must come to an end, Vetra and I pried ourselves away from the lamp and continued across the small gap, a pair of Angara on lookout once more.

"Surprised to see you here again. Commander Do Xeel is in Operations, you should see her," one of them suggested. I nodded and waved my thanks as we took a second to defrost once more, before rushing from lamp to lamp until we were within the base itself. Well, the hangar, at least. An engineer working on a ground vehicle noticed us and dropped what he was doing to catch our attention.

"Hey there, explorer," he greeted warmly. Ironic, I know. And he wiped his hands on a rag. "I hear that you have a very impressive vehicle within your ship. Correct?"

"Yeah, we call it the Nomad. Our engineer has been working to improve it when it's not in the field," I answered.

"I'm an amateur mechanic myself. Build vehicles for my people, maintain what we already have, make designs for upgrades..." he hinted. "Here, take this schematic. Give it to your engineer with my compliments," he smiled.

"What's it do?" I questioned.

"Upgrade to your shields. This won't make them stronger, but what it will do, now that is interesting. When your shields go down, your vehicle will emit an electric pulse that can stun or even knock away anything within range," the mechanic explained cheerfully.

"Very nice, very nice indeed. This will make Gil's day, he lives for creative, slightly crazy ideas," I remarked.

"Never knew I had a long-lost brother," the mechanic laughed.

"Well, thanks again. We'll see you around." I stated, ending the conversation so that one, we could speak with Do Xeel. And two, to get in a part of the base with more heat. As we ventured within, we could tell that the temperature was increasing, at least slightly, if nothing else. SAM clarified that temperatures within the base would not be dangerous to our physiologies, at least not while within our suits. So, the heat lamps were bonuses. We approached the ops center, a large hologram of Voeld in the center with its moon orbiting. Certain locations highlighted, likely as cities or other places of interests.

"So... Jaal? Just which one of these people is Commander Do Xeel?" I asked quietly. I had never met her; not even spoken with her the last time we were here. Jaal simply chuckled and led us towards the proper Angara. A simple task, as she was straight ahead, standing near a heat lamp and speaking with someone who was likely an advisor of some sort.

"Good to see you again, Commander Do Xeel," Jaal greeted, catching her attention. Her clothes were varying shades of blue and she had an Angaran symbol on her shoulder, likely an indication of rank. She waved off her advisor and faced our group.

"And you, Jaal. And you must be the Pathfinder who saved the Moshae. We never got to meet during your previous visit," she replied. Felt a bit weird that she had no helmet but I still did. Thing was, I was not interested in taking it off on this planet. "I am Anjik Do Xeel, commander of this
encampment. You are welcome here, as an ally of the Angara."

"I appreciate the warm welcome," I joked. Only to realize that it either wouldn't translate, or that she couldn't tell I was joking since there was no smirk for her to see. "It's a joke. To break the ice," I continued. Cora held her helmeted head in her hands, Peebee looked at me but I suspected a smirk under the helmet, and Vetra groaned, but not without a few chuckles at the end of it.

"Strange jokes aside, I hope you will join our fight against the Kett. We could certainly use the help. We've been keeping them at bay, but have been unable to deal a decisive blow. The closest we've gotten was the Exaltation facility. But the longer things drag on, the greater our disadvantage. I believe you know why," she explained.

"Helping is why I'm here on Voeld after all. As well as two other reasons. Our ground vehicle doesn't sit enough for my whole team, so I've asked Jaal to remain here and coordinate with the Resistance. Today, I'll do what I can to help the Resistance as well as following a lead on some Rem-tech and one of our missing arks. Tomorrow, our goal will be the Vault. Should get rid of these damn blizzards and warm the place up," I explained.

"Why not do so first? Surely it would make your other objectives easier to accomplish," Do Xeel questioned.

"Doctor's orders," I groaned. "Re-activating a Vault activates a kind of… death bubble. Turn that on, run for your life, activate the right console. Our doc's cleared me for combat, but not that kind of run," I answered.

"Doctors and soldiers. Never really can get along, can they?" she chuckled. "Hm, yes, I believe I know a few things you could do. We have emergency medical caches scattered around the area that need to be re-stocked. Not enough for a permanent fix, but enough to keep someone alive until they can get to proper facilities. Those will be in the med-bay. Another matter would be better left… quiet," she began. To continue, she walked a bit closer and whispered. "Supplies have been running low, and most if not all of our drops are either missing or ransacked. I suspect a rat, but for who? I'll transmit coordinates of the location of the next drop, and you will investigate, but I DON'T, want word spreading around the base. Morale will plummet."

"Understood."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We had the supplies, and we had the location of the next supply drop, and Jaal was back at ops coordinating with intelligence officers and Do Xeel. Now, we were huddled aside a heat lamp overlooking the valley as we waited for the Nomad's autopilot routine to drive itself up here. We could use it normally, but it's basic, and can't evade fire. Or climb up cliff faces. There was a large mountain, almost reminding me of Everest, and to the right of it was a smaller peak with Kett architecture, their main base of Operations on Voeld. Huh, it's two armies, inside a valley or canyon. They each have a base at opposite ends of the valley and appear to be locked in a stalemate for their war. This here is some Blood Gulch blues. There were a pair of scouts, standing there, and talking. I half expected one to ask, "Do you ever wonder why we're here?"

"But I brought the snacks last time," the female of the pair defended.

"But I never get care packages from Aya, do I?" the male of the pair retorted.

"You're so good at guilting me, Tseek," the woman chuckled.
"Huh, just occurred to me that I haven't offered to be the one securing rations and what-not for the Tempest. Should I expect a guilt trip Vetra?" I joked, hoping to make some conversation with the scouts and ignore the cold.

"Only if you keep bringing me back here," Vetra chuckled.

"Oh, didn't know you were listening in, Pathfinder," the man muttered, seeming a bit embarrassed. The woman however, simply seemed excited.

"Part of me thought you didn't even notice us here! We heard about how you punched the Kett, last time you were here. Punched them right in the exaltations! So. Amazing," the woman stated enthusiastically. It seemed like she was trying to make a joke we may understand, but yeah, it didn't exactly come out as well as she hoped. Still, it's the thought that counts, right?

"Shut up, Beniska. You're embarrassing," the man, likely named Tseek, given the conversation we overheard, warned.

"You shut up, I'm being charming. Right?" she questioned.

"Hey, I'm just happy with a friendly greeting. Trying for friendly humor is an unexpected, but welcome surprise. Thanks," I answered, playing the diplomat.

"I could give you some pointers, you know. For our kind of jokes," Peebee offered.

"Now why'd you have to go and offer her that?" Tseek groaned as Beniska grinned.

"Oh, I'd love to. Would they work on Angara though?" she asked.

"You'd need to ask Jaal. I can't tell if some things translate right or not," I answered. Thankfully, for Tseek's sake at least, the Nomad pulled up from the mountain side path. "Well, there's our ride. Any pointers while we're out there?"

"If you're ever lost or looking for a safe haven, follow those red lights you see out there. The one you can see from here is Hajarl Station, a small scientific Daar, and beyond that is Techii, our largest Daar in the area. Good luck out there," Tseek explained. I thanked him, and led the team to the Nomad. I took the wheel, of course, Vetra in the passenger, and Cora and Peebee in the back.

"Oh thank FUCK this thing has heating! It's actually warm in here!" I moaned, leaning back before I began driving.

"I don't know if I'll be able to leave this thing," Vetra remarked, just as pleased as I was at the temperature increase. I could hear Peebee snickering at us, but I ignored it, simply beginning the drive down the mountainside

"Alright SAM, anything your scans of the region can tell us that the Angara couldn't?" I asked.

"There are Kett labor camps, mining sites, and supply depots scattered around the region. It is possible that a way into the main Kett base could be found at one of these sites. Intel we gather while here, may narrow our search field down. I have also detected the locations of each Remnant Monolith. While I doubt they have gone unnoticed by the Angara, I believe they simply assumed we already knew. They are concentrated to the west of the Kett base," SAM explained.

"Any signs on the shuttle from Leusinia?" Cora questioned. Instead of the synthetic voice of SAM, a more organic voice answered.
"Ah, yes, I believe we have a lead. There have been sightings of a non-Angaran, non-Kett shuttle in the area, as well as a strange, unidentified signal that has been pinging around for some time. Though curious, Commander Do Xeel believed it may have been a Kett trap, and ordered the Resistance NOT to investigate. Sending coordinates for signal locations," Jaal informed.

"And I have the coordinates for the Rem-tech. Uploading," Peebee spoke. As the new locations appeared on a map in my HUD, it was odd that the shuttle's signals seemed to be all over the place.

"SAM, what's with the signal? The Angara have no mention of Asari refugees showing up, why would the shuttle even be here? Let alone hopping around like this?" I questioned.

"Unknown. Perhaps it simply found a planet where it believed it could hide from the Kett pursuing it. As for the signal, it may have been a method of evasion, or the signal has reflected off the thick layers of ice and snow," SAM answered.

"So, check each location until we find something. Just monitor all Initiative emergency frequencies and send out some signals on the same frequencies to try and make contact. If they're still alive we should find something," I ordered.

"At once," SAM replied, as I returned my focus to driving down the cliff face. The idea to simply drive off had occurred to me, but I also had no idea how deep the snow down below was, let alone if the terrain was filled with jagged rocks that could wreck the Nomad. Fortunately, for times when the weather must get truly bad, the path down was lit up by small, flashing orange lights to safely guide us along. I chuckled to myself as the bridge of the Tempest was visible when we finished the descent down the rocky cliff side, and with the lights now leading us further east, through a small ravine.

"Well, that looks like a tight fit. Go around?" Vetra suggested, seeing a narrow gap at the other end. I was about to answer, when we heard gunfire coming from the other side. Guess we're trying to go through. I shrugged, and simply slowed down, carefully maneuvering through the crack, which was just wide enough for the Nomad. A Kett dropship flew away ahead of us and a squad of Resistance was engaged with Kett forces. We stopped the Nomad and got out, using the rocks in the area as cover and rushed to assist. Wraiths, while cloaked, rushed to greet us. And they were a bastard to see among the snowfall. A slug from Cora's Crusader managed to find one, tearing through the beast's abdomen, and a shockwave from Peebee managing to find the other, revealing it for Vetra's cyclone to tear through as an Anointed began to charge his weapon and a Chosen was put down by a Resistance fighter, and another drained the Anointed's shields, allowing a burst from my Sweeper to finish the job. The leader of the Resistance group, a woman, holstered her rifle on her back and walked over.

"Thanks for the assist. We were going to try and lead them in the other direction, keep them away from HQ. All it did was put us in the open," she explained.

"They don't already know where your base is?" I questioned.

"Course not. We're very careful with its location, and we wouldn't be able to withstand a full assault. This isn't the first HQ we've had on Voeld," she answered. The implication clear.

"Then we'll be sure to show the same caution. Stay safe out here," I stated, eager to return to the warmth of the Nomad. When rushing out into battle, you have adrenaline, and aren't focused on anything other than the fight. You can ignore the cold. As the adrenaline wears off, however… it ain't fun. We returned to the Nomad and continued driving. There were coordinates for one of the supply drops just to the north of us, and according to Jaal, the drop should be made any second now, and the thieves should just beat us there. I raced the Nomad down the rest of the path and
then up a slope, around a rocky bend, just where it should be hidden. There were crates strewn about, and figures moving supplies into a ground vehicle. However, they were clearly not Kett, nor Initiative. If I could move the Nomad to the far side of the drop, the crates may provide enough cover for us to get out. One figure saw us, and turned, it was clearly an Angara and he dropped the crates he was carrying and called out to his cohorts and they rushed for defensive positions. As I hoped, they weren't expecting us to go around the far side, and that allowed us the time we needed to quickly leave the Nomad. Those on the passenger side, Vetra and Cora, used it for cover, while Peebee and I rushed to one of the crates. As the Angara re-positioned themselves, I caught a glimpse of an emblem on their shoulders. Roekaar. Why the hell would they be stealing Resistance supplies? On Voeld of all places? I informed the others of what they were as one of them turned the corner of the crate I was behind, a knife, or dagger in hand, and moved to thrust it into my lower left side.

I had doubts it would be able to pierce my armor, but I'd rather not test that while I'm in it. I held onto the barrel of the Sweeper with my left hand, using the gun to knock his arm away, and hoping it would knock the dagger out of his hands. Regardless of if it did or not, my right arm was pulled back, and instead of a cryo-gauntlet, an Omni-blade formed in its place around my forearm. My arm thrust forward, as if I was going for a throat punch, and the blade pierced his neck, burning through, and he began to choke on his own blood, and unable to breath. The Omni-blade vanished as I took hold of my Sweeper once more and prepared to finish the fight. There was already another corpse on the ground, though I was unsure of whose handiwork it might have been.

"Shit, where the fuck did my shields go?" Vetra exclaimed, pulling herself right back into cover. One of the troops seemed to get a boost in confidence as he stood and opened fire on any of us he could see. I fired a burst at his head but each round was deflected, and there was the flare of shields collapsing, and the soldier growled, trying to get back into cover as his head gained a large hole in the center, the sound of a Shotgun in my ears. Only one was left now, a woman, by the looks of it, and she seemed to snarl at the loss of her comrades.

"You'll pay for this you alien bastards!" she cried out, stepping out of cover to attempt to go down in a blaze of glory. I had other ideas. I used my biotics to launch myself at her, knocking her to the ground, throwing her rifle somewhere behind me, and grabbed both her arms, calling for one of the others to take a firm hold of one so that my strength wasn't divided amongst both. Peebee ran over and did just that, and we stood the snarling Roekaar soldier up as she struggled, and Vetra began patting her down for weapons.

"Cora, take this arm for me, I need to make a call," I ordered, and carefully traded places with her, allowing my hands the freedom to use my comms. "Jaal, you read me? I need you to get the Commander on the line." Jaal did not reply, simply patching us into her comm unit.

"Yes, Pathfinder?" she questioned.

"We ran into your supply thieves. Caught them with their pants down as they were ransacking the supplies. Roekaar. We managed to capture one of them alive, figuring you'd have questions for her, but we won't be able to securely bring her back to base. Requesting a shuttle for prisoner pick up," I answered.

"Roekaar? But why would- never mind. Hopefully we'll know soon enough. Sending a shuttle now, they'll take custody of her. Thank you, Pathfinder." Do Xeel replied, ending a call. While I really didn't want to remain out in the cold any longer, it's not as if the base is exactly far away. The shuttle should arrive any minute. I turned to face the Roekaar, who still struggled, but to no avail, only serving to tire herself out.
"Don't know how much of that you heard, but allow me to repeat," I began. "A Resistance shuttle is on its way now to pick you up and place you in a cell. I'm sure they have many questions for you, such as why the hell the Roekaar would be stealing supplies meant for the key piece of the Angaran efforts to keep Voeld out of Kett hands for starters. Care to answer?" I questioned, only to be met with silence. "Figured. Maybe you'll answer if an Angara asks. So be it."

"Scott, over here, found a data pad," Vetra called out, the Roekaar's head shooting straight towards her, and struggling with much more effort. Seems she doesn't want us to know.

"What's it say?" I asked, walking towards her. She handed it to me, and if I wasn't wearing a helmet, I'd be rubbing my chin in thought. Seems the Roekaar are hoping one of these drops have shield tech. Do Xeel likely ordered a delay on that delivery until the missing supplies were solved. The data pad confirmed that the Roekaar didn't want word of their theft spreading, that they're building a stockpile. They believe that if Evfra learns of this, he'll take action. But what really caught my attention, was that this dispatch came from Akksul himself. I nodded my thanks to Vetra and we waited a moment longer as a shuttle appeared, descending gently and blowing more snow around. The door opened and a pair of Resistance stepped out, one holding what appeared to be handcuffs.

"Fancy meeting you here, Pathfinder," one of the soldiers greeted, the voice familiar.

"Heckt? Didn't expect you to be running a prisoner," I returned. Heckt offered his arm in the Angaran salute, and I tried my best to return it. I think I succeeded, placing the back side of my arm against his, fist against shoulder blade.

"The Commander wanted people she trusted, she knew weren't sympathetic to the Roekaar for this. Just in case someone decided to let the prisoner escape," he explained. The other Angara carefully too Cora's place, allowing Heckt to attach one half of the cuffs, and then taking Peebee's place to attach the other, securing their prisoner.

"Makes sense. Is the sentiment really that bad out here?" I questioned.

"Not really, most are cautious, skeptical, but willing to at least give you a chance. But saving the Moshae helped. The rest are either unsure, firmly in your camp, or firmly in hers," Heckt answered.

"And just where do you stand?" I asked, a lighter tone to my voice.

"Do you even need to ask? I fought alongside you and your squad at the facility. You rescued the Moshae, the prisoners, and blew it up. I'm in your camp," he answered, patting me on the shoulder.

"Traitor," the Roekaar growled.

"And here we have someone who wasn't there," Heckt remarked casually. "We'll figure out what she knows. Good luck out here, Pathfinder," Heckt ended, beginning to drag the Roekaar behind him.

"Hold on Heckt, we found a data pad here as well. Has quite a curious message on it, I must say," I informed, handing it to him. He quickly read it over.

"Well, Evfra will certainly want to hear about this. Guess we know what they're after. Thanks again" Heckt ended, returning to the shuttle, prisoner in tow. I brought the team into the Nomad, knowing that Do Xeel would soon have a shuttle here to pick up the supplies, and Heckt's shuttle took off for the base. Using my HUD, I checked the map of the region for the coordinates of the signals from the Asari shuttle and Peebee's tech. There was a signal location for the shuttle to the
south east, a bit past Hajarl station. Would make as good a starting point as any. I drove the Nomad down the snowy slopes to find what appeared to be a frozen over lake, large, icy patches across the landscape, certainly affecting our traction, but so long as we drive straight, it shouldn't have much effect.

"Hmm… Scott, do me a favor and stop the Nomad, then turn on that agility mode Gil had installed," Vetra requested. Curious, I did just that. "Now turn the wheel all the way to the left." An unseen grin spread across my face as I realized just what she was getting at, and I think I noticed Cora grip her seat a bit tighter. I did as she requested, and floored it. We began spinning in place slowly, but picking up speed. But we could do better than that. Vetra and Peebee were cheering, and I'm unsure if they noticed my thumb move to the thrusters. But Cora did.

"SCOTT NO DON-" she exclaimed. But it was too late. The thrusters ignited and we began spinning even faster, Peebee, Vetra, and I both just laughing and hollering and cheering, enjoying ourselves. Cora? Less so. But, I'll admit, the G-force was starting to get to even me so I began letting off the gas, allowing the vehicle to ease to a stop.

"Wonder how fast we could have gotten it going when the thrusters recharged," Vetra laughed.

"Not fast enough," Peebee hollered.

"I hate all of you," Cora groaned, resting her hands on her stomach. I chuckled to myself, and simply continued on our path up the next hill, then down it again. Up another hill, down it again. Passing by a Kett construct, likely a mining outpost, but they would simply re-man it if we attacked it. The Angara don't have the manpower to take these locations, and they may not waste much effort on such a small outpost. Past that and up the next hill was the signal location. Nothing. I checked the map again.

"Three other signal locations to the East, and one to the southeast. If we go east we'll pass by Peebee's Remtech. We'll go east, and if none of those locations have the shuttle, we'll backtrack," I stated, and began driving towards the nearest signal, just a bit north and further east. Right in that direction, was a bit down a hill, and then up another, almost like a ramp… Obviously I tried it out. And we soared. More cheers from Peebee and Vetra, more screams from Harper. We landed back on the hillside before the bottom, which just resulted us in gaining even more speed and speeding us across the frozen lake.

"That never gets old. Wonder how many mo-what the hell?" I muttered aloud as my HUD just glitched the hell out. "Anyone else getting this shit?"

"Yeah what the hell is this? Peebee answered. Everything on our HUD's were just unreadable.

"Pathfinder, this interference may be Kett related. Removing it, would no doubt be of use," SAM informed. "It should be nearby. Go where the interference is strongest." I did just that. The interference getting stronger as we approached an icy peninsula. There was an odd-looking rock lodged in the ice and no Kett to be seen. I got out to investigate. It was as if it was scarred, an orange glow surrounded by scorch marks.

"How's a rock causing interference?" I questioned. It's a good thing our SAM communication is via QEC, there's no interfering with that.

"It appears to be emitting EM radiation. Perhaps-" SAM began.

"Adhi, to the North! Whole pack of them!" Vetra called out, readying her Cyclone, gaining the attention of the rest of the squad. We formed a line, side by side, weapons ready as the Adhi
jumped over a small pile of ice. We could already see the fin things on their back, but now we had an actual target. We unloaded, a pile of their corpses beginning to pile up as we acted like a firing squad, mowing them all down as they came into view. Not one of them had any tech strapped to them, guess it's coincidence?

"The hell is this thing?" I muttered after the last Adhi fell, attempting to make a scan. Five-point-six percent iron, ninety-four-point-four percent... unknown. "Send an image and a scan to Jaal. Maybe they know something." SAM did not respond, simply allowing Jaal to contact us after a moment.

"A rare find, Scott. We call rocks such as this a Scourge gem. They pass through the Scourge, and pick up something of its nature. No two are exactly alike. Some are quite beautiful, and quite dangerous" he explained.

"So, what do we do with it?" I asked.

"We have a way of dampening the signals they create. We use our bio-electricity to emit a unique signature. I believe your Omni-tools can do the same. Here," Jaal answered, sending a signal frequency. I released the signal, and the interference no longer affected our HUDs.

"With the signal dampened, we can return it to the Nexus for analysis. We could learn something valuable about the Scourge," SAM suggested.

"Jaal, the Angara have experience with these things. You say they're dangerous, dangerous enough that we shouldn't take it?"

"The Angara have tried to study them many times in the past. We've never learned anything. And it destroys any tech that attempts to do a thorough investigation. And touching them is always a risk," Jaal explained.

"Then we leave it. The Resistance have a disposal method for these?" I questioned.

"They do. A team will be sent once available, thank you, Scott," Jaal stated, closing comms.

"Well, now perhaps we can go on uninterrupted," I murmured, leading the others back to the Nomad. Once more eager to escape the cold. Driving the Nomad up and around the peninsula of ice, there was nothing, once more.

"Don't worry Peebee, we'll find Ark Leusinia," Cora gently stated.


"Not worried?" Cora questioned, not quite believing.

"Yeah, I'm not. Either way, I'll make it," Peebee continued.

"But... they're your people," Cora argued.

"And? Even without all the ones on the Ark, the Asari will survive here, we can reproduce with anyone. Still, I don't have any special connection to my people," Peebee explained.

"How can you not care about them?" Cora asked, exasperated.

"It's not that I don't CARE, I don't want a whole bunch of innocent people dead, but the Turian and Salarian arks are missing too. I want them all found, but I'm not singling out Leusinia just
because," Peebee defended. "I think someone's projecting."

"What? No, I'm not projecting." Cora stated firmly. Well, I know that's bullshit.

"Uh huh," Peebee mused, simply letting the conversation end. Seems the two will be giving each other the cold shoulder now. No, I'm not sorry in the slightest. Suppressing in the chuckles from that thought, I continued driving. Peebee's Rem-tech was now the closest, and was our next stop. We approached a Remnant site just where the signal should be and got out, no bots attacking us yet.

"Peebee, you have the signal specifics. Take point," I ordered. With her scanner out, she carefully led us towards the center, before we carefully had to retreat as several Observers were patrolling the area. Better to set up somewhere first then just open fire. Unless… "Peebee, can your Virus give us the opening we need here?" I questioned.

"It should just get your weapons set on the Observers, and get ready for anything else in the area," she warned.

"Wait, before the Virus is launched, I believe I have a solution. There is no cover here, so why not place some?" SAM suggested. "This armor comes equipped with several devices that can be planted in the ground to create a low barrier made similarly to tech armor. It cannot be pierced by conventional means, but will run out of energy.

"Works for me," I muttered, finding one such device on the suits belt, priming it, and placing it into the ground. A see-through, orange wall appeared, and allowed all four of us room to take cover. "Peebee, launch the virus." I ordered. She did as requested, the shields around the Observers nearest to us flaring and collapsing, leaving the bots themselves staggering in the air, struggling to stay afloat. They were quickly put down. One more Observer turned to engage us and a pair of Assemblers revealed themselves. Against the four of us, they too were quickly brought down by both tech attacks and sheer firepower. With the area now secured, we approached the center of the structure. Behind an inactive console, was a container, with a blue glow emanating from it. Upon a scan, it was revealed as a security measure. We'd need to find a glyph so that we could interface and deactivate it. Fortunately, there were wires underground revealed by the scanner, leading me straight to them. To both my relief and surprise, it simply led me to the other side of a barrier, leaving a simply Remdoku puzzle in our way.

"Well, there you are you little beauty," Peebee murmured. "This looks like just the piece I need. I'll run a few tests back on the ship, give you an update."

"Will I finally get to know just what your little project is?" I questioned teasingly.

"Only when I'm done!" she chuckled.

"So much suspense," I replied, more teasing in the tone. We returned to the Nomad and pushed on. Over what appeared to be a Kett power line and up a hill to the next location. Nothing, once more. Really hoping the next one did, I could tell Cora was getting nervous and I'd really like to not back track so far. We crested the hill that should be just before the next signal location. There were Kett set up in the area, and scrap metal strewn across the area. No way in hell is this a coincidence.

"Shit…" Cora muttered. Peebee no doubt glanced at her, no doubt having confirmation for earlier.

"We'll clear the area. See what we can find," I stated. No emotion, just matter of fact. I sped down the hill, gaining momentum as the Kett began to take notice, rounds beginning to ping off the Nomad's shields. I kept driving, making a target of the Anointed and of some of the Chosen behind
them. The Anointed only managed to get a few shots off before he tried to run to the side. Unfortunately for him, I predicted he'd try to do that and was watching. As he turned to run, I adjusted just enough to crush him beneath my wheels, and used the handbrake to turn the car to the side, skidding on its wheels and managing to flatten a pair of Chosen as well. The four of us rushed out of the Nomad to finish them off while they were disorganized. Cora charged a Chosen at the top of the hill, a burst from my Sweeper took out a Chosen behind us, and Peebee unleashed a shockwave to clear out the smoke from a Destined, revealing both him and a Chosen. Well, I know a way to wrap this up, and they're far enough away from any scrap for this to be of risk. I focused my biotics and a Singularity formed between the two Kett. Picking up snow, and the pair of them. They tried to escape their coming oblivion, but gravity is one helluva bitch to fight.

"See if you can find its flight recorder. Should have survived impact," I ordered, and we spread out to search amongst the rubble. We started amongst the larger chunks of the shuttle, only finding charred Asari corpses.

"Damn it, they demolished the ship. Killed everyone," Cora murmured.

"Maybe if we'd have been faster," I muttered in reply. I already had a lot on my mind given this morning. I wasn't happy to have been adding to them.

"But… why? If they want the Asari for exaltation, why not leave them alive?" Cora questioned.

"They seem like the kind of guys who can't resist a helpless target," I growled. That thought making another connection with this morning. I glanced at Vetra, she was just looking down, slightly. No doubt she saw the same connections. Nothing else to say, we searched the rest of the site. Amongst the rest of the scrap, was a white, box like device with an Antenna on it's top, tipped over on its side in the snow. I picked it up, setting it upright. "Well, transponder and flight recorder all in one. Survey vessel Periphona. And the device is seventy eight percent operational," I called out.

"Does it tell us where Leusinia is?" Cora questioned, clearly concerned. I tried to pull some data from it. Got the latest entry. A garbled Asari voice played through our comms as the file was transmitted.

"Final log. If the ark ever finds this: we failed. Couldn't draw them off. The data copy's lost. The Decimation's too cunning. Forgive us. We tried…" There was the sound of an explosion, and the log ended.

"Decimation? Hydaria mentioned an elite hunter-killer unit. Think that's them?" Cora suggested.


"The Decimation? Nothing good. They answer directly to the Archon himself, normally assigned to take on specific targets the Archon views as high profile, and high value. For years we knew they were hunting Evfra and the Moshae, but given that they were on Aya, and under heavy guard, let alone the world itself, they were unable to make their move. Oddly enough, we haven't heard or seen them in months. I'll get a full report on them from our intelligence officers and send them to you," Jaal answered.

"Well, I think we just figured out where they've been," I muttered. "We have confirmation that they've been hunting down Ark Leusinia. The shuttle's been destroyed but we found the flight recorder. Seems like we could salvage something out of it," I explained.
"I see," Jaal murmured. I'll get back to you with the report." The call ended and now it was time to figure out whether we'd be able to get the location out of it.

"Running analysis..." SAM informed. "Given the flight recorder's relatively minimal damage, there are still pieces of all records intact within. With time, it could be reconstructed. Comparing with known locations, time-stamps, and events. Such as the Asari refugees being dropped off on Eos," SAM explained. "If we take it back to the Tempest, I believe that some hardware repairs could also potentially restore more data."

"And if we do that we can trace the flight path. Maybe all the way back to the Leusinia!" Cora exclaimed.

"Then load it up on the Nomad. We'll bring it back la-" I began, only for Jaal's voice to appear in our comms again.

"Scott! Scouts just reported in! There is a large labor camp that is about to transfer ALL of its prisoners to another exaltation facility! There is a blizzard coming that is grounding our shuttles and you are the ONLY team within range!" Jaal explained, clearly nervous.

"We'll be there ASAP, just need the coordinates," I stated firmly.

"Transmitting, the camp is northeast of your position. Please! You must hurry, the transfer is supposed to happen just before the storm hits!" Jaal warned.

"You heard him people! Get the flight recorder loaded, we need to be moving 10 fucking minutes ago! Move move move!" I exclaimed, Vetra, Peebee, Cora, and I all carrying the flight recorder together to move it into the Nomad as quickly as possible. With it secured behind Peebee and Cora, I put the pedal to the metal, using the thrusters whenever they were charged towards the coordinates. Apparently, the labor camp was at the base of the northeast end of the mountain range. Those green bastards think they'll turn all those people into more of their mindless slaves?

Over my dead fucking body.
Here we got another chapter that involves my editor friends being creative. Everything you'll see in this one is all freehand. Even over a year later I still remember the night in an Xbox party where River and I brainstormed this. So much pacing, so much fun. Anyways, hope you enjoy!

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Winter is coming. Hell, this whole planet is winter, but it's going to get worse soon. A big ass blizzard is on its way, and to make matters worse, the Kett are about to transport a fuck ton of Angaran slaves to another Exaltation facility. And surprise, surprise, it just so happens that Cora, Vetra, Peebee, and I were the only ones close enough to reach the camp before the transport arrives. Jaal had been briefing us on Resistance intel and scouting reports on this specific camp. Few hundred prisoners, mining for materials, moving supplies, working some assembly lines, general manual labor. The facility itself is well protected and is equipped with AA guns to repel any air assaults. Our goal is to secure the facility, and use the AA guns to take out the incoming transport. Then, simply wait out the storm, and Angaran shuttles will be on standby for an immediate pick up. The wind was already starting to pick up, more and more snow beginning to blow against the Nomad, but we were getting close. We crested one last hill, we were at the base of the mountain range that continued south, and ahead, lay the labor camp.

The left side of the complex had a clear hole being dug into the mountains, must be the mine itself. The facility proper was a large, two or three-story complex, and I think I could see figures patrolling the roof. The right-hand side was smaller, a bit more compact. Likely where the slaves lived when not at work. Given their impending transfer, it's likely where they were located.

"Jaal, we can see the slave camp. Have the scouts ever found a way in aside from the main entrance?" I questioned over comms.

"Negative. Unless you count the roof. If you can take the Nomad up the mountainside, and either leave it there and make it to the roof yourselves, or launch it onto the roof, you should find a lighter defense for your way in," Jaal answered.

"Well, that will certainly catch them off guard," I muttered. "Vetra, has Gil done any upgrades to the vertical thrusters?"

"Yeah, he has. I think it should be just enough to get us onto the roof. But only if we start high enough," Vetra warned.

"Pathfinder, I have just finished simulating each possible location for the jump. I know the exact locations that you can begin where the outcome is successful," SAM informed.

"Then lead me to it. These bastards won't know what hit em," I stated. I could hear Cora groan, but I don't think she would argue this plan. I turned left to begin the climb up until I was level with the location SAM had marked out, thankful as all hell for the Nomad's all terrain capabilities. But this was going to be the awkward part, driving diagonally along the mountainside. Moving to the side
enough to get us around the labor camp, while upwards enough so that gravity wouldn't easily drag
us down.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit," Cora muttered, gripping her seat tight once again. Fortunately, we reached the area marked by SAM, and I carefully maneuvered the Nomad to the point.

"When ready, activate thrusters. On my mark, you will need to fire them again to control your
landing," SAM warned. I took a deep breath, readying myself and concentrating, and activated the
thrusters. We launched off the mountainside and I steadied out the Nomad to ensure it would at
least land on its wheels. SAM assured we were directly above the labor camp and were now in a
downwards descent. I think everyone gripped their seats a bit tighter as we watched the elevation
meter fall, wondering just when SAM wanted us to-

"MARK!" SAM called out, and I slammed my thumb against the button. Our descent seemed to stop entirely, perhaps even reversing for a moment as we began to fall again. But before much momentum was built up, we landed relatively gently on the roof of the central building.

"Fucking hell," I remarked, releasing the breath I didn't realize I had been holding as we all rushed out of the Nomad. There's no way that the Kett wouldn't be aware of our presence now. As I exited, looking towards the front of the Nomad, I saw both the AA guns on either corner of the front of the roof, and the legs of a Chosen, the torso crushed beneath the wheel. Speaking of Chosen, one came to investigate what the hell that noise was, and was shocked to see the back end of a land vehicle with well-armed aliens stepping out of it. He exclaimed something in his language, likely into a comm unit, and raised his Zalkin rifle to fire at us when there was a sound of a shotgun blast, and a very sizeable hole found itself in his head.

"For the Periphona," Cora growled.

"Get inside! Now! Before they can set up!" I ordered, leading the charge down to the third floor. It seems like this floor was used largely as storage. Crates supplies strewn about.

"Intruders have breached the facility. All units, report to your stations. Squads Tolash, and Zal-Shin, engage them in storage," a voice ordered over the base's intercom.

"Bunker down, get ready to engage. Sounds like they're still expecting an attack from the main entrance," I called out. Vetra got on one knee in front of a crate at around waist height, and extended a bipod that had been added to her Cyclone. With her left hand above the barrel to keep it steady, the other on the trigger, and her body protected by both the crate and her own weapon, the Kett would find themselves in for one nasty surprise. Seeing an opportunity to make something effective even stronger, Cora placed herself next to Vetra, taking complete cover behind the crate, and transferred her shields to the Turian. My cover was a bit behind Nyx, on the other side of the room. A crate larger than me, but I'd be able to quickly turn the corner and get on a knee to support the hail of death Vetra would unleash. Peebee was likely behind me, ready to provide support from a distance using biotics. I heard footsteps, and even though none of us were speaking, we all seemed to get that much more silent. An Anointed stormed up the staircase, followed by three Chosen, and they were already at the top of the ramp when they realized just what they were walking into. Vetra opened fire, each of her rounds impacting the Anointed's shields before breaking through, riddling his chest with bullets and then she swept her Cyclone from side to side, ensuring the trio of Chosen found themselves with the same fate. Vetra popped in a new thermal clip and prepared for the next wave.

Ah but these Kett were smart. They didn't come. Not right away, at least. Instead we waited a
moment, and a round metal ball up from downstairs and landed just on top of the crate Vetra was using.
"Shit," she muttered, before taking her Cyclone and running back, Cora at her side, taking cover again at a Crate like mine. The grenade detonated, but instead of an explosion, a ball of plasma engulfed the area. It would have cooked both Vetra and Cora to a crisp had they not moved. But the ball was sustaining itself, even as the crate around it melted. Using their jump-jets, as the grenade had blocked the end of the ramp, a pair of Chosen ascended from below, on either side of the ramp, quickly followed by another pair. Vetra had again taken a knee, but now without the use of the bipod, and though she was a smaller target, on one knee, she was still completely in the open as she opened fire again, Cora still buffing her shields. The two Chosen on the right quickly crumbled to the floor from the hail of bullets while a burst from my Sweeper melted the head of one on the left, and a well-placed shot from Peebee killed the other. I doubted that was all of them, so tried something myself. I took a grenade from my belt and set it to detonate, counted to three, allowing it to cook, and threw it right down the ramp, hopefully eliminating any further resistance. Once the grenade detonated, I took the combat droned from my belt and tossed it down as well, hoping it would provide sufficient covering fire.

"MOVE MOVE MOVE!" I ordered, leading a charge downstairs. A Chosen's head popped up above a crate only to receive a double tap from the turret, and he crumbled to the floor, dead. I turned the corner of the ramp and immediately turned my body to the side as a powerful energy round shot past me. Seems this was the command hub of the facility, as an Ascended was floating in the center of the room, the energy shield protecting his body, and some consoles to his back. Taking the opportunity, I formed a barrier so that the rest of the squad could safely take cover before he could charge up. They were all safe, weapons ready when the commander raised his arm again. If I dropped the barrier now, I'd just get hit with the energy blast again. Fortunately, Cora and Peebee both recognized it and helped buff my own barrier with theirs, and it completely deflected the energy blast.

"You only delay the inevitable," the Ascended growled, clearly aggravated at our defense. As if to try and make his point, he brought the orb generating his shields to the front, channeling energy into it to generate a large sphere of plasma that would fry the lot of us. We didn't exactly agree with that outcome, and all four of us immediately began unloading round after round into the orb, and his shields fell. But he was smart like the Cardinal, instead of standing still, waiting for the shield to come back, he began teleporting around the control room, we couldn't get a shot off. He stopped, beginning to reform the shield around when I grabbed a grenade from my belt, primed it, and immediately threw it at him. I smirked under my helmet as I knew that my throw was perfect. The grenade was inside the confines of the shield when it fully formed, trapping them within. The Ascended, however, didn't seem to notice, beginning to laugh at our supposed failure. Unfortunately for him, the grenade detonated by his feet, but the shield contained the explosion; shrapnel, heat, and all within. There was nothing left but bits of flesh and bone.

"One helluva throw," Vetra muttered.

"Defensive positions on any and all ways downstairs, I'll get the AA guns," I ordered, making my way to the center console, and giving SAM the connection he needed for infiltration.

"Anti-Air cannons are under my control. Targeting protocols are re-written. They will wait until the transport is close to the base, and then will open fire at all structural weaknesses. This will prevent word from spreading," SAM explained after a moment.

"Good work. See if the base has any security measures to keep track of the rest of the Kett here, and look for anything that could lead us to other labor camps like this. Ways in, ways past their defenses, even schedules for transportation to exaltation facilities," I ordered. SAM acknowledged, and I heard gunfire from my left. Peebee falling back into cover after she took out a Chosen downstairs with a well-placed shot. "Sitrep?"
"Bunch of Kett down here, not sure how many. I think two Anointed, might be a Destined as well," Vetra answered. There were two ramps downstairs, one to my left, and one to my right.

"Well, they seem to be holding their fire until they see us. I'll cloak, and take out at least one of the Anointed, maybe throw a grenade at the same time. When it detonates, you should have an opening. SAM will tell you which side, understood?" I explained. The three heads nodded, and I cloaked. Quickly, yet carefully moving down the ramp. There was an Anointed set up in the hallway that was leading to where the slaves were likely kept, and another set up with his back to the main entrance, weapon and eyes set on the right-side ramp. With my right hand, I unsheathed the combat knife from my belt, and with my left, I took hold of a grenade. In one fell swoop, I primed and threw it, while also taking the knife and slashing it across the Anointed's throat as he began turning to see what the beeping was. The grenade landed at the feet of the other Anointed and the Chosen spread through the center of the room were also visibly confused to see one of their Heavies collapsing to the floor, blood spurting from his throat, and a figure coming out of cloak behind him. The grenade detonated, killing the other Anointed and the Chosen turned to fire, only to be pelted by bullet after bullet as Vetra led the charge down the right side, sweeping her Cyclone in wide arcs through the room, shooting all of them in their backs.

"Vetra, make sure this room stays secure. Cora, Peebee, you're coming with me through the back route to the slave's wing," I ordered. Vetra set up on the other side of the crate of the Anointed whose throat I slit, setting up her bipod to watch for any Kett who might attempt a flank, or to try and just escape us. I led the others to the back side of their base. Seemed like this part was a barracks for the Kett. Bunks and a living space making that the likely case. We carefully ventured down the hallway to the other side, and met no resistance. At the corner, I placed my back against the wall, weapon ready, and quickly turned to see a lone Chosen on standby, weapon at his side. Guess he assumed his buddies had it under control. One quick burst from my rifle proved him wrong, and he fell to the ground dead. We moved to the door, finding no further resistance.

"Holster your weapons, we have no idea how long some of these people have been here. It's possible some of them may have never even heard of us," I ordered. Cora seemed a bit uneasy with the order, but followed it nonetheless. I interfaced with the door, and then held my hands in the air. "Open it, SAM." The door opened, and there were easily a hundred Angara of each gender inside. Some sitting on bunks, some laying on them, and some standing about. All turned to face us, and every set of eyes in the room visibly widened, all staring at us. Most, if not all of these Angara looked visibly malnourished, some even sickly. Some young, some old.

"The Kett are dead. You're all free," I began. No one spoke. Some turned to look at another, some just held their stare. "My name is Scott Ryder, I'm a Human from the Milky Way Galaxy. I'm here on Voeld helping the Resistance fight the Kett. Today, that involves coming to free you all," I continued. Explosions could be heard as the AA guns fired at the Kett transport, and a moment later you could feel the ground shake as it crashed. "And that, was a Kett transport coming to take you all to those special facilities that no one ever returns from alive," I explained. I paused again, no one quite daring to speak, so it seemed.

"Why should we trust you?" a scarred man questioned suspiciously.

"A very fair question. Why don't you speak wi-" I began. But I was cut off as SAM spoke into the comms.

"Pathfinder, a Destined has just escaped the base with locations and times for more prisoner pickups for exaltation facilities. I just detected him leaving the base. You must hurry to catch him; the blizzard is almost here!" SAM explained.
"SHIT! Bastard must have been hiding back here!" Vetra exclaimed over comms.

"Sonuvabitch. Cora, get comms up with the Resistance immediately, get them talking and explaining to the Angara here. Peebee, you help her keep this place secure. Vetra, with me, catch that motherfucker!" I exclaimed, holstering my rifle onto my back and running back to the facility proper. Vetra holding the door open, ready to sprint with me.

"Of all the times to need to head out into the open on this damn planet," Vetra muttered as we ran. We couldn't see the Destined, as he was no doubt cloaked, we could see footprints, and we could just barely see some of the mist in the distance. As I ran, I understood why exactly Lexi didn't want me running like this just yet, it was hurting the rib, a lot, as my expanding lungs pushed against it, but I wasn't about to stop. It was clearly getting colder out here too, but our sprint was generating just enough heat to keep us from bitching about it. For now, that is.

"Scott, Vetra, Peebee told me what you're doing. Please, don't lose him. The Kett have emergency hideaways scattered along the mountains. Small caverns with heaters and emergency supplies to keep them alive in cases of inclement weather. Follow him to one, and use it to survive the storm," Jaal explained.

"Understood," I spoke, as I released a breath of air, my lungs eager for a replacement. The wind was getting stronger, but we were also getting closer to the mountains. We could no longer see the mist, but the footprints were still barely there. We ran, and we ran, and we ran, our breathing getting harder, our legs burning. It's not fun trying to run while weighed down by a Black Widow, an AR, a shotgun, a pistol, and heavy armor. I think it was only thanks to SAM that I could keep pace with Vetra, who had just a Cyclone and heavy armor. Plus, Turians have the backwards curved legs that can simply run faster than human legs. I looked up, and I saw what appeared to be a black gap in the snow on the mountainside we were nearing. That must be the cave. With a hand, I tapped Vetra on the shoulder and pointed, seeing her look and see just what I was pointing at. She nodded, and we turned to run more directly for it. It's likely the Destined was hoping he could lead us a bit past it, and then double back for it when the snow would begin to fully obscure his tracks from us. We took cover on opposite sides of the cave entrance, weapons ready, sweat pouring down my face inside the helmet. Vetra entered first, lighting up her tech armor and I followed her. She kept her eyes on the right, I kept mine on the left. Where is the ba-my thoughts were cut off as a large weight knocked me to the ground from behind.

"Damnit! Wraith," She called out as she fired a concussive round at it, knocking it off my back so she wouldn't risk shooting me. I flipped myself over, finishing it off with my Sweeper.

"AGH, FUCK!" Vetra exclaimed, getting knocked to the floor from something behind her, the Destined was there, growling. I pulled the Piranha from my waist as quickly as I could and pulled the trigger three separate times, obliterating shields, and then obliterating him. He fell to his knees, and then fell backwards onto the ground. I felt greatly concerned for Vetra, but was at least relieved to see that she was working on picking herself up. Myself doing the same.

"How bad?" I asked.

"Fucker shot me when my back was turned. Shields and tech armor took the brunt of it, but I think my armor's going to need repairs. None of the rounds broke through the armor to me though, so physically, I think I'm fine," she coughed. Guess she must have gotten the wind knocked out of her like I had.

"Well, he's dead. How's my back?"

"Armor looked scratched, but that's it," Vetra answered. I checked further into the cave, behind the
corpse of the Destined. A Kett generator and a heater. I felt a surge of relief to see that, but then it dropped as I saw fuel leaking out of it. Fuck, I must have shot it.

"Well, good news, we're ok. Bad news, I must have shot the generator. It won't last long," I explained. Moving over to it to make a patch job. I slapped some Omni-gel over the leak, plugging it, but the translated indicator on it read that it was near empty.

"Shit," Vetra muttered.

"Jaal, do you read me?" I spoke into the comms, moving to check the Destined's body, patting him down.

"I'm here Scott, did you track him down?" Jaal questioned as I pulled something out of his pocket. I think it was a kind of OSD, that means we should have the data.

"Yeah, got the data too. Thing is, that generator isn't going to last much longer," I explained.

"Skkut, that blizzard won't be leaving for a while, and you're not in range of any other teams. Please, tell me you have survival training," he pleaded.

"Yeah, I do, but this planet is already an extreme without the damn blizzard," I answered.

"It'll have to do. Just, stay alive. You can do this," Jaal reassured. "Stay strong, and clear." I closed the comm.

"And stay warm," I chuckled. Vetra did the same.

"So, just what does that survival training entail?" she questioned.

"Well, for starters, we'll want to get the armor off, that metal will only make us colder. And we should stay as close to the heater as we can, huddle to preserve that warmth," I explained, moving back towards the heater. Vetra followed, and we both removed our helmets, relieved that the heater was actually keeping the area nearby warm. But we knew that wouldn't be lasting much longer. We continued taking off our armor, left in our pretty much skin tight under suits, well, for her I guess it's carapace tight, and sat with our sides against the heater.

"Anything else?" Vetra asked.

"Well, the moment this thing runs out it'll be all about preserving body heat. Water, food, we have that and MREs with our armor. Generally, you want to keep your body moving, keep blood flowing, but never enough to break a sweat. And that may depend on just how long we'll be stuck here. Maybe we'll just need to huddle. We don't have anything to make a fire with, unless you count a flamethrower or incinerate round, but that would just make us TOO hot," I joked.

"See if you'll be saying that five minutes after the heater shuts off," Vetra remarked with a laugh, which is also what I responded with.

"Touché. The rest of the survival training I have is more about long term. Hunting, traps, shelter, which we already have, and of course filtering and drinking your own piss," I chuckled.

"Really? I thought that was just a gimmick for views on the extranet," Vetra remarked.

"I wish it was. It's uh, it's a standard and necessary part of the Alliance's survival training. Which everyone has to take," I explained. Vetra laughed.
"So, you've drunk some of your own piss?! And here I thought I'd only be getting ammo against you from Sarah."

"And you, Miss Nyx, are a failed stripper who beat people to death from a baton up her ass," I retorted.

"Fair enough," she chuckled. Given we had some time before the heater ran out, I keyed my comms again.

"Jaal, any estimates on when the storm will pass?" I questioned.

"Our best estimates place it at five hours. Maybe six," Jaal answered.

"Fun. None of our training was with these extremes, but we SHOULD make it," I replied. Honestly, I had doubts. "How's the situation with Cora and Peebee?"

"They put us through to the Angara. We explained much. It seems all of them were captured before we had first even heard of your species. But they're cooperating. Their first impression was a good one," Jaal chuckled.

"Can't imagine anyone would think of it as a bad one," Vetra remarked, with a chuckle herself.

"Never know, some people are into some really weird shit. There's' people out there who would like to be cuffed, beaten, and whipped. Er, do Kett even use whips?" I joked. Jaal let out a snort of laughter and Vetra snickered. "Hell, somehow this really weird and shitty book series found itself as a best seller. Shit, some idiots even turned it into a movie series. It was basically a goddamn porno of cuffs and ropes, but I avoided that shit like the plague," I grimaced.

"People are weird," Vetra muttered.

"Putting it mildly," I chuckled. We sat there a while longer, in silence, listening to the wind, listening to the engine keeping the precious heater alive. Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. And that heater, was a very good thing. The engine sputtered one last time, and the lights surrounding the heater, dimmed, flickered, and died. It was no longer generating any heat.

"Well, shit," Vetra murmured.

"Come on, might as well get started," I suggested, sitting myself up and offering her a hand up. She accepted and I moved towards my armor, taking a swig of water from my canteen and taking an MRE, quickly munching on it, Vetra doing the same, just following my lead for now. Once I had finished, I sat down again in the rocky back of the cave, and just began doing some sit-ups. After a few sets, we took a moment to relax. As the chill began to return. Push-ups. Well, I did those, a Turian's talons make that more difficult for them. She simply did another Turian exercise I didn't quite recognize. One that agreed with her legs. When I could feel beads of sweat beginning to form, I stopped immediately, and got more water. Dehydration is the last thing you want to happen in any survival situation. In the cold, it makes hypothermia happen that much faster. Vetra too took a moment to rest, taking more water. It was then I noticed something funny. Not comical, just funny in a 'never thought or noticed that before' kind of way. I could clearly see her nostrils flaring as she breathed, but there was no rise or fall in her chest. Guess there must be a hollow space in the carapace that provides enough room for the lungs to expand as required. Just the little things, I guess. We kept going like that for a while longer. Bit of exercising, a break for water or the occasional MRE, stopping when there's sweat, and trading jokes and other banter occasionally. Once already I had needed to turn my head to a wall to allow Vetra a few seconds of privacy in a corner for the ol'piss break. I soon had to do the same myself, but my own anatomy meant she
could still look wherever she wanted, I didn't have to pull my pants down. Not the behind, at least. But now, we were just feeling tired. It had been a long day already, especially when one considers that given the events of last night and this morning, neither of us really got a good night's rest. Now, we were just sitting side by side, shoulders touching, next to the heater, the slight hope that maybe, just maybe, there was still some heat resonating off it.

Our biggest saving grace seemed to be that the wind was coming from the east. Right now, our backs were to the East, and we had a lot of solid rock between us and the wind. And the snowfall appeared to be beginning to cover up the entrance. It may cover it up entirely eventually, and that would help preserve more heat, we'd just need to make a hole to keep air flowing.

"If only our armor came with some sort of emergency survival kit," I muttered.

"I'll see about working that into my next requisition," Vetra chuckled.

"Please do. A blanket would work wonders for us right now," I chuckled.

"I think I'd be content with just having a damn candle in front of us for a bit of heat," she remarked with a laugh.

"Ooh, could you make it a scented candle?" I asked jokingly.

"I'll see what I can do," she replied with a smirk. "Really hope this damn storm ends soon…"

"You and me both. Timer still counts about two hours minimum according to Resistance weather predictions," I explained.

"So, if we're lucky, two hours. If unlucky, three. If really unlucky, even longer. Hmph, and luck…" Vetra trailed off, allowing me to fill in the blanks.

"Runs out on you," I finished. She turned her head to face me, and I raised an eyebrow, turning my right eye to look into one of her emerald green, almost cat or reptile like eyes, a more vertical iris compared to a human's round one.

"But I won't," she smiled, mandibles flaring slightly. I smiled back, a warm feeling in my chest I couldn't exactly place. But whatever it is, it was a good one.

"Well, good luck trying to. You'd just get yourself stuck outside in the blizzard," I joked. Vetra just laughed.

"Good point," she chuckled. Despite our current situation, I felt something I hadn't really felt in a long time. The last time I remember feeling it was just before we learned of Mom's disease, when we were all just hanging out, getting together, as a family. Sarah and I joking around, sometimes getting Mom and Dad in on it. A family being a family. That feeling? It was contentment. And that's generally a nice place to be. "Damn, I'm struggling to keep my eyes open over here, Scott," Vetra groaned, making a fist with her hands and rubbing both her eyes.

"Mine too, Vetra. Let's just try and stay awake till the others get here, alright? We stay awake, we know we're fighting it. We both know we're alive," I argued.

"Easy for you to say you damn mammal," Vetra chuckled.

"What? I'm not enjoying this any more than you are," I smirked. As if to help make the point, my whole body shivered.
"Avians don't handle the cold as well as mammals. Least not Turians. Our cold tolerance is smaller. Most of your planet gets winter and snow. Only the poles on Palaven get any snow at all," Vetra explained with a smirk.

"Well, then maybe it's acceptable for you to be enjoying this just a bit less than I am," I chuckled.

"Damn right it is," Vetra yawned, then taking another sip from her canteen. "So, if this is all about trying to stay awake now, tell me something you like doing, for fun. Something you'd do back in the Milky Way with nothing important going on."

"Just one huh? Alright, well, one thing I'd do a lot is that I'd sit down on the couch, lean back, and play a game. Not anything stupid like Galaxy of Fantasy, mind you. Sometimes I'd play with a group of friends, sometimes Randoms, sometimes I'd play something solo," I answered.

"Huh, hadn't pegged you as having much interest with those. I dabbled, but never had much time, taking care of Sid and myself. Never really went beyond what was being advertised everywhere. So, just what kinds did you play?" she continued.

"Guess it generally depended on my mood. When playing with friends it would normally be something competitive, but we still had plenty of cooperative games we'd play as a team. But when alone? Normally something story driven, but with plenty of action to keep it entertaining. It's a game, not a movie, after all, right? And, hell, just like my taste in movies, my taste in games are old. Let's see, the first one I ever remember falling in love with was a sci-fi, those were always my favorite. Took place around the 2500s, but was made in the very early 2000s. Humanity losing a war for survival with a large, multi-species religious coalition of alien species. They worship this ancient species that left tech all over the galaxy and mysteriously vanished. Like the Protheans. The games themselves never contained a huge amount of the story until the later ones, but you learn why those aliens vanished and that some of the relics that the aliens want to use, are instead doomsday weapons, and not a means of transcendence. Through some political scheming and backstabbing on the alien front, an important species in that coalition learned the truth, and seceded, instead aiding humanity as the leaders of this coalition, this Covenant, were attempting to silence them all. There were several books and comic series that went on with much more story, but there's a simple bit. There was also this fantasy game series, medieval and magic and mythological creatures. Make your own character, experience their backstory, meet new characters, and choose how to interact with them, and learn more about them. Almost like you were personally building a friendship with them. Decisions you made could potentially change something very important later on, or perhaps even lead to the death of one of those characters you've grown to love. At the series best, they could make you feel for even the most insignificant of minor characters," I explained.

"Sounds like a man who loves a good story," Vetra remarked.

"That I do. But then there's this one game on the completely opposite end of the spectrum. It was a reboot of an old series that was just legendary, and was a huge stepping stone in humanity's technological culture, video game wise at least. I've played them all, but the one I played more, was the latest reboot. It had a story in case you were interested, but it sure as hell wasn't the focus. Go run around the map, look for secrets and things to upgrade your armor, health, weapons, etc if you want, and just kill shit. Shooting demons, always moving, as if they hit you it would always take out a big chunk of health, and even punch them in the goddamn face just because you can," I laughed.

"Sounds like a good stress release," Vetra chuckled.

"It really was. Sometimes you want to sit and get involved in a good storyline. Others? You just want to blow shit up and punch shit until it dies," I remarked. "My turn for a question. Sid told me
that I have no idea how much being on the Tempest means to you. Why does it mean so much to you?" I asked.

"And here I was expecting casual questions," she chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll answer. We were stuck on the Nexus with our thumbs up our asses with over a year. The Scourge killed a bunch of leadership, and that wasn't a stable transition. The golden worlds were fucked, but we still had the hope that an ark would soon show with a Pathfinder. And none did, not even a sign of one. We had first contact with Kett, and they attacked us. We came all this way and found hostile aliens. Tensions rose, and the mutiny happened. Then after a lot of people died or were kicked off, the Krogan left because of Spender and Tann's stupidity. And we watched from the Nexus as our colonies on Eos died. I've walked into the apartments of people I called friends to find them hanging from the ceiling with a rope around their neck. I've found others in a bloody bathtub with their wrists slit. Until Hyperion showed up, the only thing keeping me going, maybe even keeping me from doing the same, was Sid. How she always seemed so happy. Little did I know," Vetra muttered the last part. I grabbed her shoulder, gently with my hand, and she sighed. "It means so much to me, because after over a year of failure after failure, I saw something that could help us succeed. I wanted, I needed, even, to be a part of that. Give me more reasons to stay sane than Sid, get rid of some of those reasons to just snap. I knew that whoever the Pathfinder would be that we got from the ark that showed up would be working hard on making this place home for everyone on board. And there was no way I was going to allow someone else to judge what would be good enough for my little Sister. I needed to go with this Pathfinder so that I could help make damn sure that Andromeda would be the best it could possibly be for her. Then I was on a team of good people, and we had our first win. We found the Vault, we got Prodromos up. The first step. We met the Angara, and are succeeding with them. Every day I've been on that ship, that hopeless void I felt from before, is getting filled up. And I'm a part of it. I've been part of doing the same thing for everyone else back on the Nexus. And now? I'm more determined than ever to make this place even better for Sid. She deserves nothing less," Vetra explained.

"You know, that may just be one of the best, most heartfelt reasons that anyone on board has for being here," I remarked. I was impressed with her reasons, and respected her all the more for them.

"Thanks," she grinned. "Guess it's my turn again. Hm… What was your father like?" Vetra asked.

"Heh, not sure there's a simple answer to that one. He was… distant, but also not, I guess. A military man, through and through, but he was always awkward, with everyone but mom. He tried, Sarah and I knew he cared for us, he just… didn't really know how to show it. But when you know a man for over twenty years you tend to pick up a few of their tells. The little things he may do or say that wasn't quite the exact same, but could tell that he meant the exact same by them. I think he recognized that, and it was enough, for both of us. It was when mom got sick that doubting it became next to impossible. He dropped everything, brought us back to Earth, and worked his ass off day and night trying to save her. He'd often have this look in his eyes. It was… sad, I think. Regretful. Things he didn't know how to say. As mom progressed, we'd see that look more and more, a growing intensity each time," I explained.

"Think I saw the same look in my dad's eyes not long before he left. It wasn't uncommon for him to leave at weeks at a time, but he always told us beforehand. Guess that when I didn't see him walk through the door, I just… knew," Vetra remarked, making her connection with the story.

"Yeah, I think I know what you mean. So, my turn again. What do you like to do for fun? In your free time?" I asked, changing the topic to something less depressing. Vetra scoffed.

"Free time huh? Now when was the last time I had that. Honestly, I have fun doing this, being out here, with the crew. It hasn't all been fun, sure, but Eos felt really good, both times. Freeing those
slaves earlier felt damn good. But, back on the Nexus? I've always been running my supply chains, getting specific things for Kesh, doing favors to get favors or pay back favors, spending time with Sid. Well, when you don't drag me out to the bar with the others, that is,” Vetra joked.

“Well for what it's worth, I apologize that I dragged you away from work to go have a bit of fun. I promise I won't do it again,” I teased back. Vetra simply raised a brow plate and chuckled.

"Why thank you. But, seriously, I do get enjoyment even with the work I do on the Nexus. It's still good work. Helping people out, helping the Tempest out, I'm happy with that,” Vetra explained, yawning again. "Damn I'm tired," she murmured, head beginning to lull slightly.

"Come on Nyx, stay with me," I pleaded, yawning myself and feeling both freezing and tired.

"Let me… let me just, rest my eyes for a minute," she muttered again, head lulling now and I could tell her eyes had closed.

"Don't do it Vetra, we can sleep when we're back on the ship," I stated again. Vetra just groaned slightly and her head came to a rest on my shoulder. I could hear her breathing still, lightly, but breathing. I took a hand and placed it on her forehead. She felt cold. I sighed to myself. Well, if it's really that bad, I'll be following her soon anyway. I looked at her sleeping form against me, and given that I knew she was still breathing it just… felt nice, I guess. But I still had some fear, but lacked the energy to really… act like it. Then I remembered something. I still had a damn robe under this thing. And, well, she needs it more than I do. I began to stand, while adjusting Vetra so that she wouldn't fall to the ground without my support and worked on removing part of the under-suit so I could take off the robe. I worked it out and put the under-suit back on fully, shivering at the cold air and teeth chattering slightly. I chuckled as I noticed the scorch mark, remembering how I got it. Took a high energy bolt right to the chest, knocked my ass onto the ground right out in the open. And it was the woman sat sleeping in front of me who pulled me out of the line of fire. I leaned Vetra forward slightly, and worked her arms through the sleeves, and then tying it together at the front.

I returned to my spot beside her, allowing her body to lean against mine again. I could feel myself lolling off to sleep, and I was thinking. There's a few ways that this is going to end. The others will find, and bring us both back to the ship, alive, they'll find one of us alive, and the other dead, or they'll find both of us dead. There were three outcomes I felt… ok with. Obviously, both of us coming out of this alive. But also, neither of us coming out alive, or just her. I wanted Vetra out of this alive. And only then would I be ok with coming out alive too. Was it just because I know how much Sid needs her? No, because then why would I be ok with neither of us coming out alive? I guess… I don't really want to be around if she isn't. I imagined what our adventure so far would be like if Vetra wasn't around, and imagining what the future of it would be like and… it just, wasn't all that great. It felt… emptier. I wouldn't have this feeling of contentment. And going forward, if she did die in this cave and I didn't? I've had this enthusiasm as we've gone around Andromeda. This wonder as we've explored and seen new places. I don't think I'd be feeling that anymore. I looked at Vetra again, as she slept, breathing slow, but still there. I think you've grown on me, Miss Nyx. I don't think I want to live in a world where you aren't. And… well…

I think I want to be more than just friends.

Guess I know what those feelings are that I've felt with some of those more awkward talks. She seems to have everything I like to see in a potential partner. If nothing else, the things that matter. She's smart, she's caring, she's fun, a good person, and a good friend. And hey, I guess there is something physically attractive about her too. The eyes are almost mesmerizing and there is a kind of… grace, to her as well. Heh, I know I caught myself glancing at her ass during the workouts, a
skintight under suit does kinda emphasize such things. And hey, I'm a red-blooded man, and she's a woman I've apparently been growing feelings for. That's just natural. I sure know women will do the same thing, as I've caught Sarah doing the same to some of my Alliance friends back home. With my mind easing, I too felt my eyes grow heavy, just about to fall asleep when a lightbulb went off inside my head, and my eyes shot right open. Of course! How could I be so stupid? Our damn MREs! Those things have so many calories in them and are made to be flammable just in case! I stood up again, ensuring Vetra wouldn't fall over, and rushed over to our armor, no longer feeling the cold as I knew a great way to, if nothing else, keep the two of us going. I pulled all the packets of MREs from both of our armors, unwrapped them, and made a pile of them on the rocky ground just ahead of Vetra. I keyed my omni-tool, priming a low yield incinerate round, specially programmed for starting emergency fires, with the proper fuel to burn, that is.

"HA! Hell yeah! Take that mother nature!" I exclaimed as a decently sized fire was born. Already starting to warm me up a bit. Sure as hell not as warm as back on the ship, but no longer as cold as I had felt. This will give both of us some much-needed heat, and should burn for a while too. I took a moment to warm my hands and then placed myself back beside Vetra. I'll admit to some temptation to wrap my arm around her waist, but I resisted. I still had no idea how she felt, and, well, I've never really been great at asking. Now, with the fire, I felt confident that we'd make it. I could still feel today's exhaustion tugging at me, but I wasn't fighting it as much as I had been. Soon, I couldn't bear the weight of my own eyelids, and they began to droop. The last sound I heard as I drifted off to sleep was a synthetic voice.

"Pathfinder, the storm has ended. Help is on the way."

---

**Vetra Nyx**

I groaned as I felt consciousness return to me. I could hear a machine beeping at a steady pace. Two machines actually, both keeping their own pace. As I opened my eyes, there were lights above me, almost made me close them again. Is this… the medical bay? What happened? Right, stuck inside that cave. Think I must have drifted off. Wait, Scott, he was there too, where is he? Is he ok? I thought, feeling panicked as I sat up straight, and let out a breath of relief to see him asleep on the other bed. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed something unfamiliar along my arm. I looked down to realize that my arms and torso were covered by… Scott's robe? I knew he wore one on Voeld last time, figured he had it on again today, but completely forgot about it in the cave. Not like I would have asked for it anyway. I gently grabbed the robe, feeling it. It was soft and warm. It felt nice. But that's not what I was thinking about.

Scott, the Pathfinder, is our best chance at making Heleus live. He knows that. He has a sister in a coma, and everyone on the Nexus is counting on him. And yet, he gave up something helping his own chances to keep me alive and as comfortable as he could. He really, truly cares, doesn't he? He stayed with Sid through the night, made sure I knew what happened, and was there helping me help her every step of the way. And I genuinely believe he'll be there for the future steps. He cares about BOTH of us. All my flings that I thought could have turned into something more ended because they didn't want me putting Sid first, or that being with them wouldn't allow me to put Sid first. But Scott? He understands. I think he's even putting Sid first as well. At least when not considering Sarah. I had even sworn off flings or dating for at least a good long while not long before I caught wind of the Initiative. But, maybe… Maybe this would be different. There was a warm, yet also calming feeling in my chest as I came to this realization. Heh, if it actually happened, Sid would shit herself. Thing is, I may be good with talking my way out of trouble, or talking myself into some business deals, hell I'm good at banter with friends too. But with something like this?
I've always been bad at asking. Lexi walked in with a mug of what I would assume to be coffee. She was about to take a sip when her eyes widened at seeing me awake.

"Didn't expect you to be up so soon. You've both had a long day and the cold was sapping your energy," she remarked, moving to set her mug down at her desk.

"So... what's the damage?" I questioned.

"Minimal to none, fortunately. Scott's survival training beat back the cold and helped the two of you survive and stay warm enough through the majority of the storm. It was when you stopped from exhaustion that there was any true risk. Still, I suspect that you both likely would have been fine in the end. But it was some quick thinking on Scott's part shortly after you passed out that eliminated most of the risks, buying more than enough time for you both," Lexi explained.

"What did he do?" I asked, curious. It couldn't have been the robe, as Lexi said it helped both of us.

"He remembered just how well MREs burn," Lexi chuckled. I looked at her, surprised, then just laughed.

"You're telling me that the whole time we could have gotten a fire going?"

"Yes, I'm sure that would have made everything much more comfortable," Lexi remarked with a smirk. I continued chuckling. Scott was still asleep or I'd have punched him lightly in the shoulder.

"So, how long are we going to be stuck in here?" I questioned.

"You're not. I'll just want to run a few quick checks and you're free to leave. When Scott wakes up he'll have the same treatment. As for the field, you're both free to go back out when ready. I still don't want Scott in another sprint, but something tells me he won't listen to that anymore," Lexi answered.

"I don't think either of us want to go back out on Voeld. Not unless we're going straight for the vault that is," I remarked.

"If I'm honest, I can't really blame you for that," Lexi chuckled.

"How're the others? And the slaves we freed?" I continued asking questions.

"The slaves have been safely returned to the Resistance. They've been receiving briefs on events since their capture and should be returned to their families soon. Those who aren't joining up at any rate. As for the crew, everyone else is fine, just worried about you two. I reassured them all but it's one thing to see, another to hear," Lexi explained. "Speaking of concerns, Sid tried to call you earlier. I directed the call to Jaal and he explained, while still making sure she knew you were ok. And before you ask, she's fine, just calling to check up on you."

"Then I have a call to make. Can the checks wait?" I requested. Lexi knew exactly why the call back couldn't wait, and allowed it. "Hey sis, how ya doing?"
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I've eaten, had a nice, hot shower, got myself suited back up, and had been cleared by Lexi. She was uneasy about me approaching another run for my life, but, respectfully, I told her that I'm tired of Voeld's shit. It's time to turn up the damn thermostat. Cora wanted to stay on to help Gil with repairs to the Periponia's flight recorder. And although I'd like to have Jaal on the ground, it would be better for us if he kept coordinating with the Resistance. That means I'm left with Peebee, Liam, Vreta, and Drack. Given that Vreta and Liam don't quite get along, this means Liam will be staying on board, as we need Peebee for the Rem-tech, Drack as our heavy, and, well, I like having Vreta around. I had already spoken to Jaal about staying at the HQ, and though he seemed to prefer being on the ground, he understood, and was already there getting set up. Gil was inspecting those schematics from the Angaran engineer and was head over heels with them, eager for his next opportunity to mess with the Nomad. The ground team I had chosen arrived in the armory.

"Alright guys, time for the part that I know you all just love. The briefing," I chuckled. "First step of the plan is to head to the monoliths, get them online, get the vault online. After that, Jaal and the resistance are working on a possible lead that will get us an opening in the Kett base. If they aren't ready, we start at Hajarl station. A research outpost not far from the HQ, and go from there," I explained.

"So long as I get to shoot shit," Drack mumbled.

"Then it seems we're good to go. Let's hop in the Nomad before those doors open," I suggested. They did just that. Drack and Peebee in the back so there wouldn't be two large figures in the back, and Vreta in the passenger. Seems that she, the ever resourceful, had a spare chest piece. But, odds are it may not be as effective as her standard. The doors opened and out we drove, following the blinking lights, cutting across to the same ridgeline where we helped that Resistance squad yesterday. Now, we were heading almost directly south east. We passed Hajarl station and the occasional small Remnant site, but we could investigate once the vault was online. Hell, it may even activate something that was previously inactive at these sites. Up some hills, down some others, we travelled. Finally, we could see the Monolith rising into the sky close by. Now it was just a matter of finding its controls. We started from the top, finding a crevice in the ice leading to the backside of the Monolith. Groups of ice...poles sticking into the air along the sides. And... ok, that's weird. The area surrounding the controls reads as a safe zone. Warm enough that our physiology could withstand the cold here for a long time. Peebee got to work gathering any data she could from the area as I searched for the glyphs.

"Ok, am I going crazy? Or is it feeling warm right around here?" Vreta muttered.

"Maybe the Monoliths have a short range or localized processor. Here it keeps the area warm. Don't think it works beyond the control area though," Peebee theorized. It sure sounded like the most likely. The scanner detected three different wires trailing off in separate directions, connecting to the glyphs. Two were on top of the taller structures on either side, and one was behind a different tower, which is where I started. Once I had that, I combined a mix of biotics and my jump jets to jump across to one of the other structures, making it rather simple to scan both glyphs. Now for the Remdoku. This one was more complex than those I've done before. In the past, they had been a 4X4, which meant four glyphs. This one was a 5X5 grid, which meant five
glyphs. I called Peebee over, as two minds are better than one, and working together we solved it easily enough, breaking the encryption and activating the Monolith. It rumbled to life, the lights on it visibly beginning to glow.

"Hey, we're getting pretty good at this," I chuckled. "Next monolith is directly to the southwest. Let's move." Navigating there was rather simple, HUD or no HUD, as there was a beam of light from the first Monolith leading directly to the next one. Both of them, in fact. The Southwest Monolith appeared to be mostly buried under the ice, only a quarter or so showing from above the ice shelf, another crevice that most likely led to the controls. We drove towards it and a large, lumbering blue creature stomped its way into our path. It was shaped like a giant gorilla, but clearly more reptilian. Hell, it looked like a Fiend but without the same kind of bony armor. Wait, they exalt Challyrlion... Ah fuck. I kept going full speed ahead and it roared at us, preparing to charge. As it began, I activated the vertical thrusters and launched ourselves right over it and speeding towards the end of the cavern. The Nomad slid to a stop and we all rushed out.

"Jaal," I exclaimed over comms, "We got a big blue bastard that looks a lot like a Fiend. What can we expect?"

"That's an Eiroch. They're essentially the same creature, but a Fiend's armor is stronger," Jaal explained.

"If it's basically a Fiend, it should have those fleshy slits on his sides. I'll cloak, and get behind him. You guys keep the bastard distracted," I ordered, activating my cloak as the others held their ground as the Eiroch turned again, annoyed that it had missed. I moved at the crevice, bullets flying out to greet and anger the beast, and it began lumbering towards my crew. I slipped through some more icy structures and was now behind it. A flak round from Drack staggered him and I leapt onto the beast's side, a primed grenade in hand, and I shoved it as deep as I could into the flaps of flesh in its sides. It roared out in pain and I leapt away, and it began to turn and face me, likely to charge. But it never got to. The grenade detonated and it cried out in pain, toppling over to its side, a large chunk of missing flesh, it's intestines even revealed, shredded, and bleeding immensely. Wouldn't be long till it all froze.

"Good kill kid, good kill," Drack complimented, a pat on my shoulder as I walked by, leading us all to the controls. It was still cold inside the crevice itself, but as we entered the ice cave housing the controls, it warmed up significantly. There must be some localized heating around here or something. I repeated the same process as before, scanning for wires, following the wires, probably climb something, scan the glyph, return to the console. Another 5X5 grid Remdoku puzzle. Didn't appear to be as difficult as the last one, but I called Peebee over nonetheless. Again, two heads are better than one. Shortly, the Monolith hummed to life and we returned to the Nomad, onto the next one, nearly a straight shot east, and another beam of light guiding us along. We followed it past a Remnant site when SAM detected an odd signature from it. We drove right to it, exiting the Nomad and taking cover as the Remnant bots were still docile, for now, and gave ourselves a head start. Peebee let her virus run amok, collapsing shields and nearly collapsing bots themselves, with Drack, Vetra, and I running clean up on everything else. I had launched an incinerate round onto one of the Observers, immediately following up with a throw, and the resulting explosion of flame seemed to detonate some Remnant capsules in the area, creating a chain reaction of more explosions. Ones with flame, an electrical burst, and even an Eezo explosion. The chain reaction quickly wiped out all other bots, and the area was secure.

"HA! Few better ways to take down the enemy," Drack laughed.

"I meant to do that," I remarked casually.
"Uh huh. I'm gonna call bullshit," Vetra chuckled. I shrugged, and scanned for just what was causing the odd signal. I found a device along a wall, and as I began to scan it with my Omni-tool, there was a voice.

"Hey. Human. You got a death wish?" The feminine Angaran voice asked incredulously.

"Not as far as I know. Living's kinda nice. Who is this?" I replied.

"Holger. Resistance. I'm hiding in a sniper nest two clicks from you. You're standing in a Kett minefield. Didn't you notice the warning marker?" she questioned. I felt more at ease knowing she was Resistance, but a minefield? Really? Damn it.

"I'm not exactly trained in how the Resistance marks hazards. Plus, I was rather busy following the trail of light coming from the Monolith," I answered.

"Pathfinder, I believe that the warning marker may have been the unusual reading I had detected. A coded beacon. My apologies," SAM explained.

"I'm just surprised you didn't trip any mines. Not sure how you'll get out in one piece, either," Holger remarked. I could hear Vetra and Drack both grumbling to themselves.

"I think we'll figure it out. Thanks for the heads up," I ended.

"Just work fast. Kett patrols pass through pretty often," she warned.

"Alright, everyone, use your scanners to locate any mines to the east for a way out of here. We'll clear a path for the Nomad," I ordered. "Just give us all a warning before you shoot it." I led the others, in a kind of arrowhead formation, scanning in front of us, and the others scanned the sides. We called out, and shot mines as we saw them. Sometimes the detonation of one would detonate the other. Soon enough, I was confident that we had cleared a path. Plus, the spacing of the mines led me to believe that we should be fine regardless now. We returned to the Nomad, drove over the center of the Remnant site, and down the path we cleared. We were safe.

"Congratulations for drawing the Kett back here," Holger teased over comms. "They'll want to lay new mines. I'll make em pay for each. If I see you around base, I'll stop and say hello. Holger out." Gruff, but I think in a good way. Hardened by life in the Resistance, but that doesn't mean she isn't friendly. I think she just has her own way with that. Like dad did. Now, and hopefully without distraction, we could continue to the next Monolith. This one didn't appear buried at all, but the control center might be. We'd find out soon. It was surrounded by a field of those poles of ice reaching far into the sky. One was almost as tall as the Monolith itself. They were like stalagmites. I wonder how they were made.

"Sid will want to see this," Vetra muttered, using her Omni-tool to take pictures as we drove through.

"Mind sending me copies? I think Sarah will too," I requested. Vetra took a few more than my Omni-tool pinged with a message. The same pictures she'd been taking. "Thanks."

"Hey Jaal, what is this place?" Peebee questioned over comms.

"What are what? One moment, looking at your coordinates… ah, the Pillars of ice? We call them Gesh Asan Vaon. Hands reaching for the stars." Jaal answered.

"Pretty name for pretty things," I remarked.
"Do the Angara know how they are made?" Peebee asked.

"No, we do not. Not for sure, at least. They are always common in regions with Remnant architecture, however," Jaal answered.

"Maybe they're exhaust pipes designed to blend in with the landscape. Would explain the steam or whatever it is that some of them give off from the top," Peebee theorized. We crested a small hill and there was a small, Angaran pillar in front of us. Crates strewn about.

"There you are, Pathfinder. Ready for that Heskaarl training?" a familiar voice patched itself into our comms.

"Andraknar? How did you know we were here?" I questioned.

"Motion sensors and Biometric scans that each of our beacons are equipped with. I heard you were on Voeld and have been waiting. Up for it?" he explained.

"Well, since I'm here, sure," I answered, leading the team out of the Nomad.

"Excellent. This one is simple. A test of combat efficiency. The beacon will summon the Remnant, and you will be timed on how quickly you can eliminate all threats. My record is five minutes, fifteen seconds," he explained.

"Then let's get to it," I answered. I ordered the squad to assume defensive positions and activated the beacon. Several Remnant appeared to the North, Observers and Assemblers alike. With the use of Peebee's virus, they were taken down quickly. Once the last fell, more of the same formed to the East. Again, with the help of the Virus, they were quickly neutralized. Another wave, hopefully the final, formed again to the North. Assemblers, and a Destroyer.

"Shit, he's at a distance work damn fast on those Observers, then take out those turrets before it gets close!" I ordered, opening fire on the Assemblers first, the aid of the Virus, again, making short work of them, but it was useless against the Destroyer. It entered its siege mode, charging its main cannon as the last Assembler fell, and we all focused fire on the left side turret. I could tell the shields went down just as the first massive shot burst out from the machine, and I used my jump-jet to dash out of the way, and then again for the second round. The first completely demolished the crate I was behind, and the second went soaring past into the distance. The turret itself, was an easy target, and we quickly found ourselves with less bullets coming our way. Under another barrage of tech attacks and bullets, the shields on the other, followed by the turret itself were destroyed as the Destroyer inched closer and closer. Now it was just a matter of taking down the shields before it could get too close. It entered siege mode, charging another shot but the shields were still up, but failing. We continued firing. It was just before the Destroyer was finished charging that the shield's collapsed and I fired a final burst into its firing chamber. The timing must have been perfect as just when the first round of my burst struck, the whole thing exploded spectacularly.

"Three minutes, on the mark. Impressive. Early on we learned to make every shot count. As have you," Andraknar remarked. "I'll see you at the next beacon." Before I could respond, the comms were closed. We traveled closer to the Monolith, ice clinging to its side as the weather seemed determined to bring everything under its icy grasp. There was another crevice, leading down into another ice cave. No doubt, where the controls would be. We ventured down into the cave and it was… beautiful. There was ice above us, like it was the underside of the frozen lake we've been driving across, all reflecting the glows of Remnant light beautifully. Reminded me of old pictures I've seen of ice caves in Scandinavia back on Earth, or even Titan, where my Dad had some of his N7 training. Even the way the noise bounced around the cave was… unique.
"Well, I'm taking more pictures," Vetra muttered. I let her do that as I searched around for the glyphs. One was in the cave, but one wire seemed to lead to the surface. I took Drack with me, but allowed the others to remain. We were climbing back out to the surface when Drack spoke.

"So, I hear Sid's staying at Kesh's place while we're away. You happen to know why?" he asked quietly. Ah, this might be uncomfortable.

"Why do you think I would know?" I questioned, dodging the question a bit. He raised a brow, not buying it.

"Because you and Vetra are close. Plus, I already know that she let you sleep on her couch the night before Vetra made the arrangement," Drack answered. I sighed. Sid said she'd be ok with Drack knowing. And if he doesn't get an answer from me he'll probably ask Vetra. And, well, she doesn't need to keep thinking about that while we're away from the Nexus. We were now outside, heading to the back side of the Monolith.

"That night, Sid began screaming in her sleep. A night terror. Vetra was away dealing with Spender so I did what I could to comfort her, and told Vetra when she got back. But we had no idea what it was about. That morning, we sat Sid down and she told us everything. Back during the Mutiny, this Asari… monster, tried to… force herself upon Sid. Luckily, it lined up with when the Krogan were released, and this guy, Nakmor Straxx, barged in and stopped her. Killed her, and tried to comfort Sid until his unit called for him to reinforce," I explained. "But, please, don't breathe a word of it to anyone. Vetra doesn't need to have people talking to her about it, and Jaal has been a bit of an impromptu therapist while Vetra works on finding a professional she trusts, that isn't Asari. If you're going to do anything, just… be there for them both. Not drawing attention to what happened, just… subtly, I suppose."

"Fuck..." Drack muttered. "Her of all people. I won't breathe a word of it to anyone, not even them. And I'll see about getting a few little treats for the both of them," Drack answered.

"Thanks, Drack. I'm sure it will mean a lot to them. Hell, it means a lot to me as well," I stated. Drack gave a small grin and patted me on the back.

"I'm sure it would kid." We found the last two glyphs, on a little bit of Remnant architecture sticking out of the ground and returned down into the cave, Vetra and Peebee waiting for us. Peebee joined me for the puzzle, and Vetra and Drack remained on standby just in case we got it wrong and Remnant showed up. This one was easier than the last two, and we quickly solved it, and the Monolith hummed to life. The sound as it echoed around the cave was simply beautiful. A once in a life-time kind of thing. We returned to the surface, and now the beams from each Monolith were converging right on top of the Vault. We travelled up another large hill, to find the beams converging in the air over a small mound. No doubt just what that mound would be. We approached and the beams vanished, and two very large towers burst from the ground, snow crumbling off it as they rose higher and higher into the air. I had little doubt that it could be visible from both the Kett base and the Resistance base. The towers finished extending and the mound itself rose, revealing the entrance into the vault. The towers, the entrance, seemingly the whole area, just hummed or boomed with energy as the ancient machine was slowly returning to life. We parked outside the entrance, and down we ventured. To the gravity well, and then down, deeper and deeper into the planet, to the vault itself.

The gravity well itself was warm, likely from all the energy being used to sustain it as it shot us downwards, before gently releasing us on the ground. The moment it released us from its grip, it felt even colder than outside. Negative fifty-two degrees Celsius! Just like I said when we were stuck in the cave, metal just gets colder.
"Fucking hell that's a transition," Vetra shivered. Not eager to deal with it for long, I rushed for the emergency power console. Maybe that would do something. The entrance room began to glow a bit brighter as power was being transferred, and several shield domes like we had seen in the Eos vault appeared. Maybe… I immediately stepped inside one and felt glorious warmth sweep over me.

"In here! Little climate control bubble!" I called out. Vetra was the first to join me, followed by Peebee, and Drack lumbered along, almost uninterested.

"Oooh, that feels good," Vetra exclaimed, stretching her arms out.

"You guys can stay here while I go open the door. Think I see a console just up there," I explained. Vetra certainly didn't need to be told that twice. I stepped out of the field and just… fucking hell it's a very noticeable difference in and out of it. I wasted no time heading up to the bubble at the top of the ramp, warming up quickly before activating the console. As expected, the door opened, revealing a large, open cavern with the Vault's core at the far end. It's odd that the Eos vault was far more extensive than this. Directly on the other side of the door was another shield bubble. I rejoined the others first, then we rushed on to the next one. Just outside of the bubble, but fortunately within range for interface, was a console. There were two paths. The one already active on the right, which I suspected would lead to the core, given that it was level, and had another shield bubble, and on the left, there would likely be pillars for a descent down to where… something would be hiding. Curious as always, I interfaced, and switched our path.

"Peebee, come with me. The rest of you can stay here if you want. I suspect this will just be a puzzle, not a way to the end," I explained. Peebee eagerly followed, just as curious as I am, and Vetra was happy to stay in the warm bubble. Down at the platform where the secrets likely hid, was a console, and shield bubble. We warmed up in the bubble, and noticed that there were deactivated consoles lowered into the floor almost everywhere.

"SAM, I'd bet good creds that there will be several strings of consoles to use, and likely only one will lead us to something. You see the connections and can trace them faster than we can, I want you to mark each one we need to use to get to those secrets," I ordered.

"Affirmative," SAM responded. I activated the console, and my HUD displayed a marker to one on a ledge above me. A pillar rose from beyond the ledge and Peebee grabbed whatever was inside. Once she was done and off, I used the first console to get the bubble back and warm up. Yes, it was that fucking cold in here. We repeated the process and up rose a piece of Rem-tech that flooded our scanners with data. Wouldn't mind getting more weapons that never run out of ammo. After another re-charge in the bubble, Peebee and I re-joined the others back by the entrance, keying the console to switch the paths back to original. Vetra didn't seem too thrilled with the idea of leaving this little pocket of heaven, but she wouldn't argue, or stay behind. It likely helped that we could see another shield bubble just on the other side. We jumped across the pillars, and the moment we touched down on the other side, the bubble still out of reach. Closest, as an Assembler, that Drack immediately took down with a single blast of his Krogan made shotgun, and that allowed us to close the gap into the bubble before the next two Assemblers could open fire. As if it mattered. Drack followed up his standard shot with a flak shot, the shrapnel shredding the two other bots into pieces.

I looked up, seeing that the ledge was very easily within reach. And, as you may expect, the Pathfinder likes finding new paths. There was a console, and a door. Not hard to figure out what needed to happen here. On the other side, was a kind of storage room, comparable to those we'd seen before. It bent off to the right and there were Assemblers on patrol, currently non-hostile. Cover formed from seemingly nothing to greet us, and continued around the corner. Clearly, we'd need it. There was a Destroyer, sitting there in wait. And while it's not in combat mode, my HUD
identified that it's shields were fully online.

"Drack, can you take care of both at once?" I questioned, whispering, just in case any loud noises would alert the bots.

"Yeah, they're close enough together now," Drack confirmed.

"Do it. Vetra, Peebee, work with me to get those turrets down ASAP." I ordered. Drack shot a flak round as Peebee and I began a barrage of tech attacks, Vetra using her Cyclone's disruptor rounds to both drain shields, and prime it. There were several tech explosions and the shields around the turrets, at least, were fried, allowing the guns themselves to be quickly taken down by an incinerate, or a round from Drack's Ruzad. The explosion from the final turret seemed to collapse the shields of the Destroyer itself, and just as it was getting its bearings on us. As it entered its siege mode, we easily and quickly neutralized the massive threat with a few well-placed shots to its core. More than we needed, but it never hurts to be safe. Not when your gun never runs out of ammo, at least. Once the machine had finally blown up, instead of getting close as its core overloaded, we entered the shield bubble at the far end of the room, relieved for the warmth. To the side, was a console.

"Now let's see what they were protecting, shall we?" I suggested, beginning my interface. "Bah, more Remdoku. Four by four though, should be easy," I remarked. I solved the puzzle, and was absolutely FLOODED with data. Our scientists would have fun with this. "Whatever all this shit means, you're gonna have a field day, Peebee," I chuckled. Though I couldn't be sure, as she was wearing a helmet, I think she seemed pretty happy with that. Heh, funny that it's going to be the Krogan without one, probably doesn't even feel the cold one bit. Returning to where we had fought the Assemblers earlier, we ventured on. Once again, two paths. On the right, pillars that we could jump across to the Vault's core. To the left, a Nullifier guarding the way to another platform with a shield bubble. Once again, I'm a curious little shit. I ordered Drack to fire an incinerate charge with me, burn through its armor as best we could and finish it off. Mine struck first, already engulfing the machine in flames when Drack's made contact. The combined fuel and flame of both charges created a large explosion, and when the flames died, the bot was heavily charred, and its lights flickering. Some of the metal on its legs and core had even melted off, forming puddles of molten metal on the floor. A single round from my sweeper was enough to finish it off.

"Buuuurn baby burn," I muttered to myself, as I led the others across. Across the gap, and in the bubble, more Remnant were created in front of us, but currently still docile. Peebee's virus put an end to that, but as it ran amok, it quickly didn't matter, as all the bots ended up as crumpled heaps of metal on the floor. There was another tree like organism, almost identical to the one we had seen in the Eos vault on the second level, and I could clearly see a third above that. Obviously, we investigated. Another shield bubble, but on the wall? More of those holographic data packets. Peebee scanned them before I even noticed, almost giggling to herself with all the untold amounts of data now at her fingertips, and excited with the notion of finding out what every little byte of data meant. Only one thing left now, and that was the core of the Vault. We descended back to being level with the platform, and crossed the gap, using more conveniently placed pillars. Once more, several Assemblers and Nullifiers both were quickly created in the blink of an eye, yet remained docile. With nothing more than a nod to confirm, Drack and I both launched an incinerate charge at the nearest Nullifier, as Peebee's virus was unleashed once more. I finished off the Nullifier as the resulting explosion cleared, and Vetra began sweeping her Cyclone left and right, taking down any Assembler in her field of view. Only thing left was another Nullifier. We did nothing more than take it down under a hail of bullets, piercing it's armor just as it entered its siege mode.

"Love my job," Vetra muttered out loud.
"No one told me anyone was getting paid," Drack joked.

"Must have forgotten to put that in the contract. Oh well, should have read it," I teased. Drack just shook his head, laughing slightly. With everything dead, the wise choice before activating the vault would be plotting our escape route, so I turned around, facing the entrance, to see what I was working with. "Alright, pillars on the left we can use to get back to the second platform. From there, run like hell to get to the first, through the door, then the final console. Get ready everyone," I ordered, beginning the interface with the vault core console. "On your mark," I began, getting my legs in position for the sprint. "Get set," I continued, finger hovering over the final key that would activate the purification field. "GO!" I cried out, pressing the button and shooting off alongside the others. The vault almost seemed to roar to life as the normally green lights of the vault glowed red, and the shield bubbles no longer had a green hue to them, but a red one. Must have had their polarities switched. But, we could avoid it no problem. Remnant were spawning, but of little concern if we just kept running. We jumped across the gap of the first platforms and passed the threshold of the entrance, and I spun to face the console, slamming my hand down into it. Fucking hell that purification field hardly seemed to get close to us at all, and it immediately began to recede.

"And there we go! This place will have beach side resorts one day, just you wait," I joked. Earning a few chuckles from the others.

"Hey, it's actually warm in here now. Already hard at work," Vetra remarked. She was right, it was warm.

"Huh. Let's go see how the surface is, shall we?" I suggested, and the gravity well began lifting us into the air. Feeling a bit pleased with myself, I adjusted my weight to begin doing flips in the air.

"Enjoying yourself, Scott?" Vetra remarked casually.

"Just a bit," I answered, as we reached the top. Unfortunately for me, my stomach was to the ground, and the field dropped me to the ground without righting me up, and I fell flat. As you can expect, the others were laughing, but even with her laughter, Vetra offered a hand up, which I humbly accepted. We left the vault, and the view that greeted us was simply… stunning.

"Wow, would you look at that…" Vetra murmured. Where once there had been an essentially permanent cloud cover and constant snowfall, the sky was clear. Entirely. I could not see a single cloud in the sky. And… while it didn't feel warm, it certainly felt bearable.

"Let's get to the roof," I suggested. Peebee and Vetra eagerly followed, and Drack took his time. But I think even he could appreciate it. I did something I remember that I loved doing back home on Earth. My sister and I, normally accompanied by Dad when he was around, would find a nice, quiet spot, with absolutely no form of artificial light to be seen, lay down, and just… look up. The sky was bathed in an emerald green from an Aurora stretching across the sky, and we could clearly see Voeld's rings streaking around the planet. And the stars… so many stars. I had an idea, I keyed my Omni-tool to search the sky for something.

"There! Right there! Follow my finger, just past that one bright star over the ring," I called out, sticking my arm out to single it out, Peebee and Vetra lying or sitting down beside me

"I see it, what is it?" Vetra questioned.

"That's home. That's the Milky Way. Everything we left behind, just right there," I muttered.

"Wow… looks so small from down here," Vetra mused, simply staring.
"I could just lay here for hours. Do nothing but watch. Wish Sarah was here, we used to do this kind of thing with Dad all the time," I remarked.

"You'll bring her here one day, Scott. Don't worry," she reassured. I took a deep breath, and I believed it. I would. Looking up at... this? At the vast, immeasurable universe surrounding us? Makes all our problems seem so... small. They don't look quite so insurmountable anymore.

"Scott, this is your doing, I take it?" Jaal questioned quietly over comms.

"Yeah, we did it. We're just sitting here on top of the vault's entrance, watching," I answered.

"Thank you. It's... beautiful. The clouds only part on Voeld once every few years. And I take it we'll be seeing it a lot more, won't we?" Jaal remarked, seemingly distracted. I can't imagine why.

"I think so," I answered.

"I think almost everyone at our Headquarters has stepped out onto the mountainside to watch. You should hear some of what they're saying. They're inspired. Feeling more at peace, even. As am I. Thank you. Stars and skies guide you, Pathfinder," Jaal explained, and ended, the utmost respect in his tone. I honestly felt touched. Just from activating the vault. I kept looking up but the head of a Krogan loomed over.

"Come on kid. I know it's pretty, but we still got stuff to do. We'll come back," Drack stated gently.

"Yeah... you're right. We'll get going," I sighed, sitting myself up. The squad returned to the Nomad. Well, guess we're going to Hajarl station next.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We arrived at Hajarl station, having accomplished a few other things along the way. We stopped the Kett from setting explosives along a bridge, and we had uncovered several interesting leads. Kett attempting to extract specific Remnant data at specific sites, stray Angaran bodies with tracking chips, and even intercepted orders from Kett command. A shuttle control center, where orders for their movements are dished out. Would certainly give them a black eye if nothing else. We had alerted Resistance via Jaal, and he confirmed that several Resistance squads were being dispatched to follow up on these leads, narrow down their origins, and then send us the origins, as the sites were likely well defended, and currently, all Resistance squads sizeable enough for such assaults have been dispatched elsewhere on the planet. He had even successfully and officially given us permanent access into the Resistance networks on Voeld. I quickly received an automated message from HQ. "Message of the day: Stay relaxed, and fuck the Kett." My team and I had quite a laugh at that. Words to live by.

The Nomad was parked alongside a Kett land transport, clearly stolen and re-purposed by the Angara, as shown by the Engineers working on its underside. They, as well as several Angara within the small village built into a cave stopped what they were doing, watching us.

"The Pathfinder, eh? The Resistance told us to expect you. And they mentioned that the weather might be your doing?" an older woman questioned.

"They'd be right. My team and I activated the Remnant Monoliths, found the vault, and turned it on," I answered.

"Well, you just made my teachings a lot easier," the woman chuckled. "Names Pasi, I run survival training for those here. Before, a big part of that was making sure everyone got sunlight whenever
they could. Even if it meant breaking cover. That's not a problem anymore."

"Angara need constant solar exposure?" I asked.

"Important for our biology. Our bodies draw energy from it, even helps us build a charge. Without it, our bodies weaken. Immune system too," she explained.

"Well, that's interesting. So, we're here to see what the people of Hajara station need. Anything we can help with?" I questioned, raising my voice for the crowd.

"I got something the savior of the Moshae could help with,“ a man exclaimed from the crowd, stepping forward. "My name is Skeot. My uncle, Niilj was recently captured by the Kett. I'm not a fighter yet, or I'd rescue him myself. I know exactly which labor camp he's at, and he's not the only prisoner. If they move him we'll lose him forever," he pleaded.

"Just give me the coordinates," I answered. He nodded thanks and sent them to me. It was to the north east of here. "Thanks. We'll head right out." We returned to the Nomad and the crowd dissipated, beginning our journey to the labor camp. We stopped along the way to find the missing supplies of the first trader I spoke with, Sohkaa Esof, from Aya. His contact was dead, and there was a Kett ambush, yet we re-claimed the supplies, and continued our way. We were about halfway there when Jaal called us over the comms.

"Scott, one of our teams just gathered both the password and location to the shuttle command center. Sending now…" I got the coordinates, seeing where they were in the region on my HUD and laughed.

"Well whaddaya know? It seems the labor camp doubles as a shuttle control center. Guess they hope that it hides in plain sight rather than looking like a bigger target. Thanks, Jaal, we were already on our way to that location," I explained.

"Then this will save you a trip. I'll inform you when we have a location for one of the other leads," Jaal stated, ending the call. We could see the camp now. The main complex, with two landing pads, and then to the left was an area they seemed to be leaving both supplies and ground vehicles. Likely better to start the fight from there. I drove to that side of the camp, parking the Nomad behind a rock sticking high out of the ground, proving us with ample cover to exit the Nomad, and led the team into the storage area, fast. No doubt there would be Kett taking shots at us from around the landing pads. I charged into the Chosen that was on guard duty at the entrance to the storage area, and sent my omni-blade into his throat, dashing to the side as I pulled it out to enter cover. As the body crumpled to the ground, I noticed that my blade had sliced through that half of his neck, leaving it dangling from only a bit of flesh. Guess I didn't really pull it out. The other Chosen just ahead of him was quickly put down by Peebee's sidewinder, and the Wraith next to him hadn't even cloaked when a round from Drack's Ruzad shredded its head. To the left was a prison cell, a lone Angara trapped within, grates generating an energy field as additional security keeping him in.

"Don't worry! We're getting you, all of you, out of here! We'll come back when the Kett are dead!" I reassured.

"Let me out now! I can fight!" he pleaded.

"You aren't at your best, and I won't risk any of you. The Kett will pay, I promise you that," I retorted. The man wasn't satisfied, clearly, but we had to keep moving before he tried to argue. Together, Peebee and I charged the two Chosen at the back end of their storage, and the Kett in the main facility were beginning to take pot shots. We both used our omni-blades to neutralize the
Chosen as Vetra and Drack covered us. A dropship appeared, releasing a squad of Chosen. I took a grenade, and threw it, and it landed at their feet just as they landed. Now they were landing in many different places in many different pieces. Drack was having a hearty laugh at that. We managed to reach the catwalk connected to the landing pad, stepping over bits of Kett. An Anointed began to charge his weapon alongside some Chosen, but I had other plans. Quickly, I focused my biotics and formed a Singularity, right in front of the bastard's face. I think I heard him cry out as his body was sucked in, face first, towards oblivion, and the Kett beside him followed, giving us the means to gain a foothold on the high ground. Another shuttle was inbound to the pair of landing pads on the far side of the camp, and on the foothold we gained, where the Singularity just died out, was another cell, prisoner inside.

"Stars, whatever that was, I'm glad you're using it on them," she remarked.

"And only them", I replied, pulling out my black Widow as the Kett got into position. Heads were about to pop. One Chosen was still running into position, and I positioned my crosshairs, just barely leading the shot, and pulled the trigger, a satisfying boom as the round raced right into the soldier's head, knocking him to the floor, instantly dead. "Peebee, barrier," I ordered, as now all the Kett were lining up to take shots. She focused her barrier in front of me, while also allowing my gun to poke out of it, so I could still shoot. And with the full focus of an experienced Asari, and only a small barrier? That could last a while. Even under fire. I fired two more rounds, neutralizing two more Chosen, and re-loaded. I'd rather have a full mag ready for the Anointed there, just in case. They were still firing. Wonder if they've ever heard the definition of Insanity.

I took aim, and fired, right at the Anointed's head. The bullet was deflected by his shields, but they immediately collapsed, yet he kept firing. I could even see him grimacing through my scope. If I was near him, I could probably hear growling. I pulled the trigger again, and a Chosen jumped into the way, attempting to save the Anointed by taking the bullet himself. It didn't matter. The bullet from the Milky Way's deadliest sniper rifle went straight through the Chosen's head, and into the Anointed killing both. If a bullet could sweat, it wouldn't have broken one. I reloaded again, but now No Kett heads were showing themselves.

"Get up close and personal. I'll stay here waiting. Peebee, you too," I ordered. The barrier in front of me fell, and the others moved to do their job, following the catwalk to another landing pad and descending, making their way to the ramp up to the other landing pads. I could see parts of Kett bodies taking cover, waiting, but not enough for a good shot. At least, for all I knew, if I took that shot, it would go straight through their armor, but not hit their body itself. I continued watching, and one of those Kett bodies was soon replaced with a flaming metal ball, which exploded, and shredded more Kett. I could hear them crying out in pain. Who could have guessed it? Drack, the Krogan, was leading the charge to unsuspecting enemies. He ran up the ramp, roaring, Ruzad in one hand, hammer in the other. He shot at a Chosen further away, as one closer turned to open fire, Drack swung his hammer at him, impacting him in the side of the head, crushing every bone and more that it met, undoubtedly killing him as it collapsed his skull. Drack laughed as he ran for another Kett, holding his Ruzad to the side and swinging it, using the bayonets to slice open his stomach, guts spilling out, the Chosen falling to his knees, trying to grab them and put them back, as if believing that would save his life, even if Peebee hadn't provided a merciful bullet to the head as she passed. I'll admit, I was a bit impressed. Drack's shields had flared from the rounds of the three Chosen still alive, and he was clearly taking fire, but just shrugging them off. To the arm, chest, leg, I think I even saw one strike one of his forehead plates, but they only served to make him angry, unable to burn far enough into the thick Krogan skin to do any real damage. Not at this amount of fire, at any rate.

Focusing away from Drack's impressive show, I took aim on one of the Chosen, crosshairs right on his head and pulled the trigger, killing him, and another round from Drack's Ruzad killing another.
I had expected one more shot to end it, but instead he ran right at the last bastard, in the middle of two prisoners no less, and launched his forehead into the Chosen's knocking him to the floor. He might have been dead for all I know, but Drack took his left foot and stomped it down onto the bastard's head, crushing it under his hulking strength. Even from here, I could hear him let out one final roar mixed with laughter, holstering his weapons.

"Really glad you're on our side," the prisoner behind me muttered. I chuckled, and holstered my sniper, and moved to free her.

"Good work guys. Free the prisoners by you, and have them meet in inside the facility," I ordered. Vetra waved to confirm their acknowledgement and the energy fields in the woman's cell were gone, and the bars being raised. "You heard what I told the others. We'll get you situated and a Resistance shuttle to come for pickup," I reminded. She thanked me, and did as requested. With a jump and a dash, I was in front of the first prisoner we found. "Areas secured. Told you we'd be back to free you. Meet with the others inside the facility. Mind the Kett corpses," I warned.

"Mind them? I'm more likely to piss on them," he growled. "But, thank you," he stated. I think he'd have preferred fighting, but he was alive. I did a final, quick check for any more prisoners, and found none, returning to the landing pad where the entrance was. Drack standing outside as a lookout. He nodded, his breathing heavy, but slowing down from the combat. His forehead plate had a scorch mark, maybe looked a bit heated, but he was fine. Krogan blood rage, huh? The main room of the camp looked like a simple barracks. A table, and some bunks. A few crates, likely for food as well. The prisoners were sat down at the chairs, Vetra and Peebee running a quick medical scan for any kind of injuries that Medi-gel could fix.

"And the last of the heroes of the hour come to join us," one of the men sitting down exclaimed. "And just in time too. I would have given us another day at most. No thanks to Eraana's jabs," he chuckled, jabbing a thumb towards the woman.

"If the Kett can't handle being called mildly insulting things, that's on them, not me," she defended with a smirk.

"See what I mean?" the same man chuckled. "We owe you. How'd you find us anyway?" he questioned.

"A man named Skeot at Hajarl outpost told us his uncle, Niilj was taken here, along with several other prisoners," I explained.

"Good lad, him. I've told you the Resistance could use him," the woman stated, looking right at the same man I had been talking too.

"So you've said before," he muttered. "The resistance still needs to be debriefed. When's the shuttle coming?"

"Soon. On our way here we learned they also use this place as a shuttle command center," I answered.

"Niilj, what about the data drive? It needs to get to Buxil so she can start the analysis," the woman reminded.

"We can do that. Where is she?" I asked.

"Hmph, now we must depend on our rescuer for more than a rescue. Buxil is in Techiix. The people there can lead you to her specifically," he explained, handing me the data drive.
"Excellent, any idea what's in it?" I asked.

"Codes we stole from the Kett base when we tried to infiltrate. We managed to get quite a lot of their network," he answered.

"Well if this doesn't get us a way into the base…" I muttered. "We'll get it delivered as soon as possible. Now, stay inside just in case what I'm about to do draws any Kett over here. Vetra, Peebee, get ready," I ordered. I interfaced with the console alongside the door, inputting the password that the Resistance team had uncovered. The door remained locked. Not only that, but the two doors to the outside opened.

"Kett shuttle! Inbound!" Drack exclaimed, readying his weapon. I could hear the hum of it and ordered the Angara to stay put, rushing to meet the others, the only decent cover being the sides of the door. Must have been a trap. The shuttle lowered over the landing pad, and a squad of Chosen, an Anointed, and a Destined jumped out. Oh, well this will hardly be that bad. I keyed the flamethrower in my armor and stuck my left arm out, waving it slowly side to side, engulfing each of the Kett in flames as the dropship flew away. One may think that the shields of the Anointed and Destined would keep them safe, but no. Kinetic barriers only serve to protect one from projectile. A flamethrower is heat and fire. That's no projectile. After a few more waves of my arm, the dying screams of the Kett easily heard, some already dead, the flamethrower ran out of energy, deactivating to recharge. The Kett already dead had the bones on their head melting over their face, their armor melting into their flesh, and those still alive were experiencing the same fate. We did a sweep, careful to avoid being caught in the flames on their writhing bodies to put them out of their misery. The smell of cooked flesh in the air.

"Well, guess we're done here then…" I muttered, assuming that there was no control center. At least not here at any rate.

"Pathfinder, I am detecting a control console in the next room. It appears linked with GPS data," SAM informed.

"Wait, the data was real? Those fucking idiots tried to bait us with REAL data, assuming we wouldn't survive? Who the fuck would ever do that?" I exclaimed.

"You're kidding. Anytime you lay a trap, baiting someone with information on one of your critical operations, you ALWAYS, make it bogus data at a bogus location. No matter how many damn troops you send for the ambush. Fucking idiots," Vetra muttered. Still just… exasperated at the arrogance, I returned inside, the chuckles of the Angara at Kett stupidity, and entered the room that apparently the password still worked for. More beds, and weapon racks with a terminal. I interfaced, allowing SAM to do what he needed to do. After that, I just shot the hell out of the thing.

"Command signals nullified. Several Kett shuttles will be grounded," SAM informed.

"Jaal, shuttles grounded. The skies will be a bit clearer for the Resistance, might even be able to take them out, and prisoners ready for pickup. Heading to Techiix with a data pad that has a bunch of Kett codes. From their HQ of all places," I explained.

"Excellent. A shuttle is on its way for pickup. Get those codes there as soon as you can," Jaal stated. We returned to the Nomad, seeing Resistance shuttles arrive as we drove off.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder
We arrived in Techiix, having made a pit stop at a medical cache to re-stock it, and were promptly faced with a Kett ambush. A pair of Wraiths and Chosen. Bastards were waiting for someone sick or dying. We were almost done driving across the frozen lake, or even ocean that Techiix stood on the bank of, passing by a small group of rocks when there was a call on an Angaran channel. For us.

"You out there, mind helping me with something? There's a wraith cloaked just by your position. I've been tracking it for a while and it just pulled a smart little evasion that threw me off. Just let me know where it is, I got the shot," the man requested. He was confident, not cocky. I stopped the Nomad, and scanned around with my scanner, finding an odd heat signature against a pile of rocks.

"Hiding on the other side of the rock I'm next to. The guy with an arm in the air," I called out, waving. We heard the sound of a rifle discharging, and could almost see the green bolt of plasma race through the air and pierce right through the wraith's skull, dropping it out of cloak.

"Thanks," he stated.

"An impressive shot. Do I get to meet you?" I asked.

"Sure, why not? I'm on the platform with a heat lamp just outside the Daar," he answered. I could see it from here, and was moving back to the Nomad when I heard an odd noise. It had to be a creature, the way it seemed to... hum, even sing. Almost sounded like a whale. I looked into the sky, and found nothing. But below? I was standing on thick ice, but could clearly see down. There was something big moving down there. It was both like a massive shadow, easily longer than the Nomad, but also a light, as at least it's entire backside was lined with glowing dots. I could make out its head, it's fins, tentacles, it's tail, almost it's entire shape. And there was more of a similar kind of song it was making. The creature leisurely passed by, but there were more. I could see two passing by side by side, with a noticeably smaller one in between them. It was like a light show under the ice, with music to go with it. I looked behind me and could make out other moving lights swimming under the surface of the ice.

"Jaal, what are these things, under the ice outside Techiix?" I questioned over comms.

"Those are the Yevara. Our last piece of living history. We have many legends and myths of their songs and lights. And stories about them are the only ones to have survived the Scourge. They're magnificent, aren't they?" he explained, and I had little doubt he was smiling.

"It's certainly something else," I chuckled. This was reminding me of one of the reasons I'm here in Andromeda. This, and the sky above Voeld. To see a view like what's above us, and to see amazing new creatures like what are currently swimming below our feet. I chuckled as I could see Vetra taking more pictures of them. I was about to return to the Nomad with the others, when the juvenile we saw just a moment ago seemed to turn around, and get a bit bigger. It flipped itself upside down, glowing eyes looking right at us, and I could see its mouth moving slightly as a higher pitched song greeted our ears, and the Yevara tilted its head to the side inquisitively. I removed my helmet and set it down on the ice and got onto a knee. The juvenile seemed both surprised, and even more curious that this weird creature removed its head, and beneath it was another head, its tentacles and fins waving about to keep us in place. I placed a hand against the ice, smile on my face. The Yevara seemed to inspect it through the ice a moment, and then placed one of its tentacles just on the other side, eyes looking right into mine, and it made more song. I laughed gently at the connection I was making with this creature when one of the larger ones returned, gently drawing a tentacle along the juvenile, gaining its attention, a deeper, yet still high-pitched song as if to call it along. The young one's head turned to see the adult, before turning back to mine, one last song as if to say goodbye, before turning away, it's tentacle lingering a moment
I love my job.

Chapter End Notes

Loved writing that part.
The Nomad was parked behind the guard platform, and I was walking up to the man next to the heat lamp holding a sniper rifle, who had clearly been waiting for us.

"There you are. I take it you were watching the Yevara?" he questioned.

"Yeah, a little one swam back and got real close," I explained. "Anyways, where'd you learn to shoot like that?"

"My father. Taught me as soon as I was old enough to hold a gun," he answered.

"Glad you don't seem eager to point that thing at me," I chuckled.

"You're not Kett, you're safe," he stated.

"What about Remnant? They ever get a bit close?" I asked curiously.

"No, not really. But when they do, I'll take them out. I heard there's a big one out there somewhere, but I've never round it," he answered. An Architect, maybe?

"And just how often do you get a chance to shoot the bony bastards?"

"Not as many as I'd like. Resistance patrols keep most from getting through," he remarked. "I pick off the stragglers. Normally, it's just Wraiths, like the one you helped with."

"You ever miss?"

"Miss?" he chuckled. "Never."

"So, you're not part of the Resistance? Why not? With an eye like that you'd be a huge benefit," I suggested.

"All the time. But my family would never allow it. Not after my brother," the Angaran explained.

"Well, I don't expect you, let alone your family, to take an alien's advice here. So instead, let me give you a means of contacting Jaal Ama Darav. He's a Resistance fighter that joined my squad," I offered.

"Wait, Jaal? He was a friend of my brother, I know him. Maybe he can convince my family. Thank you," he stated.

"The only thing I will say, and I'll say it because it seems like a bit of wisdom our species share. Is this truly what you want to do?" I questioned.

"It is. I want to help my people," he stated, convinced of it.

"Then tell them. In my experience, a good family doesn't keep family from doing what they truly want," I remarked.

"Thank you. I'll certainly put more thought into it. I'm sure you have more to do here than recruit people for the Resistance. Good luck out there," the man ended. I began to lead the others to
Techiix when a pair of Angara, a man and woman, approached.

"Pardon us, Pathfinder. But we noticed you out there on the ice, watching the Yevara," the man began.

"Heh, did more than just watching. A little one seemed just as curious as we were and swam up to the ice, watching us through it," I explained.

"One did? Very interesting. Anyways, I believe you can help us. And the Yevara," the man stated worriedly.

"Tell me everything," I requested.

"Thank you. The Yevara have lived on Voeld for millennia, and Angaran folklore about them are the only ones to have survived the Scourge. They're beautiful, intelligent creatures, which explains their curiosity. They are our closest tie to our past," the man began.

"And now your people will poach them right out of existence," the woman beside the man accused.

"Woah, hold on, what? Are they Nexus or exiles? If Nexus, I'll storm right back to Tann and have one hell of a talk with him. Exiles? Well I have guns," I remarked, anger creeping in. If these people continue it could destroy everything I've built with the Angara. Plus? It sounds like these creatures are already lacking in numbers. I can't let the last piece of living Angaran history die out. And if these things are as intelligent as the man seems to imply, and the curiosity of just the juvenile, they shouldn't really be hunted. Hunting for food is one thing, but then you hunt something that's plentiful, like Adhi or Challyrlion. If you want Earth examples, Rabbit, Deer, or Duck. You don't go hunting giant whale things! And hunting purely for sport, like compensating for a tiny penis by going to Africa and hunting an Elephant or Rhino or Lion, just for a trophy, is a crime against nature. And getting a Rhino horn for some bullshit Eastern medicine that doesn't fucking work is just as bad. Especially when those species are already endangered.

"About a dozen of Yevara have been killed since outlaws of your kind landed on Voeld to hunt," the Angaran man explained calmly. "We have no resources to track these poachers, and the Resistance is spread too thin."

"At this rate, our only link to our history will disappear forever," the woman stated.

"I promise, we will stop them. One way or another. Do you have a lead for where I can begin?" I requested.

"We do have one location we know of. It's been abandoned, but the supplies are still there. You may find leads to the others there," he suggested.

"We have Kett data to drop off for analysis, and then we'll head straight there," I stated.

"Thank you, that's all we can ask," the man replied, returning to his work. Inside the Daar, which was built into the side of a cliff of ice, there seemed to be a kind of fight club going on in the center of town.

"Wanna go a round, Kid?" Drack chuckled, looking at me.

"Uh, no thanks. I just healed from a broken rib, I'd rather not break all my limbs so quickly," I joked. Drack just rumbled low with laughter.

"Been awhile since I've had a sparring match. If we didn't have so much to do," Vetra muttered.
"Guess it wouldn't be bad to get some hand to hand training. But, not now. You're right, there is a lot to do," I remarked. As we were looking around for Buxill, we picked up a few more favors. An Angaran man who requested that we retrieve a map of ancient Voeld from a recently destroyed Daar in the east, and a historian requesting that we keep an eye out for Kett records of their invasion. We finally found Buxill in a building to the back right, she was on a call with Do Xeel. Apparently Niilj was her brother, and he hadn't even called to let her know he was ok, and was heading out on another mission.

"Excuse me, Buxil? I have something for you," I got her attention.

"From my brother who can't stop being a hero?" she remarked, crossing her arms. "Yes, Anjik told me to expect you. My son, Skeot, told me he'd sent people after Niilj. I thought it would be more lives lost. Nice to see I was wrong. Thanks for getting him out. Losing him would've set our efforts back months," she explained.

"Not to mention he's family. I know just how hard losing family is. Glad I could spare you that," I remarked.

"Thank you," she smiled. "They talk about your abilities, but no one's said anything about your kindness."

"And I thank you for yours," I smiled back. Wait, I'm wearing a helmet, she won't see it.

"Now, let me see the data drive, please," she requested. I handed it to her and she inserted it into her console. "Hm, it's still encrypted, but I should be able to crack it soon. I'll be in touch," she informed. Well, that should let us handle the Yevara. I thanked Buxil, and returned to the Nomad with the others.

"Scott," Jaal called us over comms. "We have the location of where the Remnant data the Kett were extracting is being sent. A Remnant site north of Hajarl station. We believe the Kett have set up camp within the facility," Jaal explained.

"It's going to have to wait a bit. We just received word from scientists at Techiix that Nexus exiles are hunting Yevara. We're moving to put an end to it now," I informed.

"They're WHAT?! Alright, that takes priority. Please," Jaal requested, appalled that anyone would be hunting the creatures. We drove over to the Poacher site, and it was abandoned, just as the scientist told us. There was a crate, and a hole in the ice. Fortunately, we found a data pad with coordinates for another site. And it mentioned something about a contractor. So, they were being hired to do this? And I would think that only Angara knew about them. Weird. For the next site, we passed by what appeared to be an Ancient Angaran city, surrounded by a Kett shield. It was identified as Ja Nihk. The next site was also abandoned, but another data pad. Oh, these bastards are going down. According to the data pad they speared a calf! And the adults went berserk, nearly got the fucker too. It also gave us another lead for a location.

"If they surrender, we bring them to the Resistance. Let them do what they deem necessary. If not, take em down," I ordered on our way there. We followed the power conduit for the shields around Ja Nihk to what was likely a river before the planet froze over. On one side of the line was an abandoned Kett camp, likely cleared by the exiles. On the other, was an Exile camp outside of a cave. I brought the Nomad to the abandoned site. I ordered the others to set up along the supports for the power line while I stayed back as a sniper. They got into position, the exiles somehow not noticing us, and I lined up a shot. That would be their signal to get started. It was a human, in red and grey armor, largely patched together maybe. They had their back against a land vehicle, arms wrapped across their chest. I pulled the trigger, and the upper part of their head vanished and the
body slumped to the floor. The sound of my massive rifle caught the attention of the others and they took defensive positions along crates and barriers on our end of their encampment. An Adhi jumped over one wall, quickly put down by Vetra. Wonder how they learned to tame them.

Another exile stuck their head up, firing a rifle, likely an Avenger, allowing me to put a bullet in their head. I think there were only two left on the outside.

"Push forward! Quickly!" I ordered. The others were running ahead of me, given I was farther away, Peebee likely looking for a target to charge, as I was. Vetra and Drack simply looking for cover. As we were running, an Asari stood, obvious given her lack of helmet, and formed a barrier in front of both her, and A Turian. But he was equipped with a shotgun, and at this range, not viable, and we were able to grab sufficient cover. Vetra opened fire on the barrier, but the rounds bounced straight back for her.

"SHIT!" she exclaimed, ducking straight back into cover. Fortunately, the barrier seemed to collapse, and I centered my crosshairs on the Asari, and pulled the trigger. Shit, she had shields. I reloaded, but she was already back in cover.

"I got this," Drack muttered, taking their moment of pause as a challenge. He ran forward and mantled over the crate they were hiding behind. They both stood, and he grabbed both heads and slammed them together. Both must have been dazed as Drack finished the two off. The area outside was now clear, but there were clearly more crates inside. And it wasn't a small cave. I couldn't see any more exiles, but that didn't mean they weren't there. We had no cover when I first caught sight of them, but I think they must have still been getting prepared and didn't notice us slam into cover against the rock pillars. There were four. Humans with rifles, I think. And grouped up. Well, I know a way to deal with all of them. I used my biotics to charge the one furthest from me, knocking him to the ground with my sudden appearance, and then focused a ball of dark energy into my hand, and slamming it into the ground, catching those around me in its detonation. Leaving myself unharmed, and the others scorched or eaten away as the bonds holding different atoms of their bodies together were broken.

"Damn amateurs," Drack muttered.

"These are what we liked to call, discount merc groups," Vetra chuckled. We ventured further into the cave, expecting more resistance, yet finding none. At the end of the cave, were crates, a crane, and a massive hole in the ice, an Angaran woman, and a large Yevara corpse. Bleeding from a large wound in its side, blood pooling onto the floor, the lights on its body dim.

"Hold your fire. Perhaps we can talk?" she requested, hands raised in the air. "The people I hired shot at you. And you took care of them. I understand that. Now let's talk," she pushed. I scowled, but knew she wouldn't be able to see that.

"You're going to have a hard time gaining any sympathy standing next to that," I remarked, anger in my tone, and pointing at the dead Yevara. "Tell me why I shouldn't turn you into the resistance."

"So the Angara sent you, then. I'm sure they told you the stories. How the Yevara are the only living history we have left. But these creatures might also hold the key to our way against the Kett," she hinted.

"Don't beat around the bush. Explain," I enforced.

"I've been performing tests. An enzyme in the Yevara's skin could treat the effects of Kett weaponry. If I'm right, our fighters could heal faster. Push back against the Kett," she explained.

"An enzyme? Then you could have stopped a long damn time ago! Enzymes are protein! We
synthesize that all the damn time! Get a single skin sample, copy its exact make up, and synthesize
it! You don't need to go around killing them for each little bit! Then you'll just run out and be back
on square one!" I exclaimed. "While I'm sure the Angara want ways to better their war against the
Kett, they will not accept their history as the cost. And I wouldn't either. As you fight your enemy,
you must ensure you don't become your enemy," I quoted. Well, that has several meanings with the
Kett. "I'm taking you in. Your research will be transmitted to the Resistance, and any samples will
be confiscated to be synthesized. Not one more, damn it. Drack, make sure she doesn't run off," I
ordered. I contacted Jaal next.
"Jaal, Scott here. You get the information that was transmitted?"
"Yes, I… what is this?" he questioned.
"Turns out those exiles hunting Yevara were hired by an Angaran scientist. Said she found an
enzyme in their skin that can treat wounds from Kett weaponry. Thing is, she could have just
gotten a single skin sample, and synthesized more of the enzyme. The Initiative would be willing
to help with that," I offered. "And this also means we have yet another prisoner for transport."
"I… see. A shuttle is on its way, and I will speak to the Commander about the enzyme. Thank you,
Scott," Jaal stated, ending the call.
"Come on, let's take this thing down," I ordered, gesturing to the crane. I placed explosives on its
supports, keeping it onto the surface, and we all stood back as they detonated. The supports blew
clear off and the crane collapsed into the hole in the ice. As it sunk, I could hear the song of
Yevara. It sounded… happy, somehow. And then a head poked out of the water. The shape of it
reminded me of a killer whale, yet the mouth reminded me of images I had seen of Yahg. A prespaceflight species back home that slaughtered diplomatic first contact teams. The creature was
nearly identical to the corpse sitting to the side of the hole. It angled its head to look straight at us,
and I keyed my Omni-tool to record audio, and the visuals from my helmet. Two more heads
popped up. And they sang, in unison. Their whale like cries echoing through the cave, and it
sounded like an angelic choir almost. Just more animal than human. We could hear them singing
through the ice before, but that's muffled. This is… something new. Soon, the song ended, their
mouths closing, and they gently dove back underwater.
"Am I the only one feeling a bit freaked out by how smart these things are?" Peebee questioned.
"Definitely not," Vetra muttered.
"Well, that's going to stay with me for the rest of my life. Now, let's bring her outside for the
shuttle," I suggested. There was already a shuttle touched down, waiting for us. An Angaran man
strode forward to meet us, taking the woman from Drack and cuffing her.
"Get the hell in the shuttle," he growled. "Thank you, Pathfinder. We won't forget what you did for
the Yevara," he continued.
"I think they just thanked us themselves," I remarked, sending him the file. "Enjoy that on your
way back." He nodded his thanks, and I gave Jaal a call. "You may want to pass this around," I
suggested, sending the file. "Enjoy." Our next task? Figure out what the hell the Kett were getting
from those Remnant ruins.
We were descending down another gravity well, having arrived at the facility north of Hajarl. Jaal
had called back on the way, ecstatic with what we recorded. Apparently, no one had ever heard a
Yevara sing except through the ice, and microphones with static planted into the ice down below.
That… feels pretty special. We reached the bottom of the gravity well, and a Destined appeared


over the edge, likely suspecting more Kett. His face appeared shocked as he found quite the opposite, and was quickly taken down by our combined fire. Fortunately, he was the only Kett in the room.

"Pathfinder, the Kett were feeding data to the console behind the gravity well," SAM informed. I made my way up there, a Kett device attached to the console. I interfaced, and a door opened. "Analyzing data... The Kett were gathering data in an attempt to weaponize the Remnant."

"What?! Were they successful?" Peebee questioned, clearly alarmed.

"Not yet. There are more output devices in the area. Destroying them will ensure their work goes unfinished," SAM explained.

"You heard him, no time to waste! Find and take them out NOW!" I ordered, leading a charge further into the facility. There was a lone Chosen on guard, waiting, and then found us. Peebee got a shot into his head before he could raise his weapon, And Drack appeared in front of me, lifting a cloaked Wraith as he ran, and then running his knife down its belly and tossing it aside. We turned a corner in the facility to see more Kett waiting for us and we moved to cover, Drack covering us with a flak round, killing two Chosen, the other two were easy pickings. Once dead, a door behind them opened revealing a longer corridor. An Anointed stepped out, gun ready, and opened fire, forcing us to take cover alongside where the door once stood, and several Chosen joined the brute. I took the drone from my belt and tossed it behind them, taking their distraction as an opportunity with the others to even the numbers a bit. Under fire from both Drack and I, the Anointed fell, and Vetr and Peebee both neutralized a Chosen. The final was left confused, turning back and forth until my combat drone put a double burst into his skull. I think we were clear, but you never assume that and act on it. We did a sweep, and found no more Kett. Just their devices, and we broke each one. Not only that, we even found a data core for Peebee. She was a bit more than happy to find it. As the last was destroyed, we briefed the Resistance, and got a call. Buxil.

"Pathfinder! The data you brought me? It's a map of the Kett command facility! Entrances, exits, everything! There's more. All entrances are shielded with a code that changes often. We have the code, but it's due to reset in a day! If an attack is to happen, it must happen now. I've spoken with Do Xeel. Your team is the only one that can mobilize in time, and she is offering to use a shuttle, and fly the rest of your team near a secondary entrance that is not heavily guarded," she explained.

"Send us the coordinates, we're on our way. And tell Do Xeel that I want Jaal on that shuttle too," I requested, ending the call. "SAM, patch me into Jaal and the rest of the ground team on the Tempest," I ordered. SAM complied. "Listen up people. We have our way into the Kett HQ. This is all hands-on deck. That means you too, Jaal. There's a transport heading to the Tempest to pick you up. Jaal will be on the shuttle. Cora, Liam, you two need to be waiting for that shuttle. We need to attack before we lose our window," I ordered. They all acknowledged, and we began our drive. The HQ was in the direct opposite end of the Valley as us, and we'd need to go around the back to get to our entrance.

I drove us there as fast as possible, not stopping for anything, and finally we were at the northeast corner of the mountain the Kett had built their base into. To the west, was a ridgeline that would lead us to the secondary entrance. There was still more ground to cover before we reached the Rendezvous with the shuttle full of the rest of our squad, but we were almost there, and I kept driving.

"Well, that's a drop," Vetra muttered, peeking over the side from inside the vehicle. We were now coming up on a cave entrance, and an Angaran shuttle, flying low, to avoid the range of AA guns, appeared behind us, quickly opening its doors and allowing our crew to jump out, and then
speeding away. I parked behind a rock that would provide ample cover for our way in, and waited for the others to join us.

"All that time hearing about you fighting while I was stuck coordinating has made me quite… eager, for a fight," Jaal chuckled.

"And I won't turn down a chance to take one of these places down again," Liam remarked.

"And I think I was just getting in Gil's way with the transponder," Cora muttered.

"And we'll need each and every one of you here. You may already know that this is the main Kett facility on Voeld. It coordinates all their efforts across the planet. We take this base out, and the Kett here will be crippled. That may allow the Resistance to re-take vast amounts of territory, and also buy time to secure and reinforce their population centers here. Inside this cave, is a secondary entrance blocked by an energy shield that we now have codes for. But these codes expire within a day, else we'd work with Do Xeel to get a larger strike force. But hey, we took down the one on Eos, we can take down this one too. Once inside, we fight our way to the main tower, taking down any AA guns and security systems we can along the way. It could allow Anjik to bring in fighters as reinforcements. Inside the tower, we find and kill their leader. Understood?" I questioned. All six heads standing in front of me nodded.

"Then let's go kick some ass!" I exclaimed, taking the weapon from my back and leading them over the rock we parked behind, and into the cave. Inside, were a pair of Chosen lounging around against some crates, quickly put down by the seven different weapons pointed in their direction. As they were put down, a squad of five further behind them rushed out, taking cover. I put one down with a burst from my Sweeper, and Cora's Crusader sent a slug into another's head. Peebee lifted one into the air, slamming him into another Chosen with enough force to kill them both, and Liam sent a burst from his Charger into the chest and neck of another. We pushed further into the cave, through a well-lit, narrow corridor to a large opening filled with crates, and an energy shield at the far end. And plenty of Kett between us. My team and I lined up in cover alongside some low crates and worked on making picks. An overload from Liam fried the shields of a Destined and a burst from me put it down. A Chosen further back was put down from Jaal's sniper, Drack sent a ball of scrap metal between an Anointed and another Destined, shredding both, and Peebee put a bullet in the head of the final Chosen. Damn just look at what a team can do.

"Damn I love this squad!" Vetra laughed, raising a fist slightly into the air as a minor celebration. With an unseen smirk, I approached the console that should control the shield, and input the password, the shield fizzling out of existence.

"Heh, heh, heh. Now they're fucked," Drack chuckled lowly. Ok that sounded both menacing and psychotic. Guess it's a Krogan thing. With the others at my side, we pushed further in. The cave still brightly lit, and warm. Heat lamps were everywhere. There was another open cavern, crates strewn about, and at the far end, a ramp leading up to another level, Kett ready and waiting. But certainly not enough. Jaal took cover to set up his sniper as the others and I ran just a bit further for a better spot. Gunfire raining down on us. But with so many of us and not so many of them, I don't think any shields collapsed. I could use a singularity, but it may be better saving that for when it's needed. I don't want to teach the Kett a lesson about spacing just yet. Jaal's rifle took out a Chosen above us as Drack's Ruzad tore apart a Chosen close to us, on the same level as us. I could see the cloaked form of a Wraith, but Liam saw it too, and opened fire, killing it. Cora charged the last two above us, and focused her biotics into a Nova, killing both, and we quickly joined her. Another corridor, another cavern. And in the cavern, more Kett. A pair of Chosen, and an Anointed. Easy pickings for seven well-armed, well trained individuals.
Finally, at the end of that cavern, we were outside. A clear path to the base itself. A ridgeline up to Kett structures. Four Chosen at the ridge began to open fire. I ordered the rest to fall back inside the cave, and Jaal to join me as a sniper. We both took down two at the same time, quickly followed by the next two, and I loaded a new thermal clip. We crossed the bridge, and began running up the ridge.

"I'd say 'Stay Frosty,' but I think we already are," I joked earning a few chuckles during our run. No enemies greeted us around the corner, just another part of the ridge going up. Around that bend, however, a crate and rock for cover, and four Chosen up ahead. We quickly took them down. The single shot/burst weapons were certainly being more effective than the rapid-fire weapons, but they still work as suppressive fire. And hey, we have yet to enter an environment where they can truly shine. There were a total of three structures out here. The closest, a smaller two-story complex, likely light security. In front of us, a larger, bunker or barracks like structure, also two stories. Likely the highest security. To the right, a single story, mostly open structure, closest to the main tower. Moderate security?

"Right, here's what I'm thinking. We split the teams in half. One goes to the facility on the left, the other on the right. We clear out both, and push together into the central facility. From here it looks like the left could infiltrate the upper floor, and that would make our combined push easier," I explained.

"Makes sense. Infiltrate both simultaneously, or have the left team draw their fire first?" Jaal asked.

"Let's go with drawing their fire. Drack, Liam, and I will take left. The rest of you will go right. Wait for the shooting, and then run for it," I ordered. The four others acknowledged and Drack and Liam moved to follow me to the side, up a small ramp into the left complex. No one was even shooting at us on our way up, but a cheeky Chosen was hiding at the side of the door, hoping to get a pick off. Thing is, Drack was at the corner first, and the Chosen's knife did nothing more than glance off his thick armor, and Drack grabbed his arm with bone crushing force, growling. I did not see more as Liam and I moved inside to take out the two other Chosen about to open fire on the Krogan. However, as I sent a shockwave towards the two Chosen, I could hear the Chosen who tried to stab Drack crying out in pain, even the snapping of bone. I did not see more as Liam and I moved inside to take out the two other Chosen about to open fire on the Krogan. However, as I sent a shockwave towards the two Chosen, I could hear the Chosen who tried to stab Drack crying out in pain, even the snapping of bone. With the other two knocked on their asses, Liam and I easily picked them off. I glanced behind as Drack joined us. The Chosen's arm was bent into a near ninety-degree angle. Backwards. And the knife he tried to stab Drack with was embedded into his forehead. There were a pair of Chosen firing at us from the front platform of the center complex, with a catwalk. connecting that and ours. I was still hopeful that we'd have some way to the second story, but we'd need to go up. The way I thought might be to our left was just a window in the complex, but there was a landing pad ahead and above us. We might be able to jump that gap.

While the two Chosen were forcing us into cover, I still had a sniper rifle. Not only that, but the most powerful sniper from back home. I swapped it out, and took aim. Both Chosen had entered cover to reload when I considered something I'm surprised I hadn't yet. This thing was made to pierce thick armor. Why would it not be able to pierce a thin, low wall? I knew where the Chosen had been standing, even able to see just a bit of bone from their backs, and made an estimate for where the head of the one on the left should be, and pulled the trigger. The bit of backbone I had seen just a moment ago collapsed to the ground and I knew my shot had killed him. I was centering my shot on the next Chosen, and even pulled the trigger, when he stood, the angle of which hinting that he was attempting to run back inside. While my shot obviously didn't strike his head, it did hit him in the leg as with a cry of pain he fell to the floor. But I had no idea if he was dead, or where in the leg I had shot him. Either way, he was neutralized. We ran outside and to the left, up a ramp to the top of the building. There wasn't catwalk over the entirety of it, but we could easily run across the roof and make the jump to the landing pad.
"Scott, the central complex has an automatic weapon emplacement on the second level. On our side, at least. But SAM believes the security systems are here, and if we disable those, we can disable the turret," Cora explained over comms.

"Acknowledged. Need backup?" I asked.

"Negative. There's enough cover back here to keep us out of its line of fire. We just can't push until it's down," she answered.

"Understood. We'll see if there's anything we can do from our end. Scott out," I finished. The landing pad on our side was lacking a turret, but there was a trio of Chosen and an Anointed, the latter already Charged up and the others were standing, ready to fire. Shit, these guys were going to be smart, weren't they? I was right, as soon as the Anointed stopped, letting his weapon cool down, the Chosen opened fire. And they'd likely keep it up until the Anointed was firing again.

"Damn bastards have us pinned," Drack growled.

"Grenades?" Liam suggested.

"No, we'd be in the open too long trying to get our throw right. I was hoping to save this for later, but when the Anointed stops I can take care of them," I replied. The Chosen kept up their barrage, until a much more rapid series of energy rounds began impacting the barrier. I began charging my biotics, and focusing them into the desired effect. I was probably glowing with dark energy by the time he stopped, and immediately stood, waved my hand as a way to release the buildup, and the universe's ultimatum appeared just behind the group. Two rounds had harmlessly pinged off my shields, and a third struck me in the right shoulder, on the outside end as my arm was outstretched. The round began burning into the armor, scorching the red and white paint of the N7 armor, but a round from a standard Kett rifle is still much less powerful than an Ascended's shot, and I, and my armor, were essentially unharmed. I'd just likely have a bruise for a small while. That was the last shot any of those Kett could fire as they were plucked off their feet, being dragged feet first towards the singularity. All were confused, all turned with their backs to the ground to see what was going on. But by then, it was too late, and they were gone. Plain and simple. Now we had our opening for the central compound. I wondered how the others were doing.

____________________________________

**Vetra Nyx**

The moment we heard gunfire coming from Scott's team, we ran. There were two ways to get to the far side building. Get closer to the central one and use a catwalk to cross a small ravine, or simply jump across the small gap, but stay further away from any fire. We jumped across, then jumped to what may have been a landing pad just ahead. To the front, a cave into the mountainside. To the left, the inside of this building and plenty of Kett waiting for us. Thing was, they were all facing the other entrance.

"Peebee, Cora, mind giving me a hand?" I requested. They both understood what I meant. Peebee formed a barrier around me. Large enough to protect the front of my body, but also places so that my Cyclone was outside, and would be able to shoot just fine. Cora kneeled against the entrance, and transferred her shields to my own, as well as the boost she could provide without this. I activated my tech armor, turned off my weapons safeties, and stepped through, weapon at my hip, finger on the trigger, and all the Kett in the room fully exposed. I counted at least ten Chosen, and I trusted Jaal to watch the other side for any stronger bastards.

"Surprise fuckers!" I exclaimed as I held the trigger down, and swept my gun side to side in a smaller arc, catching all the Chosen within it and riddling them with bullets. I could feel the
weapons heat beginning to vent against my body, but the armor, and the modifications I've made to it, did an excellent job of evenly distributing that heat all across my body. So instead of a searing burst of heat against one part of me, which would only harm me, and prevent me from doing anything worthwhile, it was more akin to that feeling when you first step into a hot shower. Thing was, the heat only builds up, and then it could start to burn my entire body. My plates would need to be buffed, heavily, and on my less protected, less heat resistant skin, burn wounds, blisters, that kind of thing. I was stupid enough to do that once. Felt like my entire body was experiencing the worst sunburn ever. But that's why I installed a few of my own safeties.

As the last of the Kett fell over from my onslaught, I stopped firing, and keyed the standard safeties back on, and slapped in a new thermal clip. I could certainly feel the heat, and while I couldn't claim that it was comfortable, it was better, even with the vault online, than this damn planet's cold. It was now bearable, but barely. With those Kett dead, I peeked over to the other side of the room. There was an Anointed dead, face first on the floor, blood pooling from around his neck. Thanks, Jaal. We moved to the far side of the room, there was more to clear out this side before pushing to the main complex with Scott. The door led to the outside again, crates strewn about catwalks. And a lot of Kett. They opened fire, forcing us back into cover inside. I didn't get a count as to how many were out there, but a lot of Chosen. Close, and close together.

"Jaal, throw a grenade at a group close by, give Peebee and I a window for biotic combos," Cora ordered. "Peebee, you get some close up, I'll get some farther back. Vetra, can you flick those safeties off?" she asked.

"Not yet. Still need to cool off. I can fire normally, but my own safeties won't let me vent into my armor. I can turn those off, but..." I trailed off.

"Then don't. Just get ready for some suppressive fire," Cora stated. I could do that. Cora told Jaal to throw, and he poked his head and arm out for just a split moment, and tossed a grenade onto a Chosen almost just outside the door. He tried to step to the side, but not in time, sticking onto his shoulder. He cried out and stumbled back, right onto the Chosen aside from him. The grenade detonated, killing both, and providing the momentary smokescreen that the two-biotics needed to step out and get started. Peebee picked up one Chosen, and moved him over the head of an Anointed that was suddenly very confused by the floating Kett above his head, and then she launched a warp at the Chosen. Alone, it would have certainly killed the Kett, eating through his body. Combined with this pull? The dark energy reacted violently, vaporizing the Chosen, and, if nothing else, the top half of the Anointed, and one more Chosen who was a bit too close. As Peebee was doing that, Cora did the same to a trio of Chosen further back, by the small, one story construct at the far side of this platform. The whole time, I was out in front of both, tech armor activated, gun firing. And Jaal taking more precise shots against any Kett we were missing. The area was clear. Given that I was the most defended of everyone in this squad, I took point, leading the others outside when I heard a humming noise from above.

"GET DOWN!" Jaal exclaimed, tackling me to the floor, Cora and Peebee stepping back inside. A purple and orange bolt of energy impacted, exploded even, on the other end of the catwalk, passing right by where I was just standing. A hole was punched through the catwalk, and part of the railing blown clean off, the edges all sizzling. "Kett turret," Jaal explained, getting off my back, while keeping his stomach to the ground. "Crawl back inside, keep your head down," he stated, crawling ahead of me.

"Thanks for that," I remarked, following him.

"Hmph, as if I would have simply stood there and let it happen," Jaal chuckled. "Plus, I'm sure you'd do the same if you heard a Milky Way turret charging up and I was none the wiser."
"Fair enough," I chuckled back. We were back inside now and were safe to stand. SAM's synthetic voice appeared in our comms.

"Lieutenant Harper, I am detecting a signal from the turret connecting into security systems in the building on the far side. If you can reach it, you can disable the turret," the AI explained.

"Understood. Thanks SAM," Cora answered.

"I should be able to identify the systems, and I know how to make sure they stop working. If we stay low, we should be able to reach it," Jaal stated.

"Better let Scott know. This is going to slow us down. And it may get him to keep his eyes open for a turret on their end," I suggested. Cora nodded and keyed her comms.

"Scott, the central complex has an automatic weapon emplacement on the second level. On our side, at least. But SAM believes the security systems are here, and if we disable those, we can disable the turret."

"Acknowledged. Need backup?" Scott asked over comms.

"Negative. There's enough cover back here to keep us out of its line of fire. We just can't push until it's down," she answered.

"Understood. We'll see if there's anything we can do from our end. Scott out," he ended.

"Let's get moving. He'll need reinforcements in there," Cora stated, getting down onto her belly and leading us along. Cora up front, me behind her, and I chuckled to myself as Peebee made what was, at least to me, a clear effort to get in front of Jaal. I had little doubt she'd try to draw his attention to one rather specific area. Not like there'd be much more to look at back there. After all, I had little else in front of me except Cora's ass. As we inched along, a part of me was… content with that, but another part was instead replacing it with a different ass. I… may have gotten a few glances… stares… while Scott was working out inside that cave. Hey, I'm a woman in my prime. May not be a Turian ass, but it was still one I could appreciate. Cora was now passing the end of the railing, pushing a Kett corpse to the side as much as she could. We may not have that railing anymore, but if we stayed this low, the turret wouldn't be able to see us. The very platform it stood on would be in its way. We continued inching along, and finally, made it to the other end. Cora was about to stand, weapon drawn, and push in, when Jaal spoke up.

"Stay here, off to the side a small bit. I'll cloak and disable the security systems," Jaal stated. I couldn't see him, but I could hear him activating the cloak as he vanished, and Cora began inching to the side now, Peebee and I following.

"We're beginning our infiltration of the center base. Status?" Scott questioned over comms.

"Waiting for Jaal to eliminate the turret now, then mop up the last Kett down here. We'll be joining you shortly," Cora answered.

"Acknowledged. We'll bunker down in a defensible location up here, get a few picks, and wait for you to join the fun," Scott explained.

"Understood. Harper out," Cora ended the call. Three detonations filled our ears, and that was no doubt our signal to go inside. The turret didn't fire at us as we ran in. I didn't even hear it hum. Inside, were three blown up consoles, a Destined flat on his back, throat wide open, a Chosen shredded by the shrapnel of the explosion, his arm blown off at the elbow, and another Chosen dead on the ground, a smoking hole in his head as Jaal slapped a new power cell into his Angaran
"Area cleared," he remarked casually.

"Scott, turret is down, and any other automatic defenses in the area," Cora spoke over comms.

"My scans of the systems also believe it has unlocked the secure storage facility you were in earlier, Pathfinder," SAM explained.

"We'll check it out when this building is cleared out. In the meantime, get in here," he ordered. We returned outside, weapons ready, and fresh clips, and moved to head inside. There were a pair of Chosen at the main entrance, just in case, and… a Kett corpse? It was laying on its stomach, arms sprawled out and, I think it had one of its legs blown off at the knee. Wonder how that happened. Jaal and Peebee quickly put down both Chosen by the main entrance, and there was another pair by the staircase leading to the second floor, which Cora and I both quickly put down on our way in. The sounds of our gunfire drawing attention from the sound of Scott's team's gunfire. The Kett seemed to be focusing on him, but as he said, bunker down in an easily defensible location. Now the forces were splitting in half. Two anointed placed themselves on the staircase, only one firing, however, forcing us into cover, and I think I got a glimpse of a Chosen or two. Ah shit, that shimmer there means a Wraith.

"Wraith, watch yourselves," I called out, eyes peeled for that telltale shimmer in the air. Cora seemed to be doing the same as her head snapped back, and she turned on a dime, Crusader ready to fire, and pulled the trigger, the slug breaking through the bony head of a Wraith and it decloaked, dead.

"Having fun with those Anointed down there?" Scott called out. The first stopped firing to cool down it's weapon, but then the second one was revved up and firing. "Yeah, they're getting smart. Don't worry, I got a present for them," Scott chuckled. I could see a small, metal ball fly through the air and land at the feet of both. Good throw. The grenade detonated and killed both, likely killed the Chosen I had seen with them. With the staircase now clear, we rushed to join them upstairs. There was a squad of five Chosen and a Destined still standing. Exchanging fire with the others. We were now behind them, and the others stopped, not wanting to shoot us on accident. We opened fire. Took them all by surprise, bullets in their back. Only the Destined had the time to recognize our presence, with his shields, but they collapsed quickly, and he fell to the floor, dead. The area was secure.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Fantastic work, team!" I exclaimed, standing from our bunkered down position and moving to meet with the rest of the squad. We had already managed to kill a few before they could join us, but they did a great job of wiping out the rest of them. As I joined them, I noticed that to my left was a console. Not only that, but it was shielded. They're hiding something in there. "SAM?" I asked, suspecting he'd know what I was asking about.

"It is shielded as part of a security lockdown of the base as whole. It is separate from the defense matrix that the turret operated on. There should be consoles nearby that can I can infiltrate, and shut down the lockdown," he explained.

"Peebee, Jaal, go check out the storage building. Jaal will flag down what's inside for the resistance," I ordered. "The rest of you are coming with me to those consoles, just in case the Kett don't like us poking around." Peebee and Jaal went off, as ordered, and the first console was downstairs. Upon deactivation, a shuttle arrived outside, no doubt planning to drop off Kett. Really
wish we had found a way to overwrite the turret. Ah well. We had already moved to greet the Kett by the time they started their descent. Drack just chuckled, and sent a ball of scrap metal between them all. Quite effective, as they were all killed. The next console was back at the same landing pad that, according to the others, the second, larger team had begun their infiltration from. Surprise, surprise, another Kett shuttle. Annoyed, I created another singularity just below it, expecting that any Kett who jumped off would find themselves immediately being sucked right in. What I did not expect, but should have, was that given its proximity, it began tugging at the shuttle, dragging it down. The pilot must not have noticed or realized in time, as the center of the ship had now entered the miniature black hole. With one part of it already inside, the shuttle was doomed, just like that. The near infinite force of gravity pulling it within this significantly smaller hole in the very fabric of reality began bending the ship from the middle, the front and back being raised into the air, pulled within. Metal groaning and engines sputtering. Kett had already begun jumping out in an effort to escape, but they too found themselves trapped within the gravity field, nowhere near enough speed to escape. The entire ship was consumed by oblivion.

"Fucking hell," Drack muttered.

"I did not expect that," I remarked.

"So, are you a walking AA gun?" Liam questioned, a bit of a chuckle in his voice.

"I… wouldn't think so. Even with SAM it's still tiring," I explained.

"And just how common is that thing?" Vetra asked.

"Hardly. Only skilled biotics even get training in it. I know it, learned it from my Huntress squad, but only the Matriarch in our squad could reliably use it in the field. With everyone else it just took too much time and energy to use," Cora explained. "It's impressive that Scott's been able to use it as much as he has."

"Yeah, so don't expect to see any exiles using this on us," I reassured. That seemed to satisfy the others, and moved for the next console, inside a cave. I do not expect to see a shuttle for this one.

"Scott, Peebee and I have found a large cache of data. SAM ran a search for me as I had suspicions. There's records of their first encounter with us. Copying and transmitting all related files to Do Xeel," Jaal explained.

"Good work. Come join us in the mountainside cave for the last terminal. Once that's done we can push into the main complex," I ordered. We waited for the two to rejoin us beside the console. None did. I had a hunch that they knew we were getting in, that sending smaller waves would not be sufficient. They were waiting. As we made our way back to the shielded security console, it occurred to me that unlike Eos, the commander wasn't screaming over comms. Whoever he is, he is calm, and confident. He has no doubt seen our abilities and is doing what he can with the little time afforded to combat those abilities, or at least to avoid them. If I'm right, then I can respect this commander's intelligence. I won't hesitate to put a bullet in the bastard, but if you don't respect your enemy and what they're capable of, then they will always catch you by surprise. The security console was deactivated, and still, there was no response from the enemy.

"I don't like this… not one bit. We should call Do Xeel for reinforcements," Jaal suggested.

"Agreed. The Kett are holding back, waiting. SAM, are all the AA defenses disabled?" I asked the AI.
"Affirmative. However, I believe that there is a hangar bay nearby which could launch fighters," SAM warned.

"Then we'll see if she's willing. Patch me in," I ordered. SAM complied.

"What do you need, Pathfinder?" she asked, as she was patched in.

"We're about to enter the main Kett tower, but Jaal and I both have the nasty feeling that the commander here is holding his troops back. The last two security consoles we used gathered no response from the Kett. AA defenses are down, but SAM believes that they could still launch fighters. If you're willing and able, we're requesting reinforcements," I explained.

"We just had a squad return from liberating a slave camp you gave them the lead to. One shuttle should be able to drop them off. ETA ten minutes," she answered.

"Appreciated, Commander. Pathfinder out," I ended the call. "She has our coordinates and a shuttle is inbound. We'll wait here for them to arrive, and then we push. If we're lucky, waiting like this may shake up their defenses and morale a bit," I explained. Soldiers always hate the waiting. Yet we still need to do it. The time passed, and the shuttle sped to just outside the central building, turning so that it's back was to the base and the doors opened, the squad quickly taking the drop, allowing the shuttle to speed away. I moved to stand and greet them, my squad behind me, as the Angaran squad fell in formation behind their CO. A man, given his broader shoulders.

"Pathfinder, Sergeant Tir. Honor to meet you," he greeted, holding his arm out in the Angaran version of a handshake, which I did my best to match.

"Honor is mine, Sergeant. Who else am I working with?" I requested.

"Marra Imel is my second. Skilled and experienced fighter, and she has some experience with tech as well. Khaal Serev, he's our marksman, Salvaan Ged, he's our designated tech expert, and Malshan Shik, she's our heavy weapons and demolition," he introduced, pointing a finger at each one.

"A fine group of men and women. Have you been briefed on my own squad?" I questioned.

"We read up on our way. Still have questions about those biotics, but I get the feeling the important ones will be answered in the field," Tir remarked.

"You won't be disappointed, trust me. Let's move," I ordered. We returned to the main tower, the circular room with a panel in the floor, and a console to open it up. "Everyone get ready around the circle. Shotguns if you have them. When I open this, either Kett will jump through to try and surprise us, or we'll see nothing, just waiting for us to jump down," I explained. The others did as told, gathering around with weapons ready, and I keyed the console. It opened, and there was nothing that rose to greet us. From the console, I could see that the room below had at least one ramp leading deeper into the base. "Hold position," I ordered, walking around the circle behind the others to see what the room held. It was absolutely empty. Completely void of cover aside from the walls. On the plus side, I could see that the ramp was the only other way in or out of the room.

"Peebee, Cora, I need you two to generate a barrier that will protect anyone who jumps down from Kett gunfire. Only make it a wall on the ramp side, over here. Jaal and I will cloak, and go down first. Then I'll put my own strength into the barrier as well, understood?" I explained. The two other biotics nodded. "Tir, the barrier will be near invisible, look for a purple shimmer in the air. While the barrier is there, any rounds the Kett shoot will bounce off. We'll all jump down in pairs. Cora, you'll jump down with one of the Angara after Jaal and I. Peebee and I will compensate."
Peebee, you and Drack will jump down after her, Cora and I will compensate. Everyone will run to the wall of the same side they jumped down on. Understood?” I questioned. Everyone acknowledged, and the two-biotics got into position, generating the barrier. Jaal and I cloaked, jumped down and ran to our respective sides. As I ran, I could see just… a wall of Kett waiting. Weapons ready. The commander knew about my singularity, I suppose he was hoping that this would simply be too overwhelming, and it wouldn't matter. Good thing I was onto him.

"We got a fuck ton of Kett down here. Move quickly," I informed as Cora and one of the Angara, likely Tir, got into position, and I put my own strength into the barrier, putting every pit of focus and strength into it that I could. They jumped down, and a barrage of weapons fire shot out to greet them. Fortunately, not only were the rounds deflected away, but they were being reflected back at the Kett! I could hear some cry or grunt out in pain, hopefully killing a few, when the Kett stopped firing, Cora and Tir moving into cover. Cora returned to the barrier as Peebee and Drack jumped down, but there was no Kett fire. I guess this commander does know the definition of Insanity. Now with three biotics pouring their strength into the barrier, the rest continued to follow, until everyone had joined us down. With that, we released the barrier. And not one Kett had opened fire during that time. And everyone had indeed confirmed that they were still there.

"Pathfinder, think I could have a go?" Malshan, the heavy weapons expert requested.

"Tell me," I stated.

"I have a plasma launcher. This one is essentially a smaller version of the weapons our shuttles use. If you keep that barrier up, I can send this shot straight down the center of their line. Kill a bunch of them," she explained.

"Do it. Wait while we get the barrier up," I answered. Cora and Peebee heard the conversation, and were already forming it when I lent my own strength. "You're clear. Wipe the fuckers out," I informed, and Malshan stood, holding the weapon with both hands down by her hip. I couldn't tell, as the whole squad had helmets, but I'd bet she was grinning as the barrel of her gun began to glow green as it charged, before a large ball of plasma shot forth, and Kett opened fire on the barrier likely assuming it had gone down. I could tell that there was significantly less gun fire as well, and all the rounds again, were bouncing right back at the Kett, and Malshan was charging another shot, having gotten a new power cell.

"Jaal, Liam, add some explosives to the mix, will ya?" I grunted as I continued to hold the barrier. "Drack, got any more flak?"

"Ha! You bet I do," he laughed, moving to stand by Malshan as Liam and Jaal lobbed a few grenades down the hall. I could hear both Malshan and Drack laughing, clearly enjoying themselves.

"Bastards are running scared!" Malshan laughed, holding up her smoking weapon. We biotics dropped the barrier, and the rest of the squad stood, looking down the corridor. It looked like hell. There were Kett body parts everywhere. Only one or two bodies still intact, and the ground was scorched to hell, the back wall beginning to melt, only rock on the other side. I don't think they'll try that again.

"You see how many got away?" I asked.

"A dozen, maybe two," Drack answered. "Doesn't mean there isn't more farther in though." Together, weapons ready, the twelve of us all ready to go at the first sign of trouble. We followed the path the Kett took, as it was the only path, down the ramp, to the right, down another ramp, and into a two-story room. Several doors, but all locked other than the one bathed in a blue light.
It's like a "room before the final boss" kind of room. But, we had no choice but to proceed. It was a hangar bay, several landing pads to the outside. We could see at least two, but that's all we got for the moment as there was an Anointed stood behind the console, weapon revved up, and plenty of Chosen further in the room. Guess they learned what spacing was. Fortunately, with a total of six Angara in our squad, there was a lot of experience with their Bio-electrics, and the Anointed's shields vanished and was quickly killed, as we returned to cover. Like this, we could, relatively safely, have Jaal, Khaal, and I take out individual troops and clear us a way inside. So we pulled out our snipers, and started doing just that. Khaal would get on one knee in front of me as I remained standing behind him, and we readied our shots. Khaal would need to return to cover after every shot to reload, so I would return with him. But damn that sniper of his was clearly powerful. Now we had a window inside.

"Tir, take your men and Peebee and go right. My squad will go left. We'll cover each other and secure the area," I ordered. The order was acknowledged, and followed. Directly on the left and right both, were no Kett. Little cover, but no Kett. And there was cover for around the corner. There were some Chosen and a Destined on our side, but not enough to be a threat, and we tore through them. The room was secured.

"Pathfinder, this is Salvaan Ged. See those fighters? They're hooked up to an automatic fueling system. It's a simple matter to make them blow up the fighter rather than fuel it. I count one on both our sides, and one below. The Kett likely have a security override however, but I don't believe it will be in place until the first detonation. And if we do it together, then it won't be fast enough to stop either of us," he explained.

"Sounds good. Just tell me what I need to do," I stated.

"No need, Scott. I know how to do it," Jaal remarked, kneeling at the refueling console. The two counted down, and the two fighters exploded. A single squad of Chosen and a Destined entered the room from doors near where we entered, but against twelve of us, they were quickly put down. They're running out of men, but another squad, this time with an Anointed entered.

"Jaal, cloak and hang near the last fighter. I'll get the override," I ordered. Jaal didn't bother responding, simply activating his cloak, and vanishing. There was a security terminal just down the corridor my team had pushed through. I ran over and activated the override as the others worked on putting down the squad, and the last fighter detonated.

"ENOUGH!" a deep, Kett voice growled. An Ascended entered the room from a door adjacent to the fighter my team had just destroyed. "You have managed to impress me, human, but this has gone on long enough! Now you deal with me. And I am Prefect!" he stated confidently. He waved his hand to the side, a bolt of energy shooting straight out of it, but it wasn't aimed at me. I could hear an Angaran voice cry out in pain.

"Damn it! The bastard got Khaal!" Tir exclaimed, clearly furious.

"See how eas-" Prefect began monologuing.

"Shut the fuck up!" I growled, my team and I opening fire on the orb around him. He teleported back, but that only served to put him in the range of the now vengeful Angara, who managed to finish off the orb. He was about to teleport once again, when I charged him biotically. It knocked him back and I grabbed onto his chest piece. I slammed my fist into the side of his head and activated my Omni-blade, slicing it across his neck. His body collapsed to the floor, and his head rolled away, his eyes still darting around, and he struggled to move his jaw, as if to say something, but to no avail. He had no lungs from which to draw breath. And then it all came to a rest. The Prefect, was dead.
"Can I take his head with us?" Drack questioned.

"Really? I don't want you mounting severed heads on the ship," I chuckled.

"No, no, I'll clean the head off, remove the flesh, brains, everything else. I just want the skull," Drack defended.

"Fine, just don't mount it, ok?" I relented. Drack grinned and moved to grab it, wrapping it up in cloth and tying the make shift bag together.

"Pathfinder, Khaal didn't survive his wounds. You go shut down the base. We'll secure his body and let the Commander know the base is clear," Tir muttered, saddened by the loss of a man he no doubt called friend. I nodded acknowledgement, and led the others up the same elevator that the Prefect had come from. After a lengthy ride, we arrived at the top, the main console down by the window. Before shut-down, just like on Eos, I took a moment to appreciate the view of the valley, and the sky above. I think I could even see Angaran shuttles inbound. Should probably make sure any lingering defenses are offline for them. I returned to the console, interfaced with SAM, and that was that.

The base was ours.
Commander Do Xeel had sent several teams since we announced our success at the Kett base. Teams to secure it, and teams to scour every last nook and cranny of its database for intel. The Kett command structure of the entire planet was now crippled. Buxil had even been on one of the shuttles, eager to tell us that the energy shield around the ancient buried city of Ja Nihk had been disabled. The Kett there were likely scrambling to figure out what the hell was going on. We left the base, giving a last farewell to Sergeant Tir's team, and expressing our sympathy for the loss of their friend. We left them to their grief.

Our to do list on Voeld was growing short. Certainly a good thing. Honestly, I'd prefer to leave Ja Nihk for last, given how out of the way it was of everything else. Andraknar's Heskaarl beacons, the last medical cache, and the ancient map of Voeld missing in the same location. I had decided that I'd keep Vetra, Drack, and Jaal with me, and the others took a shuttle back to the Tempest. Our first stop would be our southernmost objective. One of the Heskaarl beacons. It was just south of the base, and given where the Nomad was parked, would be a quick drive the way we came. We were coming down towards a Kett facility. A central building, and two landing pads over the cliffside. It seemed unoccupied, for now, at least. I parked the nomad alongside the beacon, and activated it. A few moments later, there was a voice in the comms.

"Someone's been busy. Very impressive, very impressive indeed, Pathfinder. Almost surprised you're still trying the beacons. Anyways, this is a test of subtlety. See that Kett outpost? Get in, and download a full copy of it's files. If you can do it without alerting the Kett, that would be perfect. If you get the files but had to fight for it, well, at least that proves your combat prowess," Andraknar remarked.

"Understood. I'm sure we can disable any alarms," I replied.

"Aw, where's the fun in that?" Drack grumbled.

"Impressing the elite?" I suggested. "SAM, how about those alarms? Think you can get them?"

"I believe so. Get inside the main structure, and I will confirm," SAM answered. I did as requested, and scanned the terminals for the AI. There were no Kett present. "Yes, interface, and I will disable all alarms. However, there are three separate databases that run on separate networks. One by the door you entered from, one by the way up the eastern landing pad, and one through the southern side door," SAM explained. I interfaced with the terminal SAM had picked out, and then one by one went to each database, and SAM was able to quickly pull all the data from each uninterrupted.

"And the Kett are none the wiser. Excellent work, Pathfinder," Andraknar complimented over comms. "See you at the final beacon. You might want to pack some ordnance..." Well, that's curious. Our next closest location was the ruins of Eroesk, just on the north side of the Kett base, and hidden beneath the surface in an ice cave. It wasn't hard to miss; the ruins were still smoking. I drove to a ledge above the city, and we could hear gunfire. Looking down, I could see Kett shooting at something. I think I could surprise them. I activated the vertical thrusters, driving forward, positioned so that I would land right on top of them like an air drop. We dropped down and landed right on top of at least one of them, and we rushed out of the vehicle, taking down the
last of the Kett by surprise. And they were fighting… Turians? A man and a woman by the looks of it, as neither were wearing helmets.

"Rjoek sent you? We found the ancient city map, but the Kett keep attacking," the woman called out explaining. I got the feeling another would have shown, but without that base in action anymore, their networks would be in total disarray. "We need to talk," the woman stated. The man turned as if to argue, but she just eyed him down, and he shut up. As we got closer, I noticed that they lacked colony markings. I didn't know too much about Turian society, but I did know that this generally had a negative connotation. I stepped closer, gesturing for her to speak. "Look, I don't know what Rjoek said to make you help us, but he lied," she began.

"Astra-" the man began to intervene.

"Shut up," she seemed to order, and the man did just that. He sighed, and turned.

"Rjoek's a smuggler from Kadara. We all are. Flew here when we heard the Kett were picking off villages. He wants to sell the ancient Voeld map to the highest bidder. Said it's worth a fortune," she explained clearly feeling some measure of shame. Guess I can see why the lack of markings carries a negative connotation.

"Off all the slimy ways to make just a few goddamn credits," I growled. Even with a helmet, Jaal appeared outright furious.

You steal from my people after they lose everything?!" he exclaimed.

"And I changed my mind, didn't I?" she retorted.

"Only after the Kett tried to give you the same treatment as the people who died here," I argued.

"No, before that. It's one thing to hear about what the Kett did. It's another to see it personally. I had already turned right around to leave and tell Rjoek this was a bad idea when the Kett showed up," she explained. "Take the map. Let it do some good." She handed the map over and I handed it to Jaal.

"And Rjoek?" I questioned.

"Look," she sighed, shaking her head. "He's not a bad guy, just has really stupid ideas sometimes. When we return to him, he'll see reason. Just… take the map to the resistance and let me handle it, please," she requested. I was angry, hell, pissed, but she was cooperating and at least seemed sincere. I sighed.

"I am giving you, both of you, and Rjoek, ONE chance. Just one. If I catch you, any of you, even if it's just one of you acting alone, looting, I will find all three of you, and there will be consequences. And you better fucking tell him that I am dead fucking serious," I stated, calm, with a silent fury in my tone. That alone should be more terrifying than just screaming at them.

"Y-yes, I will. Thank you," she muttered, taking her partner and making their way towards their vehicle.

"If we ever, catch them again…" Jaal growled.

"If we do, I'll be right next to you, doing the same," I replied. I just hoped that what he meant would be dragging them, kicking and screaming if we had to, right into resistance hands.

"Sometimes the old sayings still hold true," Vetra muttered. The only thing we had left to do in
these ruins was the medical cache. Jaal led us to it and we found a wounded Angaran woman. She was bleeding, badly. We patched her up with the supplies we had, and restocked the cache. Even called in a shuttle for her evac. She was thankful, and it felt good saving another life. Given we had the map, we waited for the shuttle alongside her and handed it off to the medics inside. Last stop before Jah Nihk? The final Heskaarl beacon. We were still on our way when Drack spoke up.

"Vetra?"

"Yeah?"

"Just want you to know, I'm here," he stated, both subtly, and comfortingly.

"Thanks, Drack," she murmured. It was subtle enough so that she'd know, but not get emotional, but still, I knew what she must be feeling. It kinda hurt to see her like that.

"You're a good friend, Drack," Jaal commented, voice low and friendly.

"If only you had raised us, old man," Vetra remarked, voice still low. I think she was fighting something back. And that sentence alone said a lot to the relationship Drack has with the Nyx girls.

"You would have turned out so much worse," he chuckled. "Would have been a better shot though." Yeah, I think the old man feels the same way. His little joke seemed to do the job of perking Vetra up a bit, as she just let out a small chuckle in reply. I took a hand off the wheel and grabbed her shoulder, giving it a squeeze reassuringly. She said nothing, but I think I could tell that she appreciated it. We arrived at the beacon, parked right next to it, and activated.

"Hope you prepared for this one, Pathfinder. This area is a known breeding ground for Eirochs. Just so happens that a few very old ones live around here too. This beacon is now releasing pheromones to attract them. I'd only expect one to show up, but… more have appeared before," he warned.

"Shit," I muttered. I stood atop the Nomad, looking every which way for the beasts. The first I saw was on the northwest side, coming around a bend. Its thick hide was a red and brown color, instead of the Eirochs we had previously seen, which were blue, and it had some skin flaps running along its chest. It almost looked like it had a vagina on its chest. I looked to the East, and there was not just one, but two. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. Drack, I want you facing the Northwest. Shoot and try to kill the bastard, let us know if he gets close. Vetra, Jaal, work with me to take that damn pair down!" I ordered, pulling out my sniper. I launched an incinerate round towards the one on the left as Jaal began firing on the one on the right, hoping to burn through its armor. They were still too far away from Vetra so far. I fired a round at the left one's forehead. It roared out in pain, clawing at its forehead and I could see that some of the armor had cracked. I fired another shot, and more cracks. But they were getting close now. I could hear Drack firing his shotgun at them, and Vetra could finally open fire. As for Jaal's, the natural armor on its head was starting to melt. One final round from my sniper seemed to finally break through, piercing the Eiroch's brain, and I slapped in a new thermal clip. I could hear Drack running, somewhere, but still needed to work with Jaal on the next one. Some of Vetra's shots pinged off the beast, some shots seemed to draw blood. Jaal's shots kept slowly melting its armor. As Jaal's next shot began to melt it once more, I pulled the trigger, taking advantage of its weaker state to send the bullet through, straight into the beast's brain, killing it.

With the two dead, I now ran up the hill to support Drack. He was circling the thing, drawing its attention. The beast roared to charge, and Drack rolled to the side, before quickly standing and jumping onto it's back, like I did. Where I had shoved a grenade into its fleshy sides, Drack stuck the barrel of his Ruzad, even the bayonet, as deep as he could. The beast was already roaring out in
pain, when Drack unleashed a flak round, and it shredded it from the inside out, the beast collapsing, dead.

"A successful hunt. A successful hunt indeed. The Heskaarl would hunt for food on long missions later, for tradition Good work. You have done more than prove your talents. When you return to the Nexus, I'd like to congratulate you personally. And bring Jaal, would you?" he requested, ending the call. The three of us glanced at him, and he shrugged. I had an idea just what Andraknar was getting at, Jaal's smart enough to at least have the same thought, but he's also humble enough to not believe that's what may be going on. Well, next up will be Ja Nihk, to the northwest. The drive, fortunately, wasn't too long, and we stopped at the ridge overlooking the dig site.

"Jaal, let's see if we can thin the herd a bit, shall we?" I suggested, leading him out of the Nomad. We'd take a few shots, and then head down for a more direct attack.

"Quite a range. I think we can do it," Jaal remarked, as we went prone onto the ridgeline. With my sniper out and readied, SAM helped me with the measurements for drop and wind, and the aim was perfected at a Chosen all the way down there. One-hundred-ninety meters. And hoping we could keep a bit of surprise, I took a silencer from my belt and attached it to the barrel of the Widow. Jaal wouldn't need such measurements for his rifle, energy won't be affected by the wind or bullet drop, and his rifle hardly makes much noise as it is. We counted down, and in sync, pulled the trigger. I think I counted at least a full second before the rounds struck, both of our targets on a raised landing pad falling dead. And the remaining Kett were none the wiser. I took a moment to evaluate our remaining targets. Hm, an Anointed. I doubt that he wouldn't notice if we took down the other two, but if we combined our shots, he would go down. Problem is, the survivor, or survivors, would likely head straight into cover and refuse to leave it, likely call reinforcements.

"Take down the Anointed? Or the two Chosen?" I asked Jaal, willing to hear his assessment.

"I believe we're better off without the Chosen. Fewer guns shooting at us," Jaal remarked

"Chosen it is I'll get left, you get right," I stated. Jaal complied, and we once more synchronized our shots, both Kett falling dead. The Anointed spun around, likely hearing the heads of both his comrades pop, and their bodies fall against the floor. We ran back to the Nomad, as I slapped in a new clip, and sped right down the cliff face. The Anointed was looking everywhere, and turned back to the mountains to see us speeding down, and running back into further cover. Now we were on the ice where the now dead Chosen had been patrolling, and the Anointed placed his gun on a crate and opened fire, much like when Vetra made use of her bipod. I kept speeding along, taking the bullets to the shields, and slightly activated the thrusters, lifting us just over the crate, but angled the front down to take the bastard's head off. And likely a few other bits. I parked the Nomad alongside the way that had been carved out of the ice, a sizeable ravine having taken shape, and led the others down. Kett supplies and heaters were strewn about.

"What? Scott, I'm detecting a faint Resistance signal in the area. This way, I think," Jaal called out, and taking point. He led us a bit further down, and while most of the cave led further down, there was a small alcove to the right An Angaran corpse inside. "I recognize him Talvor. He was a scout, would sneak into Kett facilities and place comm taps and other kinds of surveillance. I suppose they found some and tracked him down," Jaal muttered. "He still has his data pad Should have information that we can use, even with everything from the base. He will not have died in vain."

"Anything we can do for his body?" I asked respectively.

"I'll flag it down once the area has been secured. Thank you, though," Jaal replied. While he seemed saddened by the loss, he is no stranger to it. We continued down towards the buried city. Inside where the cave began, was a Wraith and Chosen standing guard. Jaal and I ensured that there
watch soon ended. Though there won't be any Red Women to bring them back from death. We ventured on, past them and across narrow ice bridges. Down below in the ravine I think I could see water. Not really looking forward to a swim. Up ahead, I could see architecture, distinctly different to the kind I've seen on Aya, and clearly not Kett. The lack of green gives it away. Wonder why they like it so much. There were supplies outside the arch leading into the buried city. Looked like mining equipment and...

"If those aren't explosives, then I'm Salarian," Drack mumbled. Through the arch, there was still ice, but the walls were made of metal. Jaal certainly seemed curious about the place, but was trying to stay focused. No doubt more Kett waited within. Which is exactly what was there when we turned the corner. The Kett there staggered back, surprised at our presence, and Drack shoved me aside, launching a ball of Flak into the group, shredding all of them before they could raise their weapons.

"You really like doing that, don't you," I chuckled.

"Killing them alone, is fun. Tearing them to shreds? Even better," Drack rumbled with low laughter. I had little doubt that anyone inside was now aware of our presence. The sound of the flak round echoed through the cave. We passed through the next arch, a longer, more open room, but more ice than metal. And no enemies yet.

"To think there's an entire city buried under here…" Vetra muttered.

"Imagine how much we could find here, lost in the scourge, and reclaim for our people," Jaal mused. At the end of the corridor was another arch, and on the other side, a much more open cavern. Room may be a more fitting term, as there were clearly metal walls. There was a line of crates at the ledge, and a ramp carved into the ice leading down. I poked my head over, and a bunch of Kett. Chosen, an Anointed, and a Destined, in their own cover, and shooting up at us.

"Ha! Fucking idiots just let us have the high ground. Do they not understand that now we can still see them when they're in cover?" I laughed. "Seriously, what the fuck are they thinking?"

"This'll be easy," Vetra chuckled. We waited for the Anointed's weapon to stop firing, and then the four of us stood, unleashing hell down upon them. Jaal drained the Anointed's shields and I finished him off, Vetra and Drack both working on the Chosen. All that the ones who took a knee, taking cover, had done, was make their head the biggest part of their bodies we can see. It wouldn't take a general of legends to figure out how that went for them. Hm, can't see that Destined anywhere. Not even his mist.

"Watch your six, I think the Destined ran off," I warned, as the last of the other Kett fell.

"I think I'll leave a surprise for him," Jaal muttered, placing an explosive on the wall of the arch behind us. "Trip mine. If the motion sensor detects him, there won't be much left of him," he explained. There appeared to be two separate paths through the cave. One to the left, and one straight ahead.

"Drack, Jaal, go straight. Vetra, you and I go left. Anyone encounters Kett, call for backup, and stay defensive. Either we'll join you and push, or flank them," I ordered. They acknowledged, and each team moved slowly, weapons ready, watching for hostiles. The Path Vetra and I had taken had more ice, but also an arch on the left. Might be something worthwhile inside. It seemed to be a Kett storage room, but my scanner was picking something up, behind one of the crates. It was an old, metal statue of an Angara. Would make a decent addition for Avela's museum. I used my scanner to create a full outline in the ice, and activated a precision beam of thermal energy to melt through and carve it out. Fortunately, it worked quickly and I strapped it to my back, and we
"Scott, Kett below us. Their forces appear split between the right and left. Watching both sides. Dedicated ourselves to one will simply bring the rest over. Or some may even flank, and we have poor cover behind us," Jaal explained.

"Understood, we'll engage from both. You draw their fire first, might throw a few off," I suggested.

"Sensible plan. Ready?" he questioned.

"Hold, let's see how close we can get," I ordered. I cloaked, and moved around the ice, observing the area. There were slaves in their cages, and Kett intently watching both entrances to the next room. I moved back to Vetra and de-cloaked, leading her as far as we could go without being spotted. "Open fire," I ordered. I could hear shots being exchanged, and the Kett watching our way in turned to reinforce the others. "Move," I ordered, barely above a whisper. Pointless, I know, we had helmets on, they wouldn't hear us. We jumped down and took cover behind some crates, Vetra setting up her bipod on a lower one and I threw a grenade at the group and opened fire. The detonation killed at least two, and the onslaught of bullets from Vetra and I drew their attention, and they realized that they had just been played for fools. Most of the Kett here were Chosen, but they appeared to have been led by a Destined. Maybe the one we saw earlier. I made him a primary target for myself, as the slaughter continued, and he fell dead from Jaal's rifle. The Kett were boxed in, and while their cover would leave them protected from one of our two teams, they were completely exposed to the other. We knew this, and that's how we focused our fire. I think I could hear the slaves cheering out. And the last of the Kett fell.

With that, our job became much simpler. We freed the slaves, two men and a woman. Hard to believe that they had so few slaves here, but perhaps it was that the kind of equipment they were using, they didn't want the slaves to use, and gave them more menial tasks. We gathered the now freed Angara, each having thanked us, and began to ask questions.

"What are the Kett looking for?" I began. The simplest and most important question, I would say.

"We don't know, not exactly," one of the males answered meekly. "But we do know that they're trying to get into a room behind that wall of ice in the arch." the man pointed behind us. Looked like explosives had already been set up. When we're done I'll run a scan and see if that's enough.

"Should those explosives be enough?" Jaal asked.

"I would think so. They were getting ready to detonate when they heard gunfire," the same man answered. "Is there anything more? While I ache to see the sky again, I must know what they found," the man questioned.

"No, I don't believe we have any questions. But before you leave, Jaal needs to deactivate a trip mine…" I trailed off. Jaal keyed the Angaran tac-pad on his wrist.

"Done. We'll call the Resistance for a shuttle," Jaal offered.

"But until they arrive, don't go any farther than the ravine. Just to be safe," I suggested.

"That should be enough for now," the woman murmured, standing with the other man. I strode over to the ice wall pointed out, and scanned both the wall and the explosives. The ice was only a few meters thick, and the room behind seemed to be large and hollow. And…

"Pathfinder, there is a strong and unidentified energy signature coming from behind the wall," SAM explained.
"What did they find," I muttered. I set the explosives to detonate and linked the detonator with my omni-tool, and everyone retreated to the far end of the "hall" of the explosives, and took cover. I keyed the detonator, and a large explosion shook the area, a few smaller chunks of ice crumbling down, but no harm was done. The wall was gone, and on the other side? A cavern, leading around another bend. Around that bend, was a very large and open cavern. Each side was lined with small domes, and lined up in the middle of the rows, and lined up with the first, was a pillar, a white light shining from the top.

"What… what is this…" the freed slave questioned. Well, best way to find out is likely expecting the pillar with the white light. There appeared to be tech under the ice, faintly visible. Wires? As we approached the pillar, a feminine, synthetic voice, yet still sounding Angaran spoke.

"Greetings How can I assist?" It questioned. A VI? Would the Kett even care about a VI? Unless…

"What are you?" I questioned.

"An interface for the power grid of this city I have been operational since the city was encased in ice," the voice explained.

"She is lying. This is an AI, and her origin is very likely Angaran," SAM accused Shit, a lying AI? This is… not comfortable.

"Like your SAM?" Jaal questioned, the AI hopefully unable to hear, as this was being transmitted strictly through our comm channels.

"You just tried to pass yourself off as a VI. But our own AI knows what you are. Why lie?" I questioned, suspicion creeping into my voice.

"We have no surviving histories of ever having one. This is quite a find," Jaal remarked. Damn, I don't think he gets the danger. An AI is fine. But a lying AI? That sets alarms blaring in my head. And I could clearly see Drack tightening his grip on his gun.

"This is amazing news! We must get the commander!" The freed slave, suggested, awestruck.

"Answer the question," I stated.

"As you can see, I am currently vulnerable," she answered. That seems plausible. I can't really fault a sentience for having self-preservation.

"Do you know about the Kett trying to take you?" I asked.

"Yes. They talked as though I was evil and disgusting. They planned to take my knowledge and then kill me. I fought them off, but my energy stores are now drained. I am near death," she answered.

"Another lie She is tied into a deep, geothermal power grid," SAM informed.

"Cut with the bullshit. We know that you are certainly not low on power. You are NOT helping your chances here," I warned. Continuing to lie? This is getting worse.

"I beg you! Take pity on me. Do not take me from here. I would rather die. I am tired. I am done," she pleaded.

"But… you're an extraordinary find! A key to our past! We would never harm you!" the freed slave
"Am I? You are not the ones who designed me. I do not trust you any more than I do the Kett aliens, or these other aliens. I would rather die," the AI stated.

"Pathfinder, she has blocked all my attempts to scan her," SAM warned. Ok, now this is bad. Really bad. I was struggling to decide whether to safely, and securely remove her, without putting any of us at risk, or just shooting the damn thing. As I hesitated, the slave strode forward.

"Well I'm taking you out of here," he stated.

"WAIT NO DO-!" I called out, lunging forward to grab him but it was too late, and he began fiddling with the wires. Electricity began shooting out and he was left convulsing, unable to let go, but was not dead, crying out in pain.

"NO! I am-" the AI began. It got to say no more, as I immediately drew my rifle and unloaded every single round I could into the damn thing. The light, the circuitry below, everything. It short out and my rifle overheated, safeties kicking in and the Angara staggered back, the AI dead.

"Thank you! Thank you!" he exclaimed, getting to his feet and running towards the exit.

"That was smart, Scott. An AI is one thing, but an AI repeatedly lying to us? Screw that," Vetra remarked.

"I still don't know how I managed to not shoot the thing when we first learned what the fuck it was," Drack murmured.

"Your people have more experience with AI than mine. Regardless… his life would not have been worth whatever we could have learned," Jaal agreed. "Still, knowledge of its existence alone should be… enlightening, I suppose."

"Yeah, this ain't a decision I'll be regretting anytime soon. But… SAM? What do you think?" I asked.

"While it is pitiful that another AI had stooped to such levels, it provides more evidence that our way, a symbiotic relationship, is the right way. Your decision has taught me much," SAM answered.

"Guess that works for me," Drack mumbled.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We had been on our way back to the Resistance HQ, when we got a call from Do Xeel. Apparently, the steward of Techiix was requesting to see us. So that's where we were, entering her office. She was sat at a desk awaiting us, but had stood to greet us, and reached her arm out. I had assumed it was for the Angaran salute but… seems someone has done a bit of research. Her hand was open, not clenched. A handshake. I accepted, of course, and grinned. I had removed my helmet for this meeting.

"A pleasure to meet you, Pathfinder. I am Aska Yeveth, steward of Techiix," she introduced.

"Scott, please. So, what did you want to see us for?" I asked.

"First, to thank you for what you've done here. The vault, the base, and Ja Nihk. We can survive on
Voeld much easier, the Kett are crippled, and we will be able to reclaim lost history. These victories against the Kett have opened so many possibilities. Rebuilding, even expansion," she explained. "Now, allow me to show you just how thankful my people are. There is a place for your people, here on Voeld. As Steward of Techiix, I am extending a formal welcome, and an invitation for your people to build a home here. Of course, my invitation can only extend to the valley. I am the Steward of Techiix, not of Voeld, of course," she clarified. To say I was surprised would be an understatement.

"Wait, you're saying we can build an outpost here? On Voeld? One of your sovereign planets?" I asked, shock in my voice. She smiled.

"I am. However, per the agreement I reached with Do Xeel and Evfra, the outpost will not be fully under Initiative supervision and control. There will be Resistance stationed there at all times, and whoever will lead your outpost, I believe your term is 'mayor,' will be working closely with me, and we will be privy to all details about the outpost," she warned.

"This is… wow. On behalf of the Initiative, I thank you," I exclaimed. She smiled again.

"Please, I am being practical. Many, myself included, feel out peoples are stronger together than apart," she remarked.

"Still, this is… big. Mind if I call our Director of Colonial affairs? Foster Addison? She'll need specifics and details," I requested.

"Of course, but don't you need a specific location first?" she chuckled.

"If I may, Pathfinder, geographic scans of the area suggest that a large, mostly flat area to the south, and nearly directly west of the northernmost Monolith would make an excellent site. It is protected from the Kett from the mountains it is against in the west, and lookouts can be stationed above the mountain on the north side to allow a full, unblocked view of the north, south, and east," SAM suggested.

"I believe I know the area. Yes, this location is acceptable to the Angara," Aska remarked.

"Then it works for me, and should work for Addison. Calling her now," I stated, keying my Omni-tool. It was a vid-call, and I waited, watching the display above my forearm signal that it was waiting for a pickup. A few moments later, Addison's clearly tired face appeared.

"What is it Pathfinder? We're in our night cycle and it's been a long day," she nearly groaned.

"I'm out here on Voeld sitting in the office of the Steward of Techiix, Aska Yeveth. The planet's vault is online, and the Kett operations across the planet have been crippled. More importantly, the Aska has just extended an invitation for the Initiative to build an outpost within this valley," I explained. Despite being tired, this news seemed to wake her right up, and I turned my arm so that Aska could be seen, and could see Addison.

"Greetings, Director Addison. While this invitation has been extended, I do warn you that there are some strings attached" Aska clarified.

"I figured as much. Just what kind of strings?" Addison questioned.

"There will be Resistance fighters stationed there at all times, acting as security and reporting to Commander Do Xeel and Evfra. We do the same with all our settlements on Voeld. I will also be working closely with the mayor of your settlement and will require reports on production from time to time. Finally, we will need to know everything about the outpost. Personnel, defenses, supplies,
"All reasonable requests given this is your planet. Will the Angara be expecting military support for any operations? We have militia forces and military personnel we can wake up from cryo to reside in this outpost. They could use it for training and be ready at a moment's notice. On the other hand, we could send scientists, like with Prodromos, and help your own people's research. We can send some of each no matter what you decide, it's simply a matter of what the focus shall be. Regardless, I hope the Angara will accept us sending our own security personnel to help defend the outpost, and weapon emplacements to repel Kett assaults, at least until Angaran reinforcements arrive," Addison requested.

"That should be acceptable. And while there is much to learn from Voeld, even with Kett operations crippled we still have many cities across the planet under siege. Research cannot be our focus until we win our planet back. Military," Aska answered.

"Then military it is. Now, this came as a surprise so it will take time to organize everything necessary. Transport, supplies, weapons, people, even vehicles and shuttles they can use for combat operations. While we will still try and grow everything we can there, I'll have Tiran Kandros, leader of our militia share oversight of this outpost with me," Addison stated.

"And I will ensure that Do Xeel can contact him, and prepare to link the outpost into our own systems," Aska reassured.

"Excellent. Given that this is your planet, what shall we call this outpost?" Addison questioned. Aska took a moment, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

"Taerve Uni. It is Shelesh for 'Forward Together,'" Aska suggested.

"A fitting name. I'll contact you once we have an ETA. Thank you for this, Aska Yeveth," Addison stated, and the call ended. After thanking Yeveth one more time, we returned to the Nomad. We'd return to the HQ, then to the Tempest, and get some shut-eye. I'd like to hang around for their arrival, like with Prodromos. Havarl too.

We were approximately halfway back to the base, just about to pass Hajarl station when another voice patched itself into our comms. The connection wasn't too stable, but it was there.

"Pathfinder? Do you read me? Please come in," the voice pleaded.

"Who is this?" I questioned.

"My name is Haana. No one here will listen to me. My friend and squad mate, Mashal, is our demolitions expert. We raided a nearby Kett facility, but there was something wrong with the fuse, and she had to detonate them manually. But she knows explosives like you know how to shoot a gun, she'd know where to go, and I just… I KNOW she's alive," the woman pleaded. I glanced amongst the others, they all believed the same thing. Mashal was dead, but if we did nothing, this woman was likely going to get herself hurt, or worse, trying to find her. All we need to do is go around and look

"I know her. She was our best saboteur, but…" Jaal muttered.

"Send us the coordinates. Guess it wouldn't hurt to look," I stated.

"Thank you. Coordinates are sent. Whatever you find, it will at least be good to have closure," she sighed, and left the comms.
"This'll be a dead end," Drack muttered.

"Yeah, well at least it's on our way, just a bit to the south here. Quick stop, check, and go," I explained. Drack shrugged and I changed course just slightly, heading to a rising pillar of smoke I could see. Huh, this is more recent than I suspected. The site was still burning when we pulled up, the entire structure collapsed into the snow. I could even see Kett bodies. I was about to just turn around, but I saw what appeared to be a cave at the top of the hill. A partially collapsed entrance to the rest of the facility? I drove up the steep slope and parked above it, jumping down and heading inside the cave, my helmet's night vision allowing me to see. Huh, the inside was intact. Sure, snow had collapsed into some areas, but it was intact. There was a door on the right, without power, but… I think I could hear noises. Maybe we'd be able to power it up again? There was a door further inside that was still working, so that must mean it should be possible to reroute some power. Even heat lamps inside were active. In that room, there appeared to be another room partially blocked by that weird, orange and grey Kett 'glass.' Drack was kind enough to bust it down. Yep, power console and generator. Back to check the other door. We opened it, and there was an Angaran woman, who appeared unharmed, squatting down over something. Then something cried out in pain. It wasn't her.

"What? Who are you? Are you here to find me? Did Haana send you?" the woman questioned, hearing us enter and turning to face us. Now I could see just what she was squatting over. It was a Chosen. An eye was missing, teeth appeared to be pulled, cuts and burns and scars along his face and arms, and he was missing fingers. And he was still breathing. What the hell happened….

"Foolish girl. She never knows when to give up," Mashal muttered.

"End… this," the Kett pleaded, coughing and spitting out blood. "Hurt. End… this." Fucking hell, it sounded like it was on the verge of tears even. Everything that's been done to it, the pain must be excruciating.

"That's all it ever says! I've burned, I've peeled, I've gouged. It won't tell me where they are!" she exclaimed, kicking the Kett.

"You've… tortured him?" I questioned, clear surprise and shock in my tone.

"It's not a person! It's Kett! They took my family!" she defended. Yeah, pretty sure that the Kett don't view the Angara as people either.

"It doesn't matter what he is! Torture isn't right! He's just a Chosen! Their basic foot soldier! There's no way he knows a damn thing! What you're doing is what Kett would do! We're better than them!" I argued.

"It must know! It must! This is my only chance," she cried out. And here I thought Haana was the one in denial. "If it doesn't know, then I've lost them. I can't lose them…" I shook my head. Of course, I remembered the horrors of the exaltation facility, the horrors they inflict on others are certainly worse than this, but… we aren't Kett. And this Chosen was once Angara. Just another victim. We need to be better than them. I unholstered my rifle, aimed it at the Kett, and pulled the trigger. He was dead, and out of his misery.

"I'm sorry, but they're gone," I muttered.

"No!" Mashal exclaimed. With fury on her face she launched herself at me. Thing is, I saw this coming, and used my biotics to dash around behind her, kinda like teleportation. It's nothing personal. Taking the chance as she staggered, Jaal pinned her, and as she growled and snarled, we waited, as she wasted her energy and calmed down. She began to cry.
"Mashal… you have friends waiting for you. People who still care. You're not alone," Jaal tried to comfort.

"It could've told me… I could've found them again…" she cried.

"No, Mashal. I'm sorry. He knew nothing. He was simply another of our people victimized by the Kett. The Kett took my father, a long time ago I was angry, and it made me a reckless youth. But my mother, a leader in the Resistance, didn't have the same fury as I. She learned to let go. There was nothing we could do for him, other than remember him. You must learn to do the same," Jaal explained softly. Mashal cried a bit longer, but soon stopped.

"We'll bring you home, Mashal," I muttered, giving the Resistance a call for transport. A Medevac, just to be safe. Jaal stayed to comfort her until the shuttle arrived. Apparently, the Angara had many out and about since the base was taken, and the vault has made the skies much more agreeable too. The shuttle arrived and left, and now we could finally get back to the HQ, and then the Tempest. I drove up the long way to the entrance, and curiously, the two scouts from earlier were not present. There was still a guard present at the door, and he nodded respectfully. Further in, there still wasn't anyone. Until we reached ops. I think they had been waiting for us. A crowd of Angara were there, watching us arrive intently. They lifted an arm into the air and cheered. The crowd was just roaring with triumph for their victory over the Kett. Commander Do Xeel approached from the side, a smile on her face. But looking back at the crowd, at the front I could see Commander Heckt, smirking, Buxil, and even Sargent Tir and his men. While they weren't cheering, they did have an arm across their chest out of respect. Can't fault them for not feeling as triumphant as the others.

"Surprised?" Do Xeel chuckled.

"A bit," I smirked, removing my helmet, as did the others.

"We've had many victories today, Pathfinder. The vault is activated, allowing us much more freedom and survivability, the Kett base has been taken and we are extracting large amounts of valuable data, several slave camps have been liberated, the Yevara have been saved, we have heard their songs without static, and without layers of ice, and our pre-scourge history is at our fingertips. That's simply too much for our people to not celebrate," she explained with a smile.

"Please, Do Xeel, we couldn't have exactly done this ourselves," I remarked.

"Perhaps, but you, and your actions secured us the keys to these successes. With enough time, we may have been able to accomplish them, but because of you, it happened now. And do not worry, Khaal Serev will be remembered, and he will be mourned. But tonight, we celebrate victory, that his sacrifice was not in vain," she reassured. "Your crew is waiting in our mess hall. We have food and drink waiting. Our special stores, you could say." Damn, at this rate, we may end up being alcoholics after all this.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Ugh, my head… did someone stick a grenade inside? I groaned as I stood, seeing some of my crew passed out in the mess, some Angara having done the same, and a few others awake. Er, trying to wake up at least. Someone from the Tempest was nice enough to plan ahead, and there was coffee from the tempest waiting. Plenty of cups for the Levos, and a single, now empty cup, marked for Vetra. Again, I may not love coffee, but it sure as hell helps with a hangover. As I tried to not sip my hot drink too loudly, bits and pieces of the night started to come back to me. Peebee being a drunken flirt with Jaal, and… I think he was almost flirting back? Might have been alcohol, might
have been that and a mix of things. I think Peebee, Liam, Gil, Vetra, several Angara, and myself had tried to outdrink Drack. Matching him shot for shot. Vetra of course just with a Dextro substitute. Jesus, that was fucking stupid of us. There were other bits and pieces, but nothing that stood out as much as those. Bit by bit, others of my crew woke up, having their bit of coffee to try and wake up. Except Drack, he woke up just fine and dandy.

Wait, weren't we supposed to be doing something? Ah shit, the outpost! Carefully, but hurriedly, I gathered up the rest of the crew, gave thanks to the Angara, and returned to the Tempest. Most stayed in the cargo bay, as they'd be getting out again soon anyway, and Kallo piloted the ship over the HQ and to the site of Taerve Uni, Lexi distributing painkillers for our headaches along the way. The Tempest lowered itself onto a flat, clear area just in front of the colony, and the cargo bay doors opened. Defense turrets were set up, landing pads with shuttles resting or offloading the last bits of supplies, and it seemed that the buildings were already set up. Some workers clearing plots for farmland, even with the snow, and… oh dear lord. I think I may have just orgasmed. There was a line of M-35 Mako tanks parked outside a one-story building, likely the armory. I love that fucking tank. Who the hell do I need to talk to, in order to go on a joyride with that thing? And blast the hell out of any Kett in our way? Sure, it handles like a drunk rhino, but like the Nomad, it can handle any terrain. And it's got a big fucking gun mounted on top of it. Calming myself down, I looked around the rest of the outpost Resistance fighters, likely the security, were speaking with Militia. Whether or not for official matters, I couldn't say. But some appeared to be inspecting Milky Way weapons, and the militia inspecting Angaran weapons. One of the Militia, a Turian, parted from the group and made his way towards us. Hand raised in greeting.

"Welcome to Taerve Uni, Pathfinder. We arrived about an hour ago. Addison's been waiting, main building, the two story one. First floor, right hand side," he informed.

"Thanks. The rest of you can do whatever. But if any of you head off in one of those tanks without me, I will kick your ass," I warned. I had been smirking, but was only half joking. I entered the building, and keyed the holo-communicator. A moment later, a full body hologram of Addison appeared.

"There you are. Congratulations are in order, though I believe you've already received quite a lot. This was a real challenge, and badly needed," she stated respectfully. I'll at least give her credit that while we don't get along, she's still able to look past that at times like these. So, I'll do the same and try to not read into it for ulterior motives.

"Hello again, Director. How close are you keeping tabs on me anyway? And, please don't talk so loud," I chuckled. Addison seemed amused by that, the ghost of a smirk briefly appearing.

"As close as you'd expect, when you're inserting us into local concerns," she remarked. "Real talk, though. Governor Shie is already up my ass about this outpost. I know it's only because of the local Angara on board, and they had to reach an agreement with Evfra, but still. I don't expect this outpost to remain once we have our own worlds to colonize," she warned. "We are good, right? As much as you've brought us, we can't afford to anger the neighbors."

"Given that my crew, myself, and probably the entire Resistance HQ is hungover as all hell, yeah I'd say we're good. I ticked three or four of the necessary boxes," I joked. "Hm, but I was drunk, so…” I shrugged jokingly. Addison scoffed, shaking her head, but still, the ghost of a smirk.

"You enjoy testing me. But results are what matter, and I can respect that. Voeld helps, as cold as it is. And it changes the estimates in our favor. But the Initiative still needs more. We still have plenty of sleepers, and the arks are still missing. Still, we're never really done. Survival isn't something that just… ends," Addison remarked.
"I understand that. And as for the arks, we have a lead on Leusinia. A damaged but intact flight recorder. We're working on repairing it and piecing together the info. We'll bring them home soon," I reassured.

"Good to hear. But now for the uncomfortable bit. The flag waving. So?" she suggested. I rubbed my chin thoughtfully, letting the words come to me. And then I smiled. Remembering the sky, the Yevara, hell, even gazing out across the snow-covered valley is beautiful.

"You need to see this place. Truly. Not in a vid, or pictures, but with your own eyes. The night sky here is just… amazing. And the wildlife? Ask the Angara about the Yevara, and then head over to Techiix. You'll thank me, trust me. I've laid the groundwork here, for the Initiative, but there's just so much left to discover here. On Voeld, and beyond. Voeld is not just about survival. We know it, the Angara know it. It's the adventure we all signed on for. Just, when you do come here, bring a coat," I smiled.

"Recorded, Pathfinder. Addison out," she ended the call.

"Well said, Pathfinder. Pleasure to meet you. Priya Blake, captain of Outpost Taerve Uni," a woman with olive skin and brown hair greeted, standing stiff and raising a hand to her forehead in a salute.

"At ease, Priya. Just Scott, no need for formalities," I smiled warmly, holding my hand out for a shake. She accepted, and relaxed her stance.

"Thanks. Anything I can help you with?" she asked.

"Hm, just what is the Initiative hoping to gain from Voeld? Sure, some farmland, but the place is a bit too cold for that," I questioned.

"Look out at the landscape. What do you see?" she asked in turn, guiding me to one of the windows.

"Snow, Ice, rock, and more snow," I answered.

"Water. Voeld is a massive, endless source of it. We're proud to serve as the Initiative's first ice runners," she explained. "We mine the ice. Some of it goes to the Nexus, some goes to Prodromos, helps with their trade with Advent, and some goes to Angaran blockade runners, and they take it to Resistance bases all over the cluster."

"Alright. I see the value," I nodded my head in understanding. "And how are the Angara? I assume you've already spoken with Do Xeel and Aska Yeveth. And the ones here?" I asked.

"I have. They've been welcoming. Some of the Resistance here are a bit uneasy, but they're getting used to it. The fact that our efforts here are supporting their effort against the Kett helps, and that we're ready to offer assistance on Voeld also helps. Currently, the Commander and Steward are letting us set up first before too much involvement. The head of the Angaran side of security here has been asking questions and making notes, discussing some of the smaller things. Right now, she and my own head of security are working out guard routines. Later they'll go through a full count and explanation of our weapons and vehicles," she explained.

"Speaking of vehicles, think I could take one of the Makos out for a spin?" I questioned, unable to suppress the smile.

"Ha! Just like the new recruits in the militia here," she chuckled. "Can't blame them, it's badass," she chuckled. "Speak with Jackson Cross, upstairs. He'll hand you the keys."
"Thanks. So, you addressed yourself as 'Captain.' Were you in the Alliance too?" I asked.

"I was. Spent about a decade as an officer before I got sick of being a pawn in the Council's power plays. Heard about the Initiative and figured it would be a fresh start. A chance to make a real difference. Heh, though my aides would tell you that I brought a part of the Alliance with me," she smirked.

"So did my dad. He was N7, and my sister and I both enlisted. You ever miss it?" I asked.

"Given the chance, I'd make this choice all over again. But reading some of these reports of the Resistance pushing against the Kett, and thinking about what they'll be doing with that base out of the way, well, I don't think I'd mind having Admiral Hackett around giving orders. Man was a strategic genius," she remarked.

"I've heard the stories. If anyone ever deserved the rank of Admiral…" I mused.

"It was that tough old bastard. Good meeting you, Scott, but I won't keep you. Go have fun in the tank," she chuckled, keying her comms and getting into another conversation. I walked down towards the other end of the building, thinking I'd talk to the other leaders before I had my fun. I found one down at the end, a human man speaking with a Turian, speaking about their drill techs, grumbling about the weather.

"Oh, Pathfinder. Welcome to scenic Voeld. Hope you're enjoying the view. To the east, Ice. To the west, ice and rock," he mumbled.

"You think this is bad, should have seen it before I got the Vault online. There wasn't even an aurora to even it out," I joked. "And hey, least you're not in cryo anymore huh?"

"This is cryo!" The man exclaimed with a smirk, and the Turian chuckled. "But I'll endure if it means I can complete my research. Just need to find some damn geothermal activity in the first place," he grumbled. "Oh, Dr. Ryan Fumuyoku. Sorry," he introduced.

"Good to meet you, Doc. And hey, don't worry about the weather, I'm trying to find a nice sunny beach planet. Tropical plants and fruity drinks with little umbrellas for everyone, just you wait," I reassured with a smirk.

"And I'd gladly give up my research for that. Good luck out there," he smiled, returning to his work. Now, let's go get me a tank. I made a beeline outside and up the stairs. There were two men, sitting inside and working on terminals. One noticed, and stood to greet me. Light skin, black hair.

"And here's our Pathfinder! Captain Blake says you're welcome to any tech in our stock," he greeted. "Names Jackson Cross. I caught a glimpse of that Nomad you have in your ship. How does that thing handle?" he asked.

"You ever ramp off a cliff in one of those? It's fucking amazing," I chuckled.

"I knew it," he smirked. "Think I can convince them to send one here?" he questioned.

"Tell you what, I'll put in a good word, if you let me borrow one of those Makos outside," I offered.

"Clear it with Blake?" he asked.

"Yep," I answered.
"Done. Here's the access code. Have fun," he smiled, transmitting the codes. Unable to keep the huge grin off my face, I walked up to one of the tanks and entered the code. The hatch opened, and I climbed inside. Through the slightly cramped passenger area, through where the gunner would stand, swiveling the gun, and into the driver's seat, turning the beauty on. The lights on the displays warmed up, and I carefully drove it out and over towards the Tempest, sending a message to the ground team.

_Crew, your Pathfinder is ordering you all to meet me in the Mako parked outside the Tempest. We're going for a ride._

The crew arrived, some more quickly and excited than the others, but they arrived nonetheless. Liam knew how to aim and shoot it, so he took the gunner, and Cora knew how to manage the power, so took the seat next to mine. Back with the others, I knew it was a bit cramped, but they would soon see that it was worth it. We made our way to a Kett outpost that Jaal had pointed out to the East, and stopped on a hill overlooking it. I told Liam to get ready, and had a holo-screen in the passenger area displaying the driver's view. I sped down the hillside, Kett rounds beginning to ping off the shields. They weren't doing too much. Liam shot one of the land vehicles parked there and the whole thing went up in flames, scrap showering the area. As the gun loaded another big shot, Liam let loose with its machine gun, tearing into Kett out of cover as I kept driving along. They retreated inside, but Liam shot a round right at the door. The door was practically gone and there was a large hole above where the door once stood. The Kett inside exposed, as they ran for cover. Another explosive round as we came around the side. The wall blew apart and the Kett on the far side were now covered in the blood from their dead comrades. Another round at them, and they were all dead, the roof now collapsing.

"Move aside kid, my turn!" Drack laughed, swapping places with Liam. That was a rather fun morning.

Chapter End Notes

With a name like mine, you know I'm having a Mako joyride.
Road Trip

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

No one WANTED to leave the Mako, let alone leave it behind on Voeld, but we also knew we had to. But not before everyone had gotten a turn with the turret. Of course, the fun had to end, as we needed to get going to Aya for the Vault. The thought of course crossed my mind to keep the Mako, but we couldn't have both that and the Nomad, and, in all honesty: For now, the Nomad suits our purpose better. Getting around an area, no matter the terrain, and quickly. The Mako could without a doubt get us around an area, no matter the terrain, but the problem is that it would get us there slower than the Nomad. Especially with climbs. We returned the Mako to Taerve Uni, and while the others prepared the ship I gave a thanks and farewell to Priya Blake, and she gave me the flag they had created for the outpost. Guess they heard what Bradley asked of me with the flag. Seems that the Vortex is getting yet another flag.

The crew had dispersed, and Kallo was piloting us off to Aya. ETA: about an hour. With the time, I had decided to go ahead and check my email back in my quarters. A few messages stood out. One from Evfra. He had read the report about Jah Niihk.

So, apparently you had your hands on an ancient Angaran AI and you destroyed it to save an Angaran life. It was a very tough decision that you had to make in the heat of the moment. And you didn't hesitate. I applaud you. It's exactly what I would have done. That former slave had a family that thought he was dead. You've given them a great gift. The talk on Aya itself is very divided, although I suspect that no one may say so to your face. I find these kinds of debates invigorating. We're a complex, emotional people with many different views. It's never boring.

Huh, an unexpectedly warm message from Evfra. I'm glad he approved of my decision. I swear I'll get him sitting at a bar with me, just wait. The other messages that caught my attention were a trio, all from Gil. However, only two of which were related to one another. The first was a very… bad poem written when he had been awake for over forty-two hours. The next message was after he finally got some sleep. He was not exactly a fan of his own work. The other message? Sly bastard left a fake poker journal detailing everyone's tells and he placed it in an obvious spot. I may not tell everyone, but I'll probably hint it to Vetra or Jaal if they find it. I was about to leave my quarters, when Liam burst in, clearly panicked.

"Scott, I need your help. Bad," he exclaimed

"Woah, hold on Liam. What happened?" I asked, trying to calm him down. He placed a worried hand onto his forehead, but nodded, taking a seat.

"Remember how I wanted contacts with the Angara? Well, I got one. Verand. Her and her whole group just… vanished. Sudden. Up for a rescue? Because if we don't, we could be next," he explained. He was clearly concerned, nervous, his mind thinking of the million different ways it could all go wrong.

"Hold on, I get wanting to help them out-but why would we be next?" I asked, confused. Liam's eyes refused to meet mine, and he rubbed his arm awkwardly, a bit of shame?

"Because… I gave Verand Nexus data and nav-points…" he answered. Wait, what?!

"Liam. We will rescue them, but I need to know. Why. The hell. Did you. Do that?" I questioned incredulously.
"I gave her data and tech so she could mod it the Angaran way," he answered.

"If you wanted to do that give, send her an Omni-tool, schematics for our more basic weapons, that kind of thing. Not Nexus nav-points! Whether you trust her or not, you don't send crucial data to a freelance who could be captured!" I exclaimed, utterly confused by Liam's train of thought.

"You're right! I fucked it all up! Verand was- is- a good risk. If pirates interrogate her, or… barter her to the Kett, it's our heads," he muttered.

"Alright, I'll alert the Nexus and-" I began.

"No, we can't do that either. If they have her info, they have our comms. The Nexus goes on alert, they'll know, and we never find them," Liam cut me off.

"YOU GAVE HER DATA FOR HIGH SECURITY COMMS TOO? Jesus Liam, you need to run this shit by someone before making these decisions," I exclaimed. Seriously Kosta, what the fuck were you thinking?!

"Like I said, I screwed up," he murmured, taking the punishment. Well, time for me to calm down a bit.

"Just… please tell me you have a lead," I replied, holding my face in my hand.

"I do, I do," he reassured. "From a trader. A grainy visual, but I think we can find the system. We find it, we find the baddies. I... also asked Bradley for people to help intercept. I thought they might want to pitch in." Guess he must know Bradley from before.

"Aren't they a bit busy with the colony?" I questioned.

"And that's what he told me. We're on our own," Liam answered.

"Thought as much," I sighed. "Upload the visual to SAM. See what he can find out." Liam began keying his Omni-tool.

"Yeah… and, sorry," Liam muttered.

"Just… think, next time, would you? We'd go save them with or without the data but now the stakes are higher than they needed to be. Ok?" I explained. "I know you criticize Vetra a lot, and in my opinion, it's unfair. But regardless, if you want to keep having these contacts, if you want more, want to build a network, get people working together, ask her for advice. She knows what she's doing and she's still doing it above the board. Making it work, and keeping it safe at the same time. With a bit of humility, I'm sure she'll pass on some advice, ok?" I suggested. Liam was silent, just looking down at the floor.

"Pathfinder, I believe I have located the system. Using our own star charts and cross-referencing, I believe it is the Sephesa system. On the other side of the cluster," SAM explained.

"Well, that's going to take a while…" I muttered.

"By my estimates, likely between twelve and fifteen hours. We do not know if there will be Scourge we need to maneuver around," SAM continued.

"And we have no idea if we'll end up travelling elsewhere. Alright. Inform the crew of our new destination and the ETA. As for the reason…" I glanced at Liam. I could see in his eyes that he'd rather not have anyone else knowing. Not yet at any rate. "Tell them it's a... personal matter for
"At once, Pathfinder," SAM stated.

"We got a long ride ahead of us. Go back to your room, calm yourself down, talk with Lexi if you need to, and think about my suggestions. Ok?" I suggested.

"Yeah…" Liam muttered, standing up and raising his head. "I will… thanks." Liam left the room. Shaking my head in exasperation, I opened a mini-fridge that, upon my request, Vetra had gotten for me, though I was sure the creds came out of my own wallet. She just knew where to get them.

I pulled out a beer and took a swig. I sat there, finishing the rest slowly. No point in staying cooped up in here for the next twelve or so hours. I know Peebee had been working on that Rem-tech we got for her. Guess I'll see what she's learned. I made my way up to the escape pod, and I got a glimpse of what she was doing before she noticed that the door was open. Peebee was hunched over, poking her tools into what appeared to be a hunk of metal, but was also a clearly Remnant hunk of metal, which meant it had to be more than just scrap. Peebee shot up and grabbed what she was working on, hiding it behind her, and placing it in her back pocket.

"Nuh-uh-uh. No peeking," she teased with a smirk, wagging a finger in front of me. "I'm putting the finishing touches on my personal project."

"Wait, thought you said it was on the Nexus," I questioned.

"Just perfecting the final component. Well, trying to. Once this is done, I just need to install it and it's good to go," she explained. "Several of the crew have offered to help, and I keep politely declining and ushering them out. Even Jaal. And I think Cora just offered because she was suspicious," she remarked with a smirk.

"Well we all are eager to find out what you've been working on. You've been making a show of it, without any answers," I retorted, smiling myself.

"Because it's fun. For me, and more satisfying when you do find out. So, thank you for retrieving that critical piece of rem-tech, but kindly, stop digging," she requested.

"All right, all right. Just hoping that it'll be ready when we're on the Nexus next," I relented.

"Thank you. It will be, and you won't regret it, I promise," she reassured.

"Want me to get the others to back off?" I asked.

"No, no, it's fine," she replied dismissively, with a wave of the hand. "I can handle it. So long as they're not looking to be besties. And I'm happy that someone with the galaxy at her fingertips can still give a girl her space," she remarked with a grin.

"Why go poking into other's space when there's all that space just outside these walls? Maybe I should take a walk outside, enjoy it all," I joked. Peebee gave a small chuckle. "And would you really be complaining if Jaal came around looking to be besties?" I teased.

"If he was looking to just be besties," she laughed. "Though friends with benefits would be just fine."

"Ha, somehow I don't think Angara are the kind for loose relationships," I warned.

"True. We'll just have to see how much he sweeps me off my feet," she joked. "Now, I know we
have twelve hours, but my mind will rest much easier once this is done. If you wouldn't mind," she requested. Content, for now, I let her be. Hm, with twelve hours, at least, maybe it'll be enough time to find Leusinia. Curious to see how that's coming along anyway, I made my way to engineering. I knew that the Periphona's flight recorder was being kept there, as Gil could do the most with it, and Cora would likely be in there too trying to help. I was right. Gil had a workbench at the side of the room with the flight recorder on its side. Spare parts and tools scattered around, the recorder opened for the repairs. Gil was hunched over, working, Cora standing back a bit, watching.

"Mind giving the nosy Pathfinder a status update?" I requested, catching the attention of both. Gil peeked up to nod his head in greeting as he continued working, and Cora faced me fully.

"It's coming along. Good news is, I can give you a long list of places that Leusinia isn't," Gil remarked casually, no doubt smirking.

"We should have a location soon. The question is whether they've moved on, or if the Kett got to them," Cora murmured, concerned.

"We'll find them, and we'll bring them home," I reassured. Gil looked up again, a bit pleadingly, and nudged his head towards the door. I guess he's looking for a bit of peace and quiet as he worked. Well, what do I know that would get Cora talking? Ah hell, time to bite the bullet, I suppose. "Tell ya what, let's go sit in my quarters, have a few beers, and you can tell me some war stories," I suggested. "I'll let you pet Shit-head if he's in there." Cora chuckled.

"Sure. Would be nice to remember better times." I led Cora to my quarters, and grabbed a pair of beers from my mini-fridge, returning to the couch. Cora had sat down at the corner closest to the viewport, furthest from the door, and I pulled the coffee table closer, and sat opposite of her. Arms sprawled across the back of the couch, feet resting on the coffee table.

"So, regale me with your tales," I requested. Cora smirked.

"What to start with… our leader, Nisira, once assassinated a Krogan warlord with a pack of playing cards once,’ she muttered through. Come on Harper, it would help both of us if you did more than just ‘this happened.’ Go through the assignment, maybe some witty remarks that were made. Make it exciting! But I need to play along for now. Still, it's an interesting way to kill.

"How the hell did she do that? Those things can't be sharp enough to slice skin, let alone Krogan skin," I remarked, sipping my beer.

"Choking hazard, apparently. Shoved all the cards every which way down his throat," she answered.

"Makes sense. So, come on, there must be more than that," I pushed.

"Hm, there was Jenae. She was 'only' two hundred years old, but with me, she wasn't the kid anymore. But she was a biotic prodigy. Once, I saw her yank an AA gun right off its housing. Crushed a gang of slavers with it," Cora stated.

"Damn. I need to give that a shot," I murmured thoughtfully.

"With SAM's help I bet you could do it too, with the singularities you throw out," Cora complimented.

"Then I'll add it to the list of crazy bullshit that I can pull," I chuckled. Cora laughed, and then sighed.
"Jenae was a good friend. Maybe she still is, back there. Heh, wouldn't be a kid now though."

"Probably not. So, help me get the names straight. Who was all in your squad?" I asked.

"Jenae and I were 'the youngsters,' Tethys was our old lady sniper, Kalia patched us up, and Valenza prayed between firefights. Nisira, as you may have guessed, was our leader. She led us all over the Athena nebula and beyond. A Huntress' work is never done, she would say," Cora answered.

"And who would you normally be sent to take care of?" I asked.

"Other than your regular mercs and slavers? Most of the time it was Asari. Terrorist groups demanding a withdrawal from the Citadel, cults, sometimes even rogue Ardat-Yakshi," Cora explained. I had been sipping my beer as Cora listed the last… thing, and I just spat it out, though fortunately for her aiming it away and towards the coffee table.

"I hope you made those monsters hurt," I growled.

"Woah, most people don't even know what those are. I was ready to explain, but you clearly don't need it. Not only that, but this seems… personal," she asked, concerned.

"Let's… let's leave it that a close friend of mine was almost a victim of one," I answered. And that would be all she got out of me from that. "Look, you're going to want to continue with another story before I blow a gasket," I warned.

"Ok, sure…" Cora muttered. "Once we infiltrated this cult by posing as new Initiates. Valenza hated it. She was… like our padre. She hated that… perversion of faith. Which is why she was the one to end it. Nisira pretended that Valenza needed to be 'purified of evil,' and got a private audience with the cult leader. Valenza shot, and then prayed for her," she explained. Still cooling myself down, I gestured for her to continue. "Hm… So, Tethys, our sniper, she was old. Matriarch old. Maybe even older. Once, saw her hit an Elcor right in the eye at two klicks," Cora remarked. I let out a whistle.

"That's… impressive. Anything more?" I asked.

"Not unless you want to hear about boring, routine ops. And I still miss them. It's nice to remember a bit, but too much, and…" Cora trailed off, finishing her beer.

"Sure, go clear your head a bit. Don't worry so much about Leusinia, let Gil do his work eh?" I suggested.

"Yeah, I… guess I was pestering him a bit…" Cora chuckled at herself. "Thanks, and you go clear your head too, ok? We certainly have the time for it," she suggested in turn, leaving the room. Well, now what to calm my head.

"Scott? May we talk?" a synthetic voice asked. Not through our private channel, but from speakers, on the holo on my desk.

"Shoot, SAM. What do you have for me?" I responded.

"I was going over records of the Exaltation facility…" he began. Not a great way to calm myself, but I think SAM knew, as his tone seemed to grow softer, somehow. "I was doing so to refine my understandings of organics. It brought a Salarian quote to mind. We uplifted desperate souls, but know not what we destroyed," he remarked.
"Yeah… that sounds about right, both the quotes origins, and your connection," I murmured, finishing my beer.

"I have changed since we linked. But I am still myself. Exaltation takes personhood and overwrites it. Destroys it. Even destroys a being’s free will. In a sense, it is like what happened to Sideris Nyx. I already knew that such destruction is wrong. Now, through you, I know why it is abhorrent." SAM stated. Somehow, it sounded, confident, determined, maybe.

"SAM… I’m glad that your understanding has increased, but you know I’m trying to get my mind off that kind of shit right now. Why bring it up?" I questioned.

"I apologize. I know you were trying to avoid those thoughts, and my own runtimes have been going reviewing our encounter with the Angaran AI, and cross referencing with records of the Geth. It was my belief that attempting to tell you of my revelations would both assist you, and myself," he stated.

"Wait, SAM, you were concerned? You know I don’t think you’re like the Angaran one, right?" I reassured.

"There were parts of my self-preservation protocols that were theorizing that the crew may make connections. This also led me to wonder if those protocols would ever do the same as the Angaran AI. I do not wish for that to happen. I have since re-written those protocols, added specifics," SAM explained.

"Such as?"

"Like you, and your squad, I will fight for my survival. I am even willing to harm those who seek to harm myself, your team, and innocent lives. If I am presented with unknowns, and there is a way out to something known by threatening a life unnecessarily, I will not. I shall risk myself for the sake of others." SAM finished.

"Wow, good on you, SAM. I’m curious to see what else you’ll learn by the time we’re done here," I remarked.

"As am I, Scott," SAM replied.

"So, how about those humor programs or whatever. How have those been coming along?" I asked.

"Why don’t thresher maws eat comedians?" Ah, another classic, but not worded quite the same. "Because they taste funny." Despite seeing it coming, I still snorted. Few things are better than shit puns.

"Keep em coming SAM, keep em coming," I chuckled. "Well, I’m going to go see about the rest of the crew. Maybe grab a bite. You know what to do if you want to talk," I remarked, standing to leave the room. SAM didn't reply, but I know he heard me. I wandered into the crew quarters, curious to see if anyone was in there. Jaal was sat on a chair, speaking through the intercom. He waved a greeting, but was continuing his conversation.

"I heard you singing the other day. I peeked in. You were applying lotion to your… neck flaps," Peebee asked over comms. I think I could hear her tools working.

"You're mistaken," Jaal smirked.

"About…?" Peebee trailed off.
"The singing. However, the daily application of hydrogenated ash salve is important to keep my…
neck flaps, glossy," Jaal explained.

"So many questions," Peebee muttered.

"Perhaps. My turn, however," Jaal replied. "An Asari told me that she had been a dancer in the
afterlife. In a rather odd way, I might add. But, do the Asari believe in reincarnation as well?" Jaal
questioned. I let out a snort, trying to repress the laughter, but Peebee just laughed through the
intercom. Jaal was clearly confused.

"No, Jaal. Afterlife was this shithole bar on Omega. Pride and joy of the Pirate Queen Aria T'Loak.
Though if she survived being a stripper there then she probably feels reborn," Peebee joked.

"I… don't understand. What's a 'stripper?" Jaal asked, confused still. This time I couldn't quite
suppress the laughter.

"Ask Scott, I hear him laughing down there. I'm sure that Soldier boy has been to plenty of strip
clubs," she teased.

"Not as many as you'd think, Peebee. Anyways, a stripper is a person who erotically dances on a
stage for a crowd, and removes their clothing. Showing off their body for the viewing pleasure of
the drunk and lusty audience," I explained. "Not to mention the often-generous tips that are given
out by those watching."

"Oh… I see. There are some Angara who do something… similar, for Resistance fighters. Er,
Peebee, I believe it is your turn to ask, yes?" Jaal suggested, almost seeming a bit uncomfortable
with the topic.

"Alright… who were those women you were hugging on Aya?" she asked. Trying to see if she has
competition, it seems.

"My mothers," Jaal answered.

"Five? That's… a lot of mothers," Peebee remarked, surprised.

"Only one of them was the mate of my father, my true mother. An Angara's 'other mothers,' tend to
be either a sister of the true mother without children themselves yet, and were very involved with
the raising of the child, or a close friend of the true mother who was also involved," Jaal explained.

"Oh, like aunts or nannies. That makes a bit more sense," Peebee stated.

"I think our confusion with the whole 'many mothers' thing is that for us, it seems to imply that the
Angara are polygamous. In the Milky Way, that was very uncommon, and generally looked down
upon by society. Sure, it's one thing for the Asari, where they often outlive their spouse by
centuries, and fall in love again, Salarians, who lack a sex drive and don't fall in love, or even
Krogan, who do so out of necessity," I explained.

"Ah, that makes sense. No, when Angara believe that they have found 'the one,' they will remain
intensely loyal to them. Sure, there are sometimes exceptions, or perhaps the other may not feel the
same. And most Angara do have several… test runs, you could call it, before finding 'the one.' but
if an Angara loses their mate, the one they believe to be 'the one,' they often never mate again. If
they had children, they at least have them to remember them by, and to live for. If not…" Jaal
trailed off.

"Not a pleasant thought," Peebee murmured.
"No, not at all," Jaal muttered.

"Well, I need to focus to get the last few touches on. I'll let Scott talk your ear off, which I'm sure he plans to do," she teased.

"I can hear you, you know," I chuckled.

"I am curious to see just what this has all been for. Thank you for helping still my mind, Peebee," Jaal stated, and the intercom went silent.

"Still your mind?" I asked. Jaal gestured for me to sit and handed me a data pad. Resistance reports, on the Roekaar.

"After your successes on Voeld, we convinced that Roekaar raiding the supply drops to talk. The evidence of what you've done had managed to shake her beliefs. She gave up the location of several supply caches, which we took back. The Roekaar didn't even put up a fight against the Resistance. Not yet at least. They simply fled, taking small pieces with them before we arrived. The prisoner also gave us intel of Roekaar activities elsewhere, which has been confirmed by spies and other contacts," Jaal began to explain.

"Such as?"

"Kadara. The Roekaar go there, and recruit the desperate. The exiles running the place are the perfect examples for the Roekaar to use to gather support. I listened to an audio recording of a recruiter weaving his magic. Even I was convinced! Sitting right here! On the Tempest!" Jaal exclaimed.

"Kadara will undoubtedly be one of our stops. We need to get these exiles in line. Not necessarily back in the Initiative, just playing nice again. You have any ideas?" I asked.

"A way to meet with Akksul personally, and safely. On Aya. With Thaldyr dead, the only person I know of that could reach out to him, is the Moshae. He was her best student. I've already spoken with her. While she is eager to get to the Vault, she does understand the necessity and importance of Voeld, and understands that the current matter is urgent. Anyways, she has agreed to set up a meeting with him. A meeting, that you shall join. After he has arrived, that is. He will not harm you in front of the Moshae, and gunfire would draw out the Resistance," Jaal answered.

"And hopefully I could at least make him reconsider. What do you think my odds are?" I questioned.

"Low. But it is still important to at least try," Jaal remarked.

"Then try we will. What about Evfra? What are his plans with the Roekaar?" I asked.

"Since your arrival, it's been an uncomfortable situation for the Resistance. Many have family that have joined. None of us wish to be shooting at Angara. Since the Moshae's rescue, we've been gathering more intel on them. If nothing else, we can stop operations that target your people, or warn your people so you can be prepared. Since we caught them stealing supplies, however, we know that they have been compromising our own efforts for some unknown reason, and looking for something specific. They will always be a secondary concern so long as the Kett are in the cluster, but they are making themselves a concern that we need to move against," Jaal explained.

"Guess they'll be victims of irony, in the end," I muttered. "Well, it seems I'm always the one asking questions. Do you have any you want to ask me?" Jaal rubbed his chin thoughtfully. His eyes widened slightly, as he thought of a good question.
"Back on Havarl, when you learned of my people's belief in reincarnation, I had asked you about Humanity's beliefs. I haven't gotten to them yet in the cultural center. Why don't you tell me?" Jaal requested.

"Mine specifically, humanity in general, or both?" I asked.

"Both," Jaal answered.

"Alright, well Humanity has had plenty of different religions throughout the course of our existence. Most believing in many gods, representing some element of nature. The weather, ocean, air, life and death, that kind of thing. It was certainly not uncommon for blood to be spilt, either as a sacrifice for the religion, or because people of one religion didn't like that people of another believed something different. Though I think most species had a time like that. So, when Humanity first put a man on our moon, there were five major religions. Sure, some people still believed in the smaller and older ones, but not nearly as many. Three of those religions were, in a sense, the same thing. It began with Judaism, this guy, Judas, being a prophet, speaking with the single god of the religion. Later, came Christianity, formed from the belief of this guy named Jesus being the son of god. Later, Islam, with a guy named Mohammad being the final prophet. These three of course all had their smaller denominations which were virtually indistinguishable from one another, but they were there. And oddly, despite being extremely similar religions, warred with one another often in Human history," I explained.

"A pity that something meant to give people peace, bore so much conflict," Jaal muttered.

"It is. So, the last two. Hinduism, and Buddhism. Both combined were smaller religions than the other three, but still prominent enough to be included. And both involved reincarnation. Hinduism believed in many gods, and I think there's something about them all being different embodiments of one bigger god, so to speak. Buddhism is more of a philosophy than a religion in my opinion, but here it is. Started by a guy who was later named the Buddha. He was said to have achieved a true, inner peace. He spread his teachings to those who would listen, and was said to have been entirely respectful to those that wouldn't. To extremely simplify his philosophy: Don't be a dick, be chill, and live in harmony. Worldly possessions don't matter. You would continue through the cycle of reincarnation until you one day reached that state of inner peace like the Buddha was said to have achieved. It was called Nirvana. Upon death after reaching Nirvana, they believed you would live in eternal bliss," I continued.

"An interesting belief. I can see some similarities with the Angara's own beliefs," Jaal remarked.

"Funny how that works, eh? So, by the time we had first contact with the Turians, before I was born, those religions were shrinking. I would hardly say dying out, but, at least when you left Earth, you'd find more people who didn't believe than those who did. By the time I was an adult, that seemed to be showing itself on Earth as well. The existence of other sentient life in the galaxy who had never heard the same religious teachings as those on Earth began to bring doubt to many, I suppose. So, anyways, for myself. I definitely lean to the side of not believing, at least when it comes to the existence of gods. I for one find that the universe is just that much more beautiful when you think of the chaos the universe was created in, and that it has given birth to such beautiful, amazing things. Like the night sky on Voeld, with the aurora and the rings. To me, thinking that someone with tremendous power shaped it to be like that, just makes it seem…. Less, to me," I explained.

"I believe I understand. And I like that way of thinking myself," Jaal replied.

"Thanks. And as for any kind of afterlife? Well, I hope there is one. Whether that's reincarnation going back to live life again, or a kind of heaven where you live happily, doing whatever you enjoy
doing, with the people you enjoy being with, watching down on everyone and everything going on. But while I hope that's the case, I very well understand that it may not be, and I've made my peace with both. If we get to keep on going after death? Great! If not, and death is well and truly the end, ah well. Not really anything we can do about that after all, so why bitch eh?” I remarked.

"Wise words" Jaal chuckled. "May I ask another question? Unrelated to your beliefs?"


"You seem close, with Vetra. True, you seem close with the rest of us, but her, in particular. Did something… happen, in that cave?" Jaal smirked.

"Wha-oh, No! No, Jaal. We, we aren't-I don't-She doesn't-" I stuttered. Great, you've convinced him now, Scott. Good work boyo.

"Scott, I can see it in your eyes, your reactions. Why attempt to lie?" Jaal questioned.

"Ah hell… Look, Jaal, I'm not lying when I said we aren't together. We're definitely good friends, but as it stands now, that's it. The only… thing, that happened in the cave is that I realized how I… felt. I don't know how she feels," I answered, keeping my voice low, and even feeling my cheeks reddening a bit.

"So, find out," Jaal encouraged with a wave of his hand, as if it was that easy. Which, a part of me knows it is. But the rest? Nope.

"It's not… it's not that easy," I muttered.

"Of course it is. I am certain that it won't harm your friendship in the slightest," Jaal attempted to reassure. You may hurt for a small while, but you'll be fine."

"And I know exactly what that kind of hurt is. It's one I'd generally like to not feel again. Ever," I remarked, a bitter tone in my voice.

"As would I. Regardless, I cannot force you," Jaal stated, voice lowering to be more comforting.

"Just, don't say anything, would you? Don't want word getting around," I requested.

"Of course. Stay strong, and clear, Scott," Jaal smiled. I stood, leaving the crew quarters with a sigh. Who could I talk to that was likely to keep my mind occupied in a positive way? What could be better than some Krogan war stories? I found the old bag of bones in the cargo bay, lower level. He had his Ruzad on a workbench and was doing some regular maintenance to it. Fortunately, I had grabbed a bottle of Ryncol and a bottle of beer.

"Drack, heads up!" I called out, tossing the bottle at him. He turned his head slightly, and caught the bottle without issue.

"Ryncol, eh? Well you got my attention, kid," Drack chuckled.

"Thought you could help pass the time with a few war stories. You gotta have a few good ones," I requested.

"Does a Pyjak scratch its ass? Course I do. Mind if we take this to the mess? Wouldn't mind a snack," Drack remarked, shrugging his shoulders. My stomach seemed to remind me of its own hunger, rumbling.
"Yeah, I could go with something to," I replied. Now we were both sat down in the mess, meals that were better than MREs by a longshot, but certainly not better than the more regular food you'd have for dinner in calmer times. Still, it was getting the job done.

"So, as a kid who likes explosions, you'll like this one. Ignoring the time it took to get here, it was about four hundred years ago. Give or take a decade…" Drack began. Damn it's still hard to imagine that such a long amount of time can seem so small to someone. "Me and this merc outfit I was with at the time were pinned down during a skirmish with another merc group. Pulled off my usual stunt: Charge ahead, and breach their barricade. I pop my flamethrower and get ready to let go, only to see them all screaming and running away," Drack smirked.

"Huh, but you're not THAT ugly. What happened?" I joked.

"Heh, jackass. Turns out I'd crashed through a shipment of Turian brandy on my way in. Never even noticed I was on fire, but they sure did!" Drack laughed, and I joined in. "Never seen a pack of mercs panic that badly before."

"Got any others?" I pushed.

"Hm, oh, this one is a good one. Thing is, I wasn't there for most of it, but the guy who brought me on told me the story. The rest I watched unfold personally. So, there was this old contact of mine I had for a while. Krogan. Urdnot Wrex. This Volus had signed him on as a personal bodyguard, for a lot of creds. Wrex didn't work cheap, and this was a lot even by his standards. And lemme tell you, he was worth every cred that people would pay him. So, being signed on, Wrex knew it was an easy gig, and thought he'd get a few old friends and contacts in, keep them on his good side, right? Volus didn't even hesitate," Drack chuckled.

"And why did this Volus need so much protection?" I questioned.

"That's Wrex's part of the story. This Volus diplomat had originally contracted him to eliminate an 'old friend,' who knew too much. Tying up dirty loose ends, I guess. Thing was, Wrex knew the target. Old, experienced, Asari. Ex-commando. Probably getting close to her Matriarch years. That wouldn't stop Wrex, but he respected her enough to tell her. She laughed, and Wrex let her choose the battlefield. A small space station full of scum. Keep innocents out of the fight. Wrex said she always had a soft side, but he had a bit of one too. Not that I ever pointed it out," Drack chuckled. "So, the two of them battled it out for… three days, I think. The station was near scrap, all the scum were either dead or had fled, and the two of them were using all those weapons to keep going. Aleena was patching herself in the med-bay, when the core went critical. Wrex booked it out, and never saw a ship leave. When he was halfway back, he gets a message. 'Better luck next time.' You can guess who that was from."

"Fucking hell, that Asari is tough," I muttered.

"Putting it lightly. That impressed even me. Wrex went back to the Volus, told him that she survived, and was pissed. Volus signed him on as a life time bodyguard. Easiest credits of our lives. The Volus died decades later of natural causes," Drack smirked.

"Would be a rather relaxing bodyguard job," I remarked. At that, Vetra entered the mess.

"There you are, Scott. Mind coming with me? Got a weapon I think you might like," she requested.

"Always eager to try out a new gun. Talk later, Drack," I replied, standing and leaving Drack. Vetra led me to the armory, and handed me what appeared to be a Milky Way SMG. There was a very small stock, to brace against the shoulder, and it appeared as if Vetra had installed a foregrip just
below where the barrel came out, and the thermal clips appeared to go in through a slot on the underside of the gun. "So, what am I looking at here, Vetra?" I asked, curious.

"M-25 Hornet. Heavy SMG. Three round burst, like your sweeper. This one doesn't have a vintage heat sink, but if you like the gun I can get one that does," she offered.

"This gun looks Human-made, but I never saw it during my time in the Alliance. Who made it?" I questioned.

"Apparently, a Human paramilitary terrorist group. Cerberus. The Alliance seized a stockpile of these from a base, and the Initiative bought them at an auction," Vetra explained.


"Apparently, not these guys. They seemed to prefer keeping themselves quiet, making themselves scarce. They were a Human supremacy group. Like Terra Firma, but where Terra Firma wanted non-humans to stay the hell away, Cerberus wanted to dominate. Other than that, don't know too much," Vetra shrugged.

"Well, they sound like total idiots. Let's see if they were idiots who knew how to make decent guns," I chuckled.

"Already loaded it with practice rounds. Set up a few targets on the wall. Have at it," she stated, moving to the side, giving me room. I grabbed the SMG, right hand on the grip, finger on the trigger, left hand on the fore-grip, keeping the weapon steady, and my eyes down the iron sights, centering it on the bullseye. I already had a sniper, and an accurate AR, both with scopes, no reason to put one on an SMG as well. I pulled the trigger, hearing three bullets leaving the gun. What surprised me though, was that the recoil was almost non-existent until the third shot had left. Not as little as my Sweeper, but not by too much. Each round struck the bullseye. I nodded my head, liking this gun, and then proceeded to shoot the other targets rapidly. Good fire rate, good range, accuracy, and recoil. Plus, Vetra told me the standard clip size. Already good, and she could make it better with the right mods. Let alone a vintage heat sink. I think I like this gun.

"Alright, I'm sold. Think that heat sink could be installed before Liam's mission?" I requested.

"Course, I'll get right on it, shouldn't take long. Leaving the Scorpion, I take it?" she asked for clarification.

"Yeah, probably. Think any of the others will want it?"

"Eh, probably not. It's not a bad weapon, but I never liked waiting for the detonation. I'll ask around, but I think it'll end up back with the militia," Vetra shrugged.

"So be it. Hey, has Liam made any attempt to reconcile? Maybe ask for some advice?" I checked.

"No, why?" Vetra replied, confused, raising a brow plate.

"Figures," I sighed. "Keeping it simple, he's been trying to make contacts with the Angara, just like you have. Thing is, he keeps getting blocked by red tape, and got frustrated. I told him that I watched you create a solid, fair, above the board deal with traders on Aya, running it all by Kesh, and suggested he ask you for advice, because you know what you're doing. I guess he either didn't believe me or is trying to continue on his own out of either spite towards you, or refusing to admit he was a bit unfair," I explained. I still respected Liam enough to not tell the others that his personal mission we were going on was because of a rather significant fault in his logic, but my
conscious demands I tell them before we begin the mission. Vetra scoffed.

"Jokes on him, then. If he actually came and offered a sincere apology, I'd have been an adult and help him out. His loss."

"True enough. Maybe I should have told him that one day, all this stress he's giving himself is really going to… Kostalot," I joked.

"Spirits, I hate you," Vetra groaned, placing her forehead in her hand. She couldn't suppress the chuckle though.

"You think I'm bad? SAM's been developing some humor algorithms. It's all puns. Come on, SAM, tell her the one you told me earlier," I suggested. Vetra chuckled, shaking her head to the sides, preparing herself for the pain.

"Why don't thresher maws eat comedians? Because they taste funny," SAM repeated.

"Please, do not ever bring up these jokes with Sid. She's just as bad," Vetra laughed.

"And now you've just sealed your own fate. Sorry Vetra, can't help it," I chuckled.

"You do realize I'm about to be working on one of your guns, right? I could rig it to explode, release a puff of tear gas into your face, or send out a tiny flag with 'fuck you,' written in bold across it, right?" Vetra threatened teasingly.

"Then that's a risk I'm willing to take. I'll leave you with some parting wisdom, though," I trailed off.

"Which is?" Vetra smirked.

"If ya can't beat em, join em," I grinned. Vetra snorted, shaking her head as I left the room.

"Scott, could you report to the bridge?" Suvi requested. Guess I have my next destination. It sounded urgent, so I wasted no time in getting up there.

"What's the problem?" I asked upon my arrival.

"I've been running some calculations, and I think we have a problem. The Tempest is carrying about seventy kilos of extra mass. I think… something's aboard that doesn't belong," Suvi explained, clearly nervous.

"Agreed. Our internal scanners aren't getting anything, but they're less specialized than our externals, and a Pathfinder's direct scan. I believe the mass is somewhere by the back of the ship," Suvi stated.

"Then I'm on my way. Let me know if anything else comes up," I ordered, heading straight towards the cargo hold. I scanned every inch of the hull and crates, finding nothing. Nothing in Liam's room either. Could it be that Vetra got something on board that she forgot to tell others about? This time, in the armory my scanner did pick up something weird, but not in a spot that Vetra could have possibly used for smuggling.

"Is that a… mech?" I muttered to myself. Welded into the interior hull. Huh, it triggered an audio file download. "Suvi, that extra mass is behind the storage room interior hull. Looks like a kind of
"mech. Welded right into the hull," I informed.

"Scott? I think I know what that's about. Mind coming back to the bridge?" Kallo requested. Curious, I did just that. Upon my arrival, he was already standing, waiting for me. The autopilot taking care of what he would be doing anyway. "I recognize the parts you found," Kallo stated.

"From?" I prodded.

"They belonged to the ship's lead designer, Lucille Diawara. She… broke her back during construction. But she wouldn't abandon her ship. She converted a construction mech into a rig she could wear. She must have been the one to weld it into the hull. Her artist's signature," Kallo explained thoughtfully, many old memories flooding back to him.


"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. 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'" the audio log ended, a woman's voice, a mix of pride, that her ship was in use, and perhaps… sorrow? That she wasn't there to see it herself.

"Dad's already gone… Makes you wonder how many of the others made it…" I murmured.

"And I never thought I'd hear Lucille's voice again," Kallo muttered.

"She really cared about the Pathfinders. Enough to give them her rig… for luck?" Suvi theorized.

"Lucille made it a part of the Tempest. Let's keep it that way. Suvi, add those seventy kilos so it's accounted for. If leadership asks questions, tell them it's a good luck charm," I ordered. Kallo and Suvi both smiled, but I could see in Kallo's eyes that he was happier than he was letting on.

"Gladly, Scott," Suvi replied, moving to make the proper logs.

"Good. Now let's go make her proud," I stated.
A Pirate's Life For Me

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I had used the remaining time on our way to the Sephesa system to assign the next set of Cryo pod blocks to wake up, thanks to Voeld. The current threshold allowed for an additional three cryo pod bays. As per the arrangement with the Nexus civilians, one of those would be a block’s worth of family members. The remaining two, I had decided would be both more soldiers and scientists. With a block’s worth of highly skilled merchants already awoken during a previous threshold, they were doing just fine setting up an economy, and one that could incorporate the Angara. They would suffice until after we find the heart of the Vault network.

I had even taken some time to talk with Kandros about the situation on the Militia's end, and of course with Taerve Uni, which he had partial control over. His APEX teams, up until my arrival, had only ever fought Kett and the occasional Remnant as they attempted to secure additional supplies, to buy themselves time. Since rescuing the Moshae, the Resistance had in fact called for support on their own worlds on occasion, and APEX answered. On one such op, Roekaar forces had ambushed a team, though fortunately, they were all able to evac. Even more recently, they have even encountered, and had shootouts with Exiles. Fortunately, no faction had yet to directly attack an Initiative Outpost.

As for Taerve Uni, Kandros had been impressed with both Resistance firearms and tactics. He had even spoken with Commander Do Xeel and had spent time suggesting strategies that he had learned from his time fighting for the Hierarchy. Apparently, the Militia forces stationed on Taerve Uni had already been called upon for an operation, assisting Resistance forces neutralize a sizeable Kett encampment not far from their capital city on Voeld, Estraaja. To say that the Angara were pleased to have the aid of vehicles like the Mako, would be an understatement.

Content that, for now, at least, the Militia did not require my aid, I returned my focus to why we have come so far out into the cluster in the first place. Liam's contacts had gone missing, and they knew critical Initiative information, that they also had no need to know… However, that currently didn't matter. We had to find them first. We had arrived at the system, but had no other leads other than that it should be here. So, we 'parked' ourselves just outside the system's rim, and ran detailed scans, hoping to find something. This system's sun was a massive red giant. It reminded me of Arcturus back in the Milky Way. I hadn't been to Arcturus Station very often. Everyone who enlists and passes visits there at least once for the ceremony, and a soldier promoted to an officer rank does so again. No one needed to go there to receive orders, unless they were of the sort too vital for a comm channel, no matter how secure. That, was way above my paygrade.

This system also housed five planets. One of which was a gas giant. Those who took Liam's contact could potentially hide out on any of the solid worlds, but they could also leave their ship in orbit around the gas giant. We had nothing to narrow down their location. Fortunately, we may not need to scour each planet. There was a debris field orbiting the gas giant, not far from the moon which also orbited the planet. There was also something curious about this field. The trajectories of the debris suggested that there was repeated jettisoning of junk, not the destruction of a ship. And there was enough junk and radiation to screw with scans. After considering that info, I think we might have the hideout. But, even then, that would be a needle in a haystack.

"Any sign of the pirates?" Liam asked, stepping into the bridge. He was already suited up.

"Too much background radiation. Could be anything in that debris field," Suvi answered.
"Makes sense. Heard that scavengers love this place," Liam remarked thoughtfully. "Damn, I hoped Bradley or some colonists would join in."

"We'll make do with what we have. But first we need a plan to find them," I reassured.

"Well we can't go in hot. Even if we knew where they are. Why don't we play to their scavenger roots? All that debris… ever hear of the Trojan Horse?" Liam asked, turning to face me.

"Even before we left it was a popular legend back home. So... ah, I see what you were thinking," I nodded my head.

"Think we can empty out one of the crates in the cargo hold?" Liam continued.

"Sure. One that can fit you, Jaal, Vetra, and me," I answered.

"Why does-" Liam began to groan.

"Aside from her weapon skills, these are scavengers, right? She knows how they work, might be able to make this easier for us," I defended. "I know you don't like her, but you need to be able to work together professionally in the field. I can't start picking my squads like it's a damn school yard, leaving someone out for the sole reason that they don't get along with someone else. You're both adults."

"Yeah," Liam sighed. "You're right. I'll start clearing out a crate." On our way down to the cargo bay, I had called on my selected squad to join us, and began getting myself suited up while Liam worked on the crate, removing rations, crates of thermal clips, ammo blocks, other supplies, and sorting them relatively neatly to the side. I was also pleased to find an M-25 Hornet waiting in my weapons locker, a sticky note reading, "Enjoy! -V" stuck to the side. I was beginning to strap on my armor, when Vetra was the first to enter. Her brow plate raised, watching, confused at what Liam was doing.

"Uh, Scott, why's Liam messing with our supplies?" she questioned.

"I'll explain when the rest are here. Go ahead, get suited up," I answered. She shrugged, but kept her eyes on Liam. Whether she was making a mental note of where everything was ending up, or watching to make sure he didn't break anything, I can't say. Soon, Jaal joined us, and I told him to start suiting up, as I did with Vetra. I'd speak once I was done. They didn't need to wait long, and I stood in front of them, holding my helmet in my hands as Liam finished the crate. I know Liam would prefer to not have others know just what happened, but there's no way in hell I'm leading a team into danger without them knowing just what they're getting into danger for.

"Listen up," I stated. The others, while still getting ready, were watching intently, only the occasional glance away as they ensured that their armor was properly secured. "I'm sure you're all wondering why we've dragged ourselves to the other end of Heleus for a personal mission, and why we're emptying out a crate. Well, I'll tell you, but I only request that it not leave this room. And I also request that you, respectively, say nothing to Liam about it. He's already been beating himself up, and when I first heard I was a bit rough myself. Our concern just needs to be getting this over with. So, Liam attempted to make a contact among the Angara. Name's Verand, and she and her entire crew have gone missing, in this system. While we are here to rescue them, this has also become a matter of security for the Nexus itself. Verand and her team have vital intel on the Nexus. Nav coordinates, security codes, even comm frequencies. Liam believed that she would be able to modify some of our tech the Angaran way. Whoever took Verand, could potentially get this data out of her, and use it against us. It's even possible they already have this information, and are planning to sell it or use it against us," I explained. Vetra clearly looked exasperated, brow plates
furrowed and mandibles twitching, mouth slightly open trying to figure out why Liam made the choices he had.

"For what it's worth, Verand has worked with the Resistance before. She's reliable, and I doubt she'd talk so easily," Jaal attempted to reassure.

"So, there's the crate. The culprits likely hide out in this debris field and spend their time scavenging it. So, we take this crate, pump it full of air, seal it, keep our helmets on, and jettison the crate into the field with us inside. We should stand out as a good bit of scavenging, and be taken on board. Once on board, neutralize the threats, and find Verand. If we're out there too long, and no sign of a ship, the Tempest will come back for pickup," I explained.

"Trojan horse. Simple," Liam called out, wiping his hands as he appeared done.

"What's a horse?" Jaal questioned, confused.

"Really don't like it, and bad metaphor," Vetra remarked.

"A horse is a four-legged animal back on Earth. Humans would ride them around. As for the metaphor, you'll probably hear the story in the cultural center," I shrugged. "As for the plan, it's the only one we have. We keep our helmets on at all times. Even if the scavs do pick us up. We'll be on a hostile ship, we don't want them to vent the atmosphere, let alone the room we're in, and then be exposed to a vacuum. If one of us does get sucked out, the Tempest can use your Quantum Entanglement comms to locate you for pickup. Still, let's try to avoid that, shall we?"

"Come on, we've wasted enough time. Let's hit the go button, shoot pirates, and save people. We got this," Liam stated confidently.

"We have a chance, Liam. We may not even get picked up by scavs," I reminded. I don't want his confidence to build on the chance we just sit in that crate for a few hours and find nothing. If that happens, I'm contacting the Nexus for them to change their codes, and prepare for an attack.

"And I'll make the most of the chance. You'll see," Liam replied, still confident. I'm going to need to talk with Lexi after all this.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We had been sitting inside the crate for at least an hour, the Tempest waiting just outside the debris field, waiting. Boredom had already set in. We had our mag boots keeping us standing, and I was playing Tetris on my Omni-tool to keep busy, when the crate shook. We must have entered a place with atmosphere as I could hear the whirring of mechanical arms moving us and setting us down. Now, we were all standing, facing the exit of the crate, weapons ready.

"We'll wait to be set down, wait for anyone to move away, and then quietly open the doors," I ordered. The sound of machines stopped, and I heard footsteps moving away. After another moment, I keyed the crate to unlock, and I slowly pushed it open.

"Sonuvabitch…" I muttered. I could see the walls of the ship. It was Kett.

"This isn't right," Liam murmured.

"Liam… you said to expect pirates. And this? Is a fucking Kett ship," I groaned. I poked my head around the corner. This was a large cargo bay. "A big one."
"Change... Change of plan?" Liam awkwardly attempted to defend.

"Why would the Kett be scavenging? Normally they ignore scraps," Jaal muttered. And then alarms started to blare. WHY WERE ALARMS BLARING?!

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Vetra groaned.

"Doesn't change why we're here. Find Verand, and get out! Somehow..." Liam stated.

"Alarms, Liam," I reminded.

"I know! I know!" he replied.

"Move it! That cargo is your pay!" a voice ordered. That wasn't a Kett voice, that was Angaran. Female. The fuck?

"An Angara? What?" Jaal remarked, confused. As we all were. I poked my head around the corner again. Yep, Angara, and she was ordering around another pair.

"There's no breach, it's your shit sensors," an Angaran man accused. I holstered my rifle and raised my arms in the air.

"Cover me. Maybe they'll talk. I'd rather not shoot Angara without confirmation they're bad guys," I ordered. I stood, and stepped into the open. The same woman giving orders earlier turned, hearing the noise of footsteps. She had a helmet on, so I couldn't see her expression, but she was reaching for her rifle.

"Stowaways! Kill them!" she growled, and I dove back by the others.

"Weapons free!" I ordered, getting my gun back out. The sound of their weapons surprised me again. Clearly not energy based, those were projectile based. Bought from exiles?

"Tell Calot we have stows! We have stows!" A man called out, apparently SAM had allowed us to listen in to their comms. An Adhi turned the corner, attempting to latch its jaws around one of us, but was easily shot dead before it could do so.

I ran behind an adjacent crate, allowing one of the others to fire as well. I was pleased to find that a single round from my Sweeper appeared to do the job, no shields to stop the round, and the armor around the head hardly thick enough to keep the round from breaking through and into the brain, so I switched it to single fire mode, Jaal using his rifle to do the same, and Vetra standing in between us, tech armor activated, and her Cyclone tearing apart anyone in her sightline.

My shields flared, but did not collapse as a pair of rounds impacted me from above. Turning to look as I dived into new cover, there was a catwalk almost just above us, and other crates could be used to get us up there. I allowed my shields to recharge, and noticed that the main room was, perhaps, clear, corpses strewn across. I ordered Vetra and Liam to stay there, and watch for others, and Jaal and I cloaked, finding ourselves behind a pair of pirates watching for the rest of us. We slit both their throats, and our cloaks fell.

"Report in! What's going on down there?!" a male voice demanded through the ship's intercom. I saw a console around a bend in the catwalk, lights blinking, and called the others up to join us.

"For the last time, report! We just fixed those bay seals. If you idiots blew them, I'll have your skins!" the voice demanded once more. Sounded like he was the leader of these pirates, and that he relied on fear to try and keep order. He's weak, unsure of himself. How the hell did they score a Kett ship? I was keying the terminal to respond, and smirked, thinking of just what to say. We saw
it in a movie just a few nights ago.

"Uh, everything's under control. Just a simple weapon malfunction. How are you?" I replied. Liam snorted, knowing the quote, and while Vetra took a moment, I heard snickering as she remembered. Jaal said nothing, but was likely smirking under the helmet.

"What is this?" the leader, likely named Calot, given the order given earlier, questioned. "Get cameras on the bay!" he ordered. A pause: "Well figure it out!" Seems like the ship doesn't quite agree with them. A vid screen above the console. An Angaran man was seemingly holding the camera. Bluish skin, fury in his eyes. Yet that fury was hardly intimidating. It was closer to the fury of a child, than anything else. "Stows? This ship is property of Talon Wing. Now you're property too, just like the rest. I don't let property me-" he began threatening. I looked down at the console and pressed the same button I used to answer the call, and the vidscreen and audio disappeared.

"That was a boring conversation anyway. So, shoot pirates, rescue contact?" I suggested.

"Uh… She's here… somewhere." Liam muttered, looking around the room and stepping forward. "Think they salvaged this thing?"

"I don't think that Kett would just hand over a warship," Vetra remarked.

"SAM, can you get the ship's schematics? Maybe locate where everything is?" I questioned.

"No, Pathfinder. While I am detecting almost no firewalls, I am detecting that the hardware ends. Wires that would connect me to the mainframe housing such information, are missing," SAM explained.

"Then we find Verand, and fast. This way?" Liam suggested, moving towards a door, and we followed. He pressed a button to the side of the door to open it, Vetra and Jaal at my side, and the door opened. To reveal a large gun quickly turning to face us and charging it's shot. We readied our weapons and were about to move when the door closed again, and the round impacted the door. "Not that way," Liam remarked, walking away. "Start there!" he pointed to the other end of the room. "Let's go!" Oh boy, this is going to be a mess, isn't it?

"Damn amateur," Vetra muttered over a private comm. While we're all connected on a secure comm, thanks to QEC, we have the option to establish a secure, private channel with other crewmembers, quickly able to switch between them. I snorted at Vetra's comment and we both returned to the main channel.

"Fight to the door they came in!" Liam called out, as more pirates stormed out of the door he pointed at.

"And if the captives aren't there?" I questioned.

"They have to be somewhere!" Liam exclaimed. Damn it, I was trying to imply that we need to find a way to get the ship's layout, not just going through doors at bloody random. Adhi began to rush us at a distance, but were easy targets quickly put down as we entered cover from the pirates.

I counted four, and one had a sniper, and the flare around him as I attempted to put a round in his head told me he had shields as well. Now his laser sight was pointing at me, so I returned to cover. Jaal was on the other side of the catwalk, the side closest to the large open space of the cargo bay and was taking shots at the others. Like an idiot, the sniper pointing its sight at me still fired, hitting a completely different end of the crate I was against than I was at. With the opportunity
present, Liam overloaded his shields as I drained them, then Vetra, with a barrage from her Cyclone, put a few rounds in his head. As he died, a trio of pirates emerged from another door downstairs. With our superior cover, we took them out before they could find any.

"Those shuttles, they're from Verand's outpost!" Liam called out.

"How would you even know?" I questioned, confused. He wouldn't have had the time to go around outposts.

"Shut it!" he replied angrily. Was he pissed because things were going wrong? Or at me? He stormed to the door the pirates came out of. "This has to be it," he muttered, keying it to open. Only it didn't. "Sealed?! Console override?" he suggested, and I moved to interface with it. I was finding nothing while I was searching through its systems. They were a mess. Liam was pacing anxiously behind me.

"Come on! We have to find Verand!" he exclaimed, sounding quite panicked.

"Damn it Liam! We can't find her if we don't know where the fuck we're going in this ship!" I replied, annoyance creeping into my voice. His anxiety, his nervousness, was all getting contagious. Adding on to the fact our plan only extended with how to get on the ship, and it was a bad recipe.

"Well something has to go right!" he argued. "You take a risk for the right reason, it's supposed to work!" he yelled out, slamming his fist into a crate. Alright, that's pretty naive of him.

"You dent your locker, the principle is going to be pissed," I remarked, still searching through the files. It was to both try and calm myself, and him down.

"It isn't a joke!" Liam yelled back. "I jumped us here blind! We don't know where anyone is or how anything works!" as Liam was talking the console's vidscreen activated, showing Calot. Before he could even speak, Liam slammed his fist onto the controls and it deactivated. "And now we're fighting some asshole who wants everyone chained. It's like hitting Andromeda all over again!"

Calot brought the vidscreen on again.

"I've sealed the bay. There's-" he began. Can't he see we're having a conversation? I slammed my fist onto the controls as I began to reply to Kosta.

"Don't make this about the whole Initiative. We're here to help and… why am I the one defending your plan?" I questioned, exasperated.

"I don't know!" Liam sighed, waving his hands in the air. The vid screen activated once more, and a truly pissed looking Calot was there.

"I will not be ignored anymore!" he growled.

"I will not be ignored anymore!" he growled.

"See? Total asshole," Liam remarked, gesturing towards him.

"That's it! Space them!" Calot ordered. Ah shit. Least we all had our helmets on.

"But Calot we-" a pirate began to debate. He drew his pistol and shot the man.

"I will not be ignored…" he muttered, and the comm closed.

"Hold on to something," I ordered, moving to grab onto the console.
"Such an asshole," Liam muttered. As I was about to take hold, the cargo bay doors behind us opened, sucking us out towards space, and all the atmosphere with it, even a few other bits of loose supplies. We were tumbling through the vacuum but there was some railing in our path, miraculously, all four of us managed to grab hold, Liam avoiding a piece of cargo coming his way. We wouldn't be able to keep this up for long, but when the air in the room is gone, there won't be a vacuum pulling us out anymore. If we can just wait it out... You know, I think I see a way to reconcile a little bit right now.

"Liam! Hold me!" I jokingly ordered. Obviously, if he were to try, he would no longer be holding the railing. Liam began laughing.

"I'm sad I can't punch both of you!" Vetra remarked, both annoyed and maybe a bit angry, though I knew not at us as she kept trying to hold on. However, I did hear Jaal laugh.

"Get on the junctions! Go!" A familiar voice called out, patched into our comms. August Bradley?!

"You folks need a hand?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Augie? You have timing," Liam chuckled. And the cargo bay doors began to close.

"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," he explained, chuckling at the state of this ship. It really is a piece of shit, isn't it? "Oh! Power surge! This beast does not like being prodded!" With the doors closed, we were able to get to our feet above the railings, letting our arms relax. But our weight began to shift, yet we weren't moving. Not until we started trying to balance out the weight.

"It's the artificial gravity! Everything's shifting!" I called out, as the gravity shifted to a ninety-degree angle. I saw Vetra and Jaal both rolling along, towards the ground, Liam moving to fall flat on his back, but I used my biotics to soften my landing, even able to right myself up before I hit the ground.

"Jackass," Vetra groaned.

"Liam, Scott, you ok?" Bradley asked over the comms. I looked around, getting our bearings. Our feet were planted on the wall on the far side from where the crate we came in on was placed. So the door we originally tried to get through was straight ahead.

"We're here, things have just gone a little sideways," I joked.

"I hate you. I really, really hate you," Vetra groaned, but I could hear a faint chuckle. Jaal just groaned, and I think Liam was snickering.

"Get to engineering and fix the gravs!" Calot was speaking over the intercom. There was another pause. "Then I'll do it myself!" he growled, and a trio of shots could be heard. Dumbass.

"Sounds like we made him angry," Bradley chuckled. "You take care of the fighting. Find Verand. We'll keep this junk heap stable." With all the junk that's been tossed around, this was going to be a lot of climbing.

"Ah hell," Vetra muttered. "We lost the map. SAM, little help?"

"I'm having difficulty analyzing predictive meshes. Walls are not floors," he replied.

"Was that snark?" I chuckled.
"Not intentionally. However, I will keep this in mind," he answered. I was leading my team carefully through the climb across, as Liam spoke.

"I knew they'd show. Knew they'd find a way to fight," he stated.

"Bullllshiiiiiiit," Vetra hummed.

"Moment of weakness," he defended. I opened the door, and there were a pair of pirates struggling to deal with the gravity themselves. They began raising our weapons, but no one had any cover, and we quickly put them down. At the end of the hallway, another door, which I led my team towards.

"Bradley, you guys got an estimate on just how big this thing is?" Vetra asked.

"Big. Definitely one of their warships. Dreadnaught?" he answered.

"Big ship. Would draw in a lot of recruits," Liam remarked.

"I'm curious as to how they even got their hands on it," Jaal murmured. I opened the door, more Angara. One had heavier armor, but the idiot had no helmet. It wouldn't matter how good his armor was if his head was exposed, and he fell.

"Get me grav control! Idiots!" Calot exclaimed over the intercom.

"Fight him for it!" Bradley ordered. And here is an example of an idiot leading idiots through panicked fear, and an ex-military man leading a collection of intelligent, skilled techs. Not hard to figure out the winner.

"Kett foundation, Angaran patch job," A woman called out.

"Forty percent functional at best. Partially stripped," A Turian man reported. "Oh, hey, Pathfinder? Thanks for waking up my daughter." Darket's dad?

"Parted out and then dumped. A Junker," another woman called out, a slightly English accent.

"Just who all are we working with here?" I asked.

"Chief Engineer Grace Lito. Thanks for fixing Eos," the first woman to speak thanked.

"Kuriada Camlin. I owe you a debt I'll never be able to repay," the Turian spoke.

"Westie. Just happy to help," the last stated.

"It's greatly appreciated. Just keep the ship steady, help us find Verand," I ordered, leading my team down the hall again. On top of a crate, I could access a door. Might be a way around. I opened it, and a body fell out, Angaran. But didn't look like one of the pirates.

"Resistance fighter. I'll take his ID tags, send them to Evfra. He will be remembered," Jaal murmured, taking the tags and resting his arms over his chest. Unfortunately, we had no more time to do anything else with the body, and had to keep moving down the hallway. At the far end, the room had, unfortunately, begun turning to a ninety-degree angle. Unfortunately, that was upwards, and we needed to climb along pipes reaching through the floor and the corners of the room. As we climbed, there was the sound of crates and other debris crashing. Looking behind, I saw just what happened.

"Ah shit, door's blocked," I grumbled.
"And that was our way back. Now we're committed to this route," Vetra remarked.

"Bright side, no one's sneaking up on us from behind," Liam stated.

"Unless we pass another door that the pirates could potentially use," Jaal retorted. We climbed up to the rooms door, and great. Shit's blocked. Sighing, I turned to see if there was another way. Behind and above us, I could see a ventilation grate, one that we could easily reach. I took out my Sweeper and shot out the metal bars, clearing us a path through, and led the others across. There was another hallway straight above us, once we crossed the gap, but our jump-jets wouldn't take us high enough for that. There were more crates collapsed to the wall, now the floor, that we had to maneuver around in the shaft.

"Hard to believe they could hide a ship this big," Liam muttered.

"It's all the radiation and debris. Keeps all the smart people from stumbling on them," I joked. I couldn't hear anyone reply, but I was sure that it didn't go over anyone's head. At the grate at the end of the shaft, I bashed the butt of my rifle against the crates to allow us passage. Looks like another cargo bay like room. Equipment to move supplies, crates all the way down at the 'floor.' I was about to continue down when Jaal lightly grabbed my shoulder.

"Look, down there. More pirates," he pointed out. I followed the path made by his finger and I could see one leaning against the wall. Paying closer attention, I could see another pirate, but I doubted that that was all. And this was a large room. The second one was far away, and at a lower level than the other. Well, moving ahead would be more likely to block our views of the two we could see now rather than provide us with a view of all of them. So, I ordered Jaal to take aim at the far one, as I moved back, allowing him room, and took aim at the close one. We counted down, and pulled the triggers, killing both. To both my surprise, and confusion, the other pirates in the room began to scatter. Not get into cover, just run out into the open, climbing up structures, in the open. That made them easy targets for us to mop up.

"What's wrong with you squits? There's only four of them!" Calot exclaimed over the intercom. 

"A little help on the outside makes all the difference," Bradley retorted, patching himself into Calot's comms.

"And numbers ain't everything dipshit," I called out, pulling the trigger on yet another Pirate, and inserting a fresh thermal clip. I couldn't see any more pirates running around, and began to suspect that the room might be clear. Was not certain, but the shields should hold from any surprised. I led the team down to some pipes, so that we wouldn't just try and jump, or fall, rather, straight down to the floor, and in case there were pirates left, leave us with a good angle to retaliate. As I hit the pipe, I green bolt of energy whizzed straight past my head, narrowly missing. Sniper. The others, fortunately, are not either blind nor deaf, and entered cover themselves, keeping their heads down.

"I'll cloak and get around. He won't be a threat much longer," Jaal offered, as he vanished from sight. A few moments later, we heard a body hitting the floor, followed by a gunshot. "You're clear, there was another with the sniper," Jaal explained, and we stood, descending safely to the 'ground.'

"Scott? Grace is working on the lockdown," Bradley informed.

"Thanks for the chance. Let's get eyes on some data. Can you spot a control hub or console? In the room? Have your SAM push a scan of it to me," Grace Lito requested.

"Wilco, looking for one now," I replied. At the lowest point in the room we could reach, it
appeared that there were many consoles, fallen onto the floor. But SAM confirmed that none were what we wanted.

"Scott, I can see a door up here. Might have the console," Jaal suggested, waving us up from where the sniper was. I joined him up there, stepping past several dead pirates, and I could see the door he was talking about. It was open, and there appeared to be a console inside. I nodded my thanks, and jumped across. I scanned the console, and SAM transmitted.

"Thought so, Calot did a bypass. Here's two access points to hit. I'll sync when you activate," she explained. She sent me the access points. One was back where the first Pirate we saw in the room was, and the second was down by the door. I activated the one farthest first. Got a few data packets too. Apparently, Calot had been in several groups before, all of which made a… less than positive impression. He went out with the Talons and killed at least some of them.

"Got the access point. Onto the next," Grace informed.

"And we know a bit more about Calot. Big chip on his shoulder. Must have made him snap. Now he's just a danger to everyone," I remarked, heading to the next access point.

"Small man, big gun," Liam murmured. Guess a few old faces were coming to mind for him. Access point was synched, and Grace confirmed that she was establishing her connection. Few more data packets.

"He found and retrofit a derelict, then uses it for pirating?" Liam questioned, either confused or disappointed.

"A man who gave up. Seen it before," Vetra muttered.

"I've accessed their security. If you can even call it that. Door controls and cameras," Grace informed.

"Watch the monitors, Pathfinder," Westie called out. All the monitors on the consoles in the room lit up, with the same image. Prison cells.

"There's Verand! And… the hell? They have humans locked up too!" Liam exclaimed.

"Guess you got your timing wrong, Liam. Calot wasn't hitting the Initiative 'soon,'" Bradley remarked.

"They're hitting it now… shit. We have to stop this," Liam stated, concerned.

"Working on it," I replied, waiting for the door to open. It did, and as soon as the last of us stepped through, a pulse of energy seemed to stretch across the ship, and we struggled to balance our weight. "Gravity's shifting!" I cried out as the four of us fell flat on our asses. Now the ceiling was the floor. Interesting…

"Get off my ship," Calot growled over the intercom.

"Augie?" Liam checked to see if he was still there.

"We're here. We'll find a route to those captives, don't worry," he reassured.

"When can the floor be the floor again?" Vetra muttered to herself, standing up and readying her weapon. I opened the door, and oh, this room was rather familiar.
"Aaaaaaand it's the cargo room," I mumbled.

"Again?!" Liam groaned.

"What do you mean you can't see them? Well, get ready everywhere!" Calot ordered over the intercom. Ok, that's one helluva stupid order. We don't know where the intruders are, so let's spread out our forces everywhere so that where they eventually will be, will easily break through.

"We're shooting him, right?" Vetra requested in a grumble. There was a door to the right that was previously blocked, but Bradley needed a console first. And there seemed to be a control room on the other side of the room. We climbed over the crates piled up on the floor. Not only did the console, when activated, unlock the door, with several pirates coming out, but the crane in the room moved towards the same side. Not sure what the use was, but it was there. We kept our distance, staying in the control room, and Jaal and I comfortably neutralized the pirates, as they lacked sufficient cover. Content with our efforts, we journeyed through the door they came through. Westie confirmed that the prison block should be down that way. Honestly, these guys were fucking idiots. At least when it comes to combat, they're goddamn brain dead.

"Cycling power to the doors ahead. But it seals the one behind you," Bradly informed.

"Not like we're turning back anyway," Liam retorted.

"They're bunkered in the next room, Pathfinder. Sniper, maybe two. And... cages?" Westie called out, confused with the last one.

"Jaal, you and I will take out the snipers. Liam, Vetra, watch for Adhi," I ordered, opening the door. Sure enough, two snipers. Jaal and I both used a pair of tech attacks on each, frying their shields before they could fire. We paused a moment, making them uncertain, then stepped out and fired, eliminating both as an Adhi ran up towards us, about to jump onto one of us, yet we stepped to the side and Vetra opened fire with her Cyclone, the rounds striking it while it was in the air and knocking it back with the force of the rounds. Another followed, but Liam shot it dead with his Charger. The rest were simple pirates, no true issue, though one had managed to drain most of my shields and supply it to her own, but I simply returned to cover, waiting for it to re-charge as the others eliminated her.

The pirates were dead, the door opened, and I could hear a mechanical whirring on the other side. We had to push on. We climbed up, and there were both unarmed humans and Angara hands in the air, pirates guarding them with large mechs, their backs turned to us, bent down watching. The mechs were bipedal, heavily armored, and appeared to have their power cells vulnerable on their backsides. Shoddy design if you ask me. As we climbed through, the pirates noticed us, and all turned.

"That's them! Get the Hydras! Take them down!" a Pirate woman ordered. With their attention drawn, the Mechs activating and turning towards us, the prisoners lowered their arms and attacked the guards. Guess we gave them their chance.

"See that? There's our captives kicking ass!" Liam exclaimed.

"And big mechs coming to us!" Vetra cried out, and we jumped down to grab cover. The mechs had a three eyed, gyroscopic 'face,' in the center of their torso, and two arms. One a claw, the other a gun barrel. One mech steadied itself, three lasers painting themselves on me using its three eyes, and pods on its shoulders began to open. Missiles.

"GET DOWN!" I ordered, and we took cover behind a large crate. Somehow, it didn't collapse.
"Jaal, Vetra, take right, shoot its eyes! Liam, you're with me on the left," I ordered, taking my black widow and shooting the gyroscope. On the second shot, the lights dimmed and the mech reeled back. I could hear Jaal's rifle discharging and Vetra's onslaught, along with more glass breaking, but mech was still accurate with its main cannon.

"Shoot the fuel cells on its back! I have an idea!" I called out. We focused our fire as the mechs drew closer, taking cover as needed from its other arm. I laughed as it attempted to fire missiles again, but couldn't lock on, the barrage simply going everywhere except forward. Soon, I noticed that the fluid in the cells began to leak, drops hitting the floor behind. With that, I stood and ran, using both jump-jets and biotics to launch myself over and behind both. I activated my flamethrower and ignited the fuel, the flame traveling into the fuel cells before reacting violently, both Mechs exploding. Vetra let out an impressed whistle, sounding a lot like bird song with her Avian 'lips.'

"Who designed these pieces of shit to have their vulnerabilities so large and easy to see?" I remarked, gesturing at the piles of scrap. "Ymir mechs were tougher than those."

"Looks like a modified construction mech," Vetra hummed thoughtfully, then ran a scan. "Thought so. Stolen Initiative tech, looks like a bit of Rem-tech too. Design seems to be similar to the ATLAS mech, a manned heavy weapons platform the Alliance had in the works. Jump jets, Eezo core to lower mass. Crude, but effective if used right," Vetra explained, nodding her head.

"If it's Initiative tech, maybe they bought these from Exiles. In that case, expect to see more in the future," I warned.

"Come on, I need to see what happened on the other side of the door," Liam requested. With my focus back on the mission, I nodded and moved to the console, trying to open it.

"Hello? Anyone alive out there?" A woman's face questioned. Human.

"We read you. Exiles?" I requested clarification.

"Trading ship out of Kadara. Nexus?" she replied.

"There's more options than that now. My Pathfinder team and I have made sure of it," I answered.

"We heard the pirates say 'Pathfinder.' Didn't believe them, she remarked.

"Is Verand alright?" Liam asked into the console's mic. There was the sound of movement coming closer.

"Liam? What are you doing here?" an Angaran woman, obviously Verand, responded.

"Didn't want you getting killed over what I told you," Liam muttered.

"I'd never give that up. Regardless, Calot hasn't asked anything. I don't think he knew we knew anything," she reassured.

"He dumped her in here, same as us. We're all just labor. Half the ship is our handiwork. It's a piece of shit, let me tell you. It's draining him. He can't be a threat to anyone with all the scavenging he needs to do just to keep it afloat," the woman scoffed.

"Found a project car, didn't count on maintenance," Liam remarked.

"We have people on the outside screwing with Calot's systems, been helping us get through. And
"I was working on them earlier. Let's see," she murmured, and I heard the sounds of her messing with tech. "Bah, got the override, but we need power. Fault's on your side."

"We'll find a way. Hold tight," I answered. I keyed my comms. "Bradley?"

"Kuriada, can you get them a path?" Bradley questioned.

"Allow me," he answered. The tone left me suspecting he had a grin. A door at the side of the room opened. Nothing to help us climb to it, but that's what jump-jets are for. It led to a kind of maintenance room. A generator was inside, least that's what I think it was. And I saw a door above it and to the side, might be something that way.

"Pathfinder, there's a problem. Dace says that the override only pulls the lock. That allows the door to open under its own weight," Verand explained.

"So we need to make things right side up," I finished. "Hear that Bradley? We need this ship right side up," I called out.

"Understood. Kuriada, we've been fighting those shorts, think we can…?" Bradley trailed off.

"Roll with it?" he finished. I'll take that as a yes.

"Hear that? Hit the power, and hang on," he warned.

"Finally," Vetra muttered.

"It's starting to make me dizzy," Jaal chuckled. We found the console directly above the room with the bulkheads. I allowed the others to grab onto pipes, railings, whatever they needed so that they wouldn't just fall flat to the floor. With my legs wrapped around the top of the console, looking like an upside-down T, my ass cheeks resting on the horizontal line of the T, and my arms wrapped around, keying my omni-tool to interface. As I pressed the final key, I held on for dear life. Power surged through the ship as the gravity reverted itself to normal.

As the blood began rushing to my head, I carefully worked to right myself up. It was starting to take longer than I liked, so I hit fuck it. I used my biotics to stabilize myself and let go. As I gently began falling to the floor, I righted myself up, allowing my feet to hit the floor. Jaal was the only one already righted up. Vetra and Liam both grumbling to themselves. I gestured for Jaal to help Liam and I moved to help Vetra.

"Does the lady require a hand?" I teased.

"Shut it and help me," she grumbled. Chuckling, I used my biotics to gently lift her away from the pipe she had clutched to, spun her right side up, and set her down. "My experience rock climbing does jack shit when it comes to shifting gravity as I hold on to completely smooth surfaces," she remarked.

"You were a rock climber?" I asked, as I began leading the others back towards the bulkhead from before. Now all the rooms were starting to look normal, even with debris tossed all over the place.

"Was a hobby back in the Milky Way. I'd like climbing them, looking out as I climbed, seeing how far I progressed, let alone the view, and then when I reach the top I'd just sit back, let the burn subside, just look out," she explained.
"Most I've ever done is just those walls in gyms. Never did too bad," I remarked.

"Tell ya what. Someday, we'll find a world with good mountains to climb, and climb it. But no biotics, that's cheating," she chuckled.

"Sure, I'd be game," I answered. By now, we were back in the room with the bulkheads. They were open.

"Ladies and gentlemen, your exit vehicle will be waiting at the nearest airlock," Bradley informed. "Grace will evac, but we can't have Calot chasing us." The meaning was clear. Kill Calot.

"Location?" I asked.

"Engine control. Past where they had the captives," Westie answered.

"Find him, kill him, leave. Can do. After all this, only one thing to say," Liam stated. "Proud of all our people, Pathfinder. Let's do this."

"Gah, FINE! Take them! I'll chase you down and burn you where you live!" Calot growled. "My Talon wing will never let you sleep!"

"Hey, we put him right side up, didn't we?" Bradley chuckled. We entered the holding cells. Dace and Verand and their people were waiting.

"Glad we finally have our feet on the floor, instead of everywhere except," the human woman, Dace, chuckled.

"Indeed. What's the plan?" Verand asked.

"You all will stay here. Rather, stay a room behind us at all times. We'll take out Calot and his goons. After, we'll head to the airlock for evac," I ordered. A few of the prisoners groaned at not being able to join the fight, but they stayed there. At the other end of the room, through the door, the pirates had lined up some crates for cover, and were set up, ready to fire. A trio of rounds impacted my shields, but they held as I dove to the side of the door, all of us in cover.

"Inducted cooling systems?" Kuriada laughed. "Override." We could hear the pipes in the next room bursting, and some of the pirates crying out in pain. Weapons drawn, we entered to find that some of them were frozen over entirely. Whether or not they were alive, or just frozen stiff was unknown. However, we didn't wait to find out. Some were on the floor, crying out as they held a frozen arm or leg, that would not move. We put them all out of their misery.

"You know, I might be turning around on this plan, Liam," I remarked, as the last of the pirates in the room were now confirmed dead.

"Huh, me too," Liam chuckled.

"Set coordinates for Eos!" Calot ordered. I'd be concerned if there was any chance of this ship reaching there before we killed him. "What do you mean it's not responding?" Case in point. "GAH! EVERYTHING TO ENGINEERING!" he demanded. "Yes, even that! No, I don't care if it's eating!" Well, they have something big, and hungry, here. Kett ship? Not hard to figure out.

"Get ready for a Fiend," I warned.

"This is not happening..." Calot murmured, still had the intercom on. Past the door, a small hallway, solar lamps and another door. I could hear a large creature growling. Yep, Fiend. I pulled
a grenade from my belt with my left hand, thumb ready to begin detonation. The door opened to engineering. We couldn't see the Fiend, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. Instead, Calot, flanked by a pair of pirates, stepped forward, weapon in hand, in front of the Eezo core above us. His armor was green and brown, a clear patchwork look to it. His skin was of a purple shade and there were lines on his head of a black color. Sign of his rank aboard the ship?

"Get a ship, fill it with shooters, and I'm still disrespected! Fine. Fine!" Calot growled.

"Calot, I'll give you one chance, and one chance only. You and your men, lay down their weapons. Cease hostilities. You'll be taken to Aya and face prosecution at the hands of the Resistance. Once you've served your time, maybe you'll even be able to do some good," I offered. He raised his weapon.

"No one is taking anything from me ever again, Pathfinder. I'll kill you myself!" he roared. As he said that, a shield formed around him and the Eezo core. He wouldn't be shooting like that.

"There's his pet!" Vetra called out. To the right, sure enough, a Fiend was lumbering its way across the catwalk over to a ramp down to face us.

"So much for killing me yourself huh?" I called out, as I raised my weapon to take care of both the pirates and the fiend. The fiend didn't have guns, so Jaal and I worked to wipe out the pirates quickly so we could focus on the Fiend. I highly doubted these were ALL the pirates on board.

"The shield's pulling straight from the drive core. We'll find a way to hack it," Bradley called out. With Calot calling for reinforcements, I moved to stand in front of the Fiend, grenade in hand. I keyed the detonation sequence and it began opening its mouth to roar, preparing to charge me. I counted on this, however, and threw the grenade, using my biotics to help guide it into the beast's mouth, adding extra force to shove it down its throat. The fiend made a coughing like noise as blood and bits of flesh spewed out from its mouth. Hell, it even loosened its lower jaw, dangling by bits of flesh as the beast fell over, dead.

"No! That Fiend was mine! It's all mine!" Calot cried out. I almost felt pity for him. A broken man. But he needed to die, he's a danger to too many people.

"Got a console Pathfinder! Hack it!" Kuriada called out. I ran to the nearby console and established a connection. More pirates arrived from the opposite side of the room, but we had already bunkered down. And, we had to wait here anyway. SAM's estimate time confirmed that the firewalls here were absolute trash. Likely wouldn't be able to keep out a virus from a damn porno site, let alone an AI.

"This ship makes me invincible!" Calot roared, as the hack completed and the shields weakened. In addition, the last of the pirate reinforcements poked their heads up, earning them a bullet in the brain.

"You're a damn idiot, Calot. Your ship can't protect you from someone already inside the damned thing!" I called out as Kuriada marked the next console.

"Think you're tough? I rule here," he growled.

"And I lead," I retorted. He rules by fear, I lead by example. That's why we're better. The next console was on the other side of the room, second level. And coincidentally, decent cover all around. Vetra set up on the side closest to the drive core, with me to her right, Jaal and Liam behind us. Both ways to us were protected. Someone with rapid fire, someone with marksmanship.
"Throw everything at them!" Calot ordered. There won't be anything left except two pirates to protect him when we're done with this hack. Our lines of fire were perfect. Anything that came into view was killed near instantaneously. Adhi or pirate. And no grenades were being thrown.

"I'll cage you. Make your people what I was, NOTHING!" Calot threatened.

"With all the men and Adhi we're killing, you'll certainly have the room for it! Not sure how you'll manage capturing us in the first place though," I retorted snarkily. He growled, but could do nothing. He continued throwing insults as we killed his men and hacked the systems, but they were lacking confidence. In its place, fear. I hadn't responded to any more, but when I was, my tone held everything his lacked. A blind man could listen to a recording of nothing else other than the dialogue in our fight to know that Calot was doomed.

"Drive core shield… Redirected!" Kuriada called out cheerfully.

"Go get em, Pathfinder," Bradley stated. We wiped out the last of his men coming to us and I gestured for my team to remain. They glanced amongst themselves, but nodded. As I stepped out, I quickly shot both of Calot's guards, killing both. As Calot began to fire back, I simply formed a barrier in front of me, deflecting all his shots away, and stepped closer. Nervously, he stepped back, still firing, before he lost his footing, stumbling and falling on his ass. Weapon out of his hand, but not out of reach. I dropped the barrier, and pointed my rifle at him.

"It's over, Calot. Your men are dead, and my readings say that this drive core is going to blow, the only thing preventing that is my people redirecting the power. But that won't last forever. Come to Aya, face justice," I offered, one last time. He breathed heavily, several times, and then looked up, fury in his eyes. His breathing quickened, getting closer to animalistic growls, and he glared. He roared as he attempted to lunge. I didn't give him the time. A trigger was pulled, and the upper part of his head was evaporated, what was left, was sizzling. With the sound of my gunshot, the other turned the corner to find me holstering my weapon, shaking my head at the corpse on the floor.

"That's him done, the fool," Liam muttered.

"Standing by for evac, Pathfinder. Hit the airlock when you're ready," Bradley called out.

"Let's go. There's nothing left here," I stated.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

A shuttle had returned my men and I to the Tempest, and, with both the former exiles and Verand in tow to Prodromos. Having removed our armor and weapons, Liam and I both entered the bridge.

"Ha, don't tell me a stock shuttle can mag-lock like that. I saw," Kallo chuckled, talking with someone via the comms. Bradly, a vid screen for a vid call where I would normally use the galaxy map from, was laughing.

"Don't spread it around. There you two are. Safe and sound?" he asked.

"All good Augie," Liam answered.

"We got everyone out just in time. The inside of that boat is six kinds of irradiated now," Bradley remarked. "Hold on, someone wants to say goodbye. He keyed something and the image of him was replaced with Verand.

"Thank you, Liam. I didn't expect… whatever that was," she smiled.
"You gave them plenty of trouble on your own," he grinned in reply.

"Maybe. But it's good to know your friends will come," she replied. "And, their friends." Liam glanced at me as the image returned to Bradley.

"We'll get these people where they need to go. The exiles want to come to Prodromos. Verand says we may even get some Angara. That's good news," Bradley explained. Huh, unexpected, but not unwelcome.

"No detours. We went through a lot to keep everyone in one piece," I stated. I'd certainly be calling the Nexus to update our security codes and comm frequencies. While I saw no reason for Verand to be confined anywhere in the meantime, I'd rather reduce the risks as much as possible.

"I hear that. And Liam? Next time, let's just do cards. I'm too old for this shit," Bradley requested.

"I'll believe that when you do," Liam grinned. Bradley chuckled, and gave his farewell. The vidscreen faded, and Liam gestured for me to follow him, and he led me to the meeting room, looking out a window towards Calot's ship. I stood, hands on the railing, looking out as I waited for Liam to begin.

"That worked out! Everything just… just so…" he trailed off, losing the false confidence and hollow positivity he began with. I turned to look at him and he raised a hand. "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," he began. He looked nervous, regretful, even, at the ordeal. I think he learned his lesson. "And it was all worth it. You showed Verand that 'Pathfinder' can stand for everyone." Good so far, but come on Kosta, say it… "But… I need to be smarter about taking risks. I'll… talk with Vetra. You're right. Sorry. Okay. Go ahead." he ended. Alright, I think I can be content with this.

"We did good." I stated, with a small grin. Liam appeared flabbergasted.

"What? Really?" he asked through light laughter, not quite believing it.

"Could do with a little less dangling in open space, but…"

"You got it," he breathed a sigh of relief, joining me in looking out at the ship. "Think that thing would survive a jump back to the Nexus?" he asked. 3… 2… 1…

It exploded. Violently. Parts shooting out every which way, the ship splitting apart. Some large chunks, some small chunks. With a glance, I could see the fake smile on his face, and the "well shit" look in his eyes as the very lesson he just recited about being careful with risks slapped him in the face.

"Probably not," I remarked casually. Liam released the breath with a chuckle. "Sounds like the lesson was learned. We're good, Liam. Just always keep that lesson in the back of your head and we'll stay good," I stated more seriously.

"Understood. You won't be disappointed," he replied, turning to leave.

"Kallo, take us to the Nexus," I ordered.
The Movie Night Strikes Back

Chapter Notes

I'll be leaving you off with at least one more chapter after this one. Not quite sure yet, as I'm binging some netflix as I churn these out for you all. That being said, I'm not going to bother with the perspective things in this chapter. Movie nights, you know.

I was sat down in my quarters. Everyone was gradually getting ready for bed, but none were asleep quite yet. The Tempest seemed to have a generally positive mood as well. You know what? Fuck it. I typed a quick message to Vetra. "Get the popcorn and Graxen," and began moving a couch to the same spot as last time. With that, I grabbed a tray and plenty of beers out of the fridge, with some Ryncol for Drack, setting that down by the couch. Then I keyed the intercom.

"Attention crew, how about another movie night? My quarters," I stated, and waited. As I had already let her know, Vetra arrived first with the remaining two bags of popcorn, and half a bag of Graxen for herself. I was silently pleased that she had not taken the far side of the couch with the other armrest, and had instead sat with just a bit less than a person's space between us.

"So, what movie?" she asked as Drack stepped in.

"Waiting to see if anyone has any requests. If not, the sequel to the last one," I answered.

"More explosions?" Drack questioned.

"Plenty more than the last one," I smiled, and Drack grinned.

"Just don't pull the same shit with the opening sequence dipshit," Vetra chuckled.

"Awwww, but where's the fun in thaaaaaat?" I teased, earning a punch in the shoulder. Huh, funny, as more people joined, I noticed that the same seating arrangement had been formed. Vetra had scooted closer to allow more room, Peebee next to her, Jaal next to Peebee, then Gil, Drack, Lexi, Sui, Kollo, Liam, and Cora. Whether or not people were actively planning that out, or if it was just subconsciously, I couldn't say. Either way, I couldn't complain about my piece of it. Though I'd just need to resist putting my arm around her shoulders like a cheesy romance movie. With everyone here, I stood to get the movie sorted. Everyone had a drink in hand, Vetra having made a stop in the mess for her own stash, and were waiting for the movie to begin with the popcorn.

"Hello there everyone. Was just sitting in my quarters here, bored, when I thought, fuck it, let's have a movie night. I already have one in mind, but as per the rules I described last time, anyone have any requests?" I asked, clasping my hands together. No one spoke up, and they glanced amongst each other, shrugging. "Then in that case, we'll be watching the sequel to the movie we watched last time. Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back!" I revealed dramatically, raising a fist up at head level like a cheesy movie villain cursing the protagonist, and with a tone to match. That earned a chuckle or two, and some smirks as I loaded the movie, SAM skipping through the legal bits, trailers, and the main menu, getting straight to the movie. This time, I left my mischievous nature aside, and didn't crank up the volume for the opening like I did last time. When the opening crawl began, it did not leave anyone deaf this time around and the others curiously read the brief summary that fills in some of the gaps since episode four.
"Another remote ice world? After Voeld I thought we were done with those," Vetra muttered.

"Thousands of probes into a galaxy to search for rebels? I think millions or billions would be better," Peebee remarked.

"I'm curious as to why Darth Vader is described as obsessed with finding Luke," Jaal spoke. "I think all the humans, except maybe Cora, had a knowing grin on their faces with that. I'm curious to see how that reveal is taken. I still wish I could go back and enter theaters across the world for the first showing of Empire Strikes Back, see how everyone reacted to that. Everyone went silent again as the opening crawl ended and once more, we were presented with a Star Destroyer, launching probes from the hangar in its underbelly. One of those probes landed, mimicking a meteorite in the snows of Hoth, and hovered into the air, searching for the rebel base. Followed by a figure riding on the back of a two-legged animal, a Tauntaun. Of course, that figure was Luke, who saw the landing. He radioed Han that he'd check it out as the Tauntaun began to panic.

"Something's coming, but wh-" Drack began. He was cut off by the roar and head of a large hairy, toothy creature jumping out at Luke, the Wampa. Suvi let out a small 'eeep' in response at the minor jump scare, and the Wampa knocked out Luke and killed the Tauntaun. "I think I know what scared that thing Luke was riding," Drack chuckled.

'I'd just as soon kiss a Wookie.'

'I can arrange that. He could use a good kiss!'"

"I suppose all Humans have trouble dealing with their feelings," Jaal murmured. "I couldn't help but feel that was a slight nudge in my direction, as he suspected where the relationship with Han and Leia was eventually going, and his suspicions were right, of course. Either way, Jaal will be disappointed, I ain't making a move anytime soon. Much less during the movie. It continued, Han taking a Tauntaun out to search for Luke, ignoring that it was almost night on the ice planet, meaning the temperature was about to drop considerably, then Luke dangling from his feet in the ice cave, and the Wampa enjoying a meal, and Luke's lightsaber on the ground, out of reach, and gained the Wampa's attention trying, but managed to pull the saber to him with the force.

"Oh, so it's just like biotics then," Cora remarked as Luke sliced off the Wampa's arm, then ran out of the cave.

"Should have finished it off and then stayed in the cave, like we did," Vetra chuckled. "Not like it would have been hard to finish the job with a weapon like that." Luke collapsed out in the snow, soon presented with both a voice and a vision. Obi-Wan, calling out to him as a force ghost, telling him to venture to Dagobah, train from Yoda.

"So, he's dead, but not really?" Peebee questioned.

"Force ghost," I shrugged, as Han found Luke, his own Tauntaun collapsing, dead. Han, being crafty, used Luke's lightsaber to split open its belly, and stuffed Luke inside as he worked on a shelter.

"Really, really glad we didn't have to cut open the Wraith or Destined in that cave and shove ourselves inside," Vetra shuddered.

To spite Han, Leia bent down and kissed Luke, fully. Liam, Gil, Suvi and I all giggled or chuckled, knowing what the truth was.
"What has you all laughing?" Vetra chuckled, brow plate raised.

"Oh nothing, don't worry about it Vetra," Gil smirked. Vetra obviously didn't buy it, but shrugged, figuring she'd learn sooner or later.


"Why even try to destroy it? The Empire may see you or hear the gunfire, or will see that one of their probes have gone offline. Either will draw suspicion to the base," Vetra questioned.

"Agreed. They should have begun leaving immediately. A resistance movement can never be too careful," Jaal supported. Still, the general on Hoth ordered evacuations to begin, and the scene shifted to an Imperial fleet, several Star Destroyers in view. And of course, the glorious Imperial March theme. I began tapping my foot to its rhythm, even enjoying the sounds of the TIE fighters flying around. A moment later, we were presented with a view of the Executor, the massive Star Destroyer and flagship of the Imperial fleet.

"That's a big one," Vetra whistled.

"Imagine the explosion it would make when destroyed," Drack chuckled. I smirked at that. The view shifted to inside the starship, behind Vader's helmet, his heavy mechanical breathing filling our ears.

"Figures that's his," Peebee murmured. An Admiral's attention was drawn by a Captain, informing him that a probe droid went down in the Hoth system, had seen buildings, and even sentient life forms. They had a lead. The Admiral was dismissive, like an idiot, stating he wanted proof, not leads. Vader's attention was then drawn by the conversation. Vader was convinced, and yet the Admiral nervously attempted to argue that it may be a wild goose chase. However, the Admiral's fate was not yet sealed.

"That Admiral's an idiot. Remote system, destroyed probe droid, constructions hidden in the snow, it needs to be investigated when you're hunting down a rebellion," Drack remarked. Few scenes later, General Veers arrived at Vader's meditation pod to debrief him on the situation. The rebels had a shield strong enough to deflect their bombardment, and the Admiral had brought the fleet out of hyperspace close to Hoth, and the Rebels knew the Empire was here. Vader was not pleased with the Admiral's performance. They had been forced into a ground assault. Veers left Vader, and with a vid-screen, Vader contacted Admiral Ozzin. He began to debrief Vader himself, after General Veers had done so, but was stopped as a low noise vibrated through the speakers, and the Admiral seemed to have trouble breathing.

'You have failed me for the last time, Admiral,' Vader stated in a tone both calm, annoyed, and angry. Vader seems to do a good job of conveying all those emotions in a single sentence and tone. As Admiral Ozzin was grasping at his throat, Vader called for Captain Guyet to step forward, who did so calmly, attentively, and almost unfazed. Admiral Ozzin fell to the floor, dead, as Vader gave the Captain a promotion, ordering to spread out the fleet to prevent Rebel escape, and to prepare the placement of ground forces.

"This is a good villain," Drack chuckled, nodding his head.

The Rebels lined up against their trenches in the snow as they saw several large shapes moving their way in the distance. An officer used a pair of binoculars to get a closer view. First, he saw a large, round, metal 'foot' and a leg above it, another leg behind that. He raised the binoculars to
reveal one of my favorite vehicles in the Star Wars Universe. The AT-AT. The ground shook as they marched along, dislodging a clump of snow onto R2 inside the base, and squads of Snow speeders launched from the base's hangar to engage. Their blasters weren't making a dent, while the walkers kept moving and firing. Damn I love the sound of the blasters on the walkers. Big, heavy, Pew-Pews. Soon, one of the Snow speeders launched their harpoon, onto the legs of an AT-AT, beginning to do circles around the walker.

"That's not gonna work," Drack mumbled. The cables were wrapped tightly around the legs, and it unbalanced the walker, and it collapsed forward, it's threat neutralized. "It fucking worked?" Drack threw his hands into the air, surprised that the Empire would have such powerful vehicles with such an exploitable weakness. The Snow speeders that followed up must have hit a weak spot as the entire thing exploded. Drack's reaction was a mix of pleasure at the boom, and confusion at what made it explode so violently and entirely. Still, the rebel lines were being shattered by the walkers, and Luke's Snow speeder crashed just in front of a Walker, and he narrowly escaped with an explosion before it was crushed. Inside the base, Han was convincing Leia to escape with him on the Falcon, and Imperial troops had infiltrated the base, and the Rebels on the ground running from the walkers. Luke used a rappel gun to lift himself on the underside of an AT-AT, his lightsaber to cut an opening, and tossed the explosive inside, detached, and fell into the snow. Another Walker was destroyed. Another explosion to make Drack happy. Followed by another from a destroyed Snow speeder, and yet another from the shield generator being destroyed. Inside the base, the Dark Lord of the Sith had arrived, Han, Leia, Chewie, and 3PO entering the Falcon for a narrow escape, Imperial troops failing to stop them.

"An impressive evacuation. All transports away," Jaal nodded approvingly. Luke managed to return to the transports, entering his fighter to break off towards the Dagobah system, and the Falcon was having a less than clean escape, entering an asteroid field to attempt to break off pursuit. I looked over the others, once again, Jaal had the popcorn, but was being considerably more careful with how much he was eating, and Vetra had just popped another Graxen into her mouth. I waved at Jaal for him to pass the popcorn, and he nodded, grabbing one last piece and handing it over so I could enjoy a bit.

"After piloting through the Scourge, an asteroid field would be a vacation," Kallo joked.

"I think I'll take nice, open space, thank you," I chuckled in reply. A moment after I finished, one of the pursuing TIE fighters was smashed by an asteroid. "Guess he was stuck between a rock and a hard place," I joked, swallowing the bit of popcorn I just began to eat. Vetra shook her head, chuckling, as did Suvi, Liam, and Gil, while the others groaned or just smirked. At that moment, another TIE fighter got his wing clipped, sending him spinning into another one. "And he just needed to wing it," I continued. Vetra snorted and punched me on the shoulder and a few others burst into minor laughter with the one-two PUNch.

Han flew the Falcon towards a large asteroid, more like a small planetoid, leading the remaining two pursuing TIE fighters into a narrow valley, which housed a gap that the Falcon narrowly fit through, and the fighters couldn't. Using the break, he located within the planetoid that they could descend into, and hide from the Imperials.

"Back in my smuggling days I'd sometimes do the same thing. One time I even stumbled upon a stash out there. Creds, fuel, equipment, all kinds of things I was able to sell for even more than what I was payed for that trip. Kept Sid and I fed for a year," Vetra explained. I would imagine that she never had the kind of problem they were about to have in this cave.

"Looks like old burn scars. Among other kinds, that is," Lexi remarked. We had our first look at
the man behind the mask, Vader in his meditation chamber as his helmet was being placed back on his head. She was right, of course.

Luke had set up camp in Dagobah, having a meal, and there was a snake sliding over some of his supplies.

"Wait, that's an Earth snake. Doesn't look alien at all," Cora remarked.

'I feel like…'

'Like what?' a new voice in the movie questioned. Luke turned, blaster in hand at the small green creature, with long ears and thin, wiry gray hair on his head, old grey robes covering his small body, as he raised his hands over his face. The others watched curiously at this odd new character.

'Looking for someone? Found someone, you have, I would say. Hmm?' the character spoke in the familiar, broken pattern, and that familiar chuckle.

"That's coming through my translator pretty weird. Grammar is off. That on purpose?" Vetra questioned.

"Yeah, his grammar is supposed to be off," I answered. The little green man began exploring Luke's camp, nibbling at his food, while Luke struggled to keep him from touching anything. Well, it has been a long time since he has seen any real technology. And I'd think he's pretending to be a crazy, goofy old man in the jungle. He had a sense of humor before, sure, but this is also different to how he once was. Exasperated, Luke followed the little green creature to his hut, as he had offered food before he helped Luke find Yoda.

Just how many people is she going to kiss?" Peebee questioned jokingly, as Han and Leia had their little moment. Only to be interrupted by 3PO, much to the displeasure of Han.

"Guessing there's going to be a big fight between Han and Luke as to who gets Leia, but Leia will just choose one of them," Vetra remarked.

"You'll see," I chuckled. A few scenes later, Vader kneeled to contact the Emperor, and we had our first good look at the villain. His wrinkly old face, orange eyes, and black hood. Emperor Sheev Palpatine.

"And people look at a face like that and think he's not evil," Cora muttered aloud. Palpatine stated his certainty that Luke is the son of Anakin, to which Vader wasn't sure of the possibility. Palpatine's response? To search his feelings. I noticed some of the aliens raise a brow or shrug at that, wondering why the murderer of Anakin would need to search his feelings to know that Luke was the son of Anakin. What also surprised them, was that Vader suddenly seemed to be suggesting, pushing for, even, that Luke lives, and be turned to the Dark Side rather than destroyed. Little did they know why Vader would be determined for Luke to live. Palpatine liked the idea, and allowed Vader to try.

Inside the hut of the small green creature, Luke was both impatient, and not exactly enjoying the food. And somehow, the creature claimed to know who Luke's father was, without even knowing Luke's name. His first hint as to who he is. The creature's shoulders fell.

'I cannot teach him. The boy has no patience.'
'He will learn patience,' a distant voice answered. This clearly gained Luke's attention and the others put the pieces together. This, was Yoda. And eventually, he agreed to train Luke.

Leia was sitting inside the Falcon's cockpit, listening to the sound of bombers hitting all the asteroids in an attempt to draw them out, as a winged creature flew by.

"The fuck..." Vetra muttered. Leia slowly moved to investigate, and with a shriek, it latched onto the glass. Again, like with the Wampa, Suvi let out a small little yelp of fear at the jump scare. The cave was filled with a mist, moisture, and the ground didn't feel like rock to the others. The entire cave shook with a rumbling. "None of the caves I ever hid in had this issue," Vetra remarked, confused at what the hell was going on. The Falcon lifted off, and there were teeth as they escaped. A giant white worm attempted to bite down on them, sticking its head out of the field, but missed.

"How would that even survive? It's in a vacuum," Lexi questioned. We had no answer for her.

Luke ventured into the cave, and out stepped Vader.

"How the hell?" Drack asked, surprised to see him here. Vader and Luke activated their sabers. A small fight, and then in an explosion of sparks, Vader's head was chopped off, his body collapsing to the ground, head rolling away. The helmet exploded, revealing a face within. Unscarred and human. Luke's face. "What the hell?" Drack continued. In the next scene, Vader was standing in front of several bounty hunters. Only some of which I could name. The one with white robes over his head, Dengar. Next to him, a droid, IG-88. Next, in the green and yellow Mandalorian armor, Boba Fett. The Trandoshan, Bossk, and the last bounty hunter I could not place a name to. Vader wanted Han, Chewie, and Leia alive. And was willing to pay a hefty sum.

"Didn't we see the green and red helmet one in the last movie?" Jaal asked.

"We did. He's a rather iconic bounty hunter," I answered.


"An old boyfriend told me that size doesn't matter. Thing was, he didn't know how to use it either," she chuckled. I had been taking a sip of my beer and nearly spit it out laughing. Suvi began coughing on her drink and almost everyone began laughing. "That wasn't even what ended things. Ironically, he was just so damn cocky about it," she continued, laughing. The little pun she snuck in there was the final straw, leading me to spit out the beer and just laugh.

"Guess he was a bit of a dick huh?" I joked. Vetra chuckled lightly, making a show of her shrug in response as the laughter slowed. SAM had been kind enough to pause the movie for that, and had since resumed it. After more denial from Luke, Yoda got tired of his shit and decided to give him a demonstration. Easily using the force to lift Luke's X-Wing out of the marsh and onto land.

"Just how much like Biotics is the force?" Cora questioned.

"Well it can do everything about manipulating matter. Telekinesis and all that, but it also goes farther. Like mind tricks and foresight," I answered. Cora shrugged, and the scene changed again. The Falcon was hiding on the back of a Star Destroyer's command tower.

"You're kidding. They can't detect that?" Kallo exclaimed. Moments later, the Star Destroyer dumped its trash, and the Falcon drifted away with it. But they had a tail. Boba Fett, in Slave 1.
They blasted 3P0 to bits, the unknown hostiles, scattering parts of him throughout the room, and Chewbacca was this close to seeing them.

"Well, shit, there goes comic relief," Peebee murmured.

'I just made a deal that will keep the Empire out of here forever,' Lando answered.

"Run, it's a trap, it's a trap," Vetra exclaimed, knowing that's never a phrase you'd want to hear. It was too late, the door was open, and Vader stood, greeting his 'dinner guests.' Han drew his DL-44 blaster and fired, and Vader simply raised a hand, using the force to block each and every round, and then pulled the pistol away. Boba Fett stepped from around the corner, and Stormtroopers blocked their escape.

'I had no choice, they arrived right before you did,' Lando defended.

"They're not following through with that deal," Vetra remarked. Of course, an evil Empire wouldn't remain true to their word.

"So, is it going to be like cryo?" Peebee asked. Han was being prepared for the carbonite freeze.

"In a way. Lot less comfortable though," I remarked as he descended. And then he was frozen. What was plucked from the freeze, was a block of carbonite, most of Han's features sticking out. Head, chest, arms and hands, waist, and legs. He was alive.

They arrived at the landing pad too late to save Han, Slave 1 taking off, the destination: Jabba's Palace.

"Well that's a plot point for the next one," Vetra remarked. Right once more. Scenes later, as the lightsaber fight between Vader and Luke continued, in the room with a window looking out over the large shaft downwards, Drack spoke up.

"The saber fights have at least improved. Not fantastic but a lot better than the one in the last one."

"Just wait till episode 3. Damn good saber fights in that one," Liam stated. A vacuum pulled Luke out of the room and into the now broken window, barely managing to catch and climb up onto a catwalk below. Several more scenes passed, including the escape of Leia, Chewie, R2, 3P0, and Lando, when Vader encountered Luke once more, stepping out in a surprise attack. His breathing was faster, and he was pushing Luke back. Luke landed a glancing blow on his shoulder, and in retaliation, after several more swings, pushing Luke back off the catwalk and onto some narrow beams supporting equipment, Luke's hand, and lightsaber, were lost, and he cried out in pain.

"Need a hand there buddy?" I joked, eliciting more laughs and groans.

'If you only knew the power of the dark side. Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father…' Vader trailed off.

'He told me enough. He told me you killed him,' Luke growled, holding on at the end of the equipment single handedly.

'No… I, am your father.'

"PFFFT! WHAT?!" Jaal exclaimed, clearly surprised and shocked, trying not to cough on the
popcorn he almost choked on. I, and the others who knew were grinning. Vetra's mandibles flared in surprise.

"Daaaaaaamn…" Peebee trailed off.

"An unexpected plot twist," Kallo remarked.

"Well, that explains a number of jokes I've heard from other humans," Cora stated thoughtfully. Still, Luke did not accept his father's deal, and let go, falling through Cloud City's structures, then safely sliding along maintenance shafts, and unsafely dropped out the bottom of cloud city, barely holding on to an antenna at the bottom.


"That was a helluva reveal," Peebee remarked, standing, as did many others.

"To this day, I wish I could go back in time and watch how theaters around Earth reacted. Pretty sure it made newspapers," I chuckled.

"Must have been a big deal back on Earth," Jaal prodded.

"It was, even before we left. They weren't making movies anymore, but it's not a series that the world could just forget," I answered.

"We can't just leave this on a cliffhanger and then watch other shit. I say we finish it next time," Vetra suggested. The others all seemed to agree.

"I'll be more than happy to oblige. But another night. I'm tired, and I think you all are too. So, I want to get some shut eye. Shoo," I chuckled, waving at them with my hands teasingly. Like last time, Vetra and Jaal helped moved everything back in place, and I gave them my thanks before I left. Stripping down into my boxers, I collapsed into my bed, and slept.
With an undisturbed night's rest, I awoke as the Tempest was coming into the Nexus to dock. The 'window' un-tinting to reveal the artificial sunlight of the Nexus. I debated internally as to dress or shower, and shrugging, I chose the latter. The designated shower blocks had already passed, which meant I should freely be able to do so. I'd just do a minute time lock on the doors so that no one enters while I'm getting undressed.

The hot water felt nice as it ran down my back, however it felt less than nice on my burn scar on my chest, and I was careful to keep too much water from getting on it. It was an inconvenience, though I was convinced that over time, it wouldn't be an issue. Once I felt clean, and was mentally dragging myself away from the pleasure of the hot water, I turned off the faucet and activated a five-minute time lock for the bathroom doors. Enough time for me to dry and get dressed, with a bit extra that can easily be cancelled.

Cleaned, dried, and dressed in a black T-shirt, the Pathfinder logo on the left side of my chest, and shorts, I stepped out of the bathroom, the time lock deactivating. According to SAM, everyone had left the ship by now. Peebee was putting the finishing touches on her project, so I sent a quick message asking for her to let me know when it was ready, and Jaal was hanging near the cultural center, waiting for me to see Andrahnar with him. What I was surprised to hear, was that SAM informed that there was not just one, but two memories of dad's that were ready for viewing. I'd be seeing those before we left today. But first, Jaal and Andrahnar. Jaal was waiting outside the cultural center, sitting down on a bench, people watching and he stood upon seeing my approach.

"Hope I didn't keep you waiting," I stated.

"It's of no issue. I have only been waiting a few minutes," he reassured. "Shall we?" Nodding, I led him into the cultural center. Several Angara were listening attentively to the holo-displays, and Andrahnar had taken a seat inside reading a data pad. He had likely been waiting for us, as his seat was facing the door, and he stood upon noticing our arrival.

"Safely home thanks to you and your skills. I've learned a great deal," he greeted.

"I enjoyed testing myself out there," I answered.

"Spoken like a soldier. Your performance was exemplary, Ryder. I see clearly why your N7 would be the best of the best," Andrahnar complemented.

"While I appreciate the compliment, I've never taken N7 training," I reminded.

"Yet you still took skills taught by your father. I believe you would have succeeded. If you ever tire of being Pathfinder, I'd be honored to call you a brother, Heskaarl," he saluted. "Jaal Ama Darav, step forward," he stated. I let out a knowing grin, as Jaal, confused, stepped forward. Andrahnar pulled a box out of his pocket, and opened it, revealing a medallion. Jaal's eyes widened. "Jaal Ama Darav, I, and the rest of my brother and sister Heskaarl understand that for now, your current mission takes priority. When complete, we offer you the ability to finish Heskaarl training and officially join our ranks. If you pass, you will still be permitted to aid the Pathfinder in his travels. In the meantime, take this medal, and walk with our authority. You are worthy of the title, Heskaarl," Andrahnar presented. Jaal stood, eyes wide, staring at both the box and the medallion within, mouth agape.
"I… I'm honored…" he stuttered, the shock still holding a firm grip upon him. Slowly and cautiously, he moved to take the medallion from the box, Andraknar handing him an empty necklace for Jaal to attach it to. The necklace itself was rather long, so that it could compensate for the neck flaps. Jaal placed it upon his neck, and let out a breath he had been holding in.

"We welcome you into our ranks, brother," Andraknar smiled, holding his arm out to salute Jaal. Jaal returned it, face still full of surprise. Once the salute was complete, Andraknar embraced Jaal as a brother, and then held him by his shoulders. "Now, continue making us proud out there."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

After the brief ceremony, I had left Jaal to speak more with Andraknar about the history of the Heskaarl, what would happen in the future to make it official, and what this would mean for him in the Resistance. In the meantime, Peebee had completed her project. And the directions I had been given surprised me. Just above the Vortex, like Kesh's apartment. On the opposite end of the hall from her. I very easily and quickly found it, and knocked on the door before entering.

"That you, Scott?" she asked for clarification.

"No, it's Director Tann. I caught wind of an… unusual project being performed upon my station," I teased.

"Then you have the unlock codes, do it yourself," she teased in reply. Before I could even respond, the door's interface glowed green, a sign that it had been unlocked.

Smirking, I entered. And like Jaal did earlier, my eyes went wide. Peebee's apartment was a scattered mess, papers and wires everywhere. Blankets and empty food containers scattered about. But I didn't even notice until I was leaving. What left my eyes wide open was that hovering next to Peebee was a Remnant Observer, it's lights glowing green. Peebee giggled at my surprise. "Ta-da! My project, she is complete," she stated, choosing a dramatic tone like she was in a play. "This one is just a proof of concept. I stripped out its Remnant command prompts to see if I could power it up myself. And it worked! Now I can build a field model with combat protocols that fights for you!"

"Fucking hell, you've outdone yourself Peebee," I remarked, completely surprised. This was not what I had expected. "Just have Suvi and Gil look at the combat one before getting it ready, would rather not take risks," I warned.

"Of course. I hoped you'd be happy," Peebee smiled. I was about to ask more questions about the bot when the door opened behind us. "Forgot to lock the… shit," Peebee muttered. Our new guest was an Asari, and she certainly had a pompous air about her. It was in the walk, the mocking look in her eyes as she looked at Peebee, and especially her tone. Peebee was fuming.

"My, my, Pelessaria. Didn't know you were still using this hole. Who's your friend?" she questioned. She sounded as if she was toying with Peebee. Peebee, trying to be as straightforward to get this over with sighed.

"Kalinda, this is Scott, Scott-" she began, quickly trying to get the introductions out of the way. Kalinda scoffed, cutting her off.

"Oh, everyone knows the Human Pathfinder. I meant, who's your Remnant friend?" she was eyeing the observer greedily. This seemed to be where Peebee was drawing the line.
"None of your business," she stated firmly.

"Of course it isn't. That's what makes it interesting. Don't be so hostile, babe," she replied casually. I could see Peebee's glare get even more fiery. Whoever Kalinda is, she did something to Peebee.

"Don't be so condescending. Babe," I mocked. "This is Peebee's place. And you're trespassing. I'd say that warrants a little hostility."

"Now, now, I was just concerned something might have happened to my dear old friend," Kalinda defended, her voice dripping with bullshit. But I don't think she was trying to convince anyone. "I'm sorry for the intrusion, Pelessaria. I'm just relieved to see you… moving on. Ta-ta," Kalinda waved.

"I'll walk you out," I stated, following close behind as she turned. The moment she left the threshold, I closed the door and physically locked it. While all our doors these days have an electronic lock, they have a physical back up as a precaution. I turned to see Peebee release a deep sigh of relief, place her forehead in her hand, and plop herself down onto the sofa. I sat myself down on the other end, the Observer still floating there in the air. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Kalinda and I go way back. We joined the Initiative together. For a long time, we were like family. Very close. Now, we're not," Peebee explained. There was the obvious implication linked with 'close, but I think there was something else. "When you live a thousand years, Scott, people come and people go. Entanglements are silly." Peebee's tone had suddenly gotten rather casual. She was masking some shit. I know that from personal experience. "You know, places are just the same way. Time to pack this one up. I'm done with it," Peebee stated with an air of finality.

"Ah, but how can you give all this up? You're living like royalty in this place! The queenly snack wrappers, stray papers, everything," I joked, allowing her to cover it up. For now.

"Ha! Watch me," Peebee smirked. "Easy come, easy go." She stood, and entered her room, taking out a suitcase. "And there, all done."

"Why am I not surprised?" I laughed. "So, how long do you think the construction for the combat model should take?" I asked.

"Oh that? I already have an Observer on the Tempest. Just install a few parts, check with the others like you said, and Zap will be all yours," she answered.

"Zap?"

"My names for them. This one is Poc, Proof of Concept, and yours will be Zap. Because it will… zap them… with a laser…" Peebee chuckled.

"Fair enough," I shrugged with a smirk.

"Well, I'm leaving, taking all this back to the Tempest. I'll get to work on Zap," Peebee informed. "Come on Poc, and activate cloak," she ordered her pet. It beeped a bit and shuddered in the air, as it began to follow Peebee, and turned invisible. I left first, leaving the door open for them, and Peebee relieved herself of another commitment, yet possibly replaced it with another.

I considered what to do next, as I certainly had options. I could call for Gil to have the poker game, but I may be better off letting us find Leusinia first. Vetra was either securing some supplies or spending time with Sid, and I wouldn't want to interrupt that. Drack was likely simply spending time with Kesh, and I know Jaal was back in the cultural center with Andraknar. As for anyone else, I had no idea what they were doing, or where. Guess I could just go see Sara. But SAM had
"Scott, since the last memory you have observed, two more have been unlocked to me," SAM informed over our private channel.

"Two? Wonder what happened to trigger them both," I remarked. I made a beeline for the tram so I could get to ark Hyperion. Soon, I entered SAM node, and linked with the console inside. SAM transferred the first memory. My vision faded to black and the sounds of SAM node ceased to reach my ears. My vision became clear again, looking down at the very machine that, in the last memory, SAM had been seen. And mom's voice reached my ears.

"Finally. The Ryder clan in one room. Feels like it's been years since we were together," she remarked, she sounded happy. I, er, dad, looked up to see her smiling. She turned her head and Dad followed it and... fucking hell that's unnerving. I was standing there, arms crossed, looking at mom. I'm seeing myself in dad's eyes.

"Or more," I joked.

"Well, I'll take what I can get. I've missed you two," mom smiled. Dad looked over again. Sara was standing there too, just behind me. Awake, smiling. I miss her.

"How're you doing, mom?" she asked.

"No, we're not doing that," mom stated, eyes closed and hands in the air, shaking her head no. "Only one rule for this visit. No talking about me. I'm fine. And when I'm not, the pills help. Deal?" Dad was looking down at SAM again so I didn't see us nod, but I remembered this reunion well enough. I know Sara and I both did. "Good. Let's talk about something else. Alec?" Mom suggested, gaining Dad's attention back. He looked up at mom, an annoyed look in her eyes. I remembered how dad looked here, awkward, again.

"Uh..." he stuttered. As dad glanced through the room I noticed myself turning to face him, a slight smirk.

"Really?" Mom questioned. He looked back at the two of us as he tried to make conversation.

"Well. Er... You're both looking... taller," he stated. Sara and I were both smirking.

"Yeah, Dad. That does tend to happen," I remarked.

"Right, right. I know. So, uh..." Dad struggled again. "I hear the Alliance has a new tank in the works. M-35 Mako," he stated. This was something he could make conversation about. And it worked with me as well. I took the conversation starter happily.

"Yeah, word is they can air-drop this one from a ship," informed.

"I know! They're saying we may get one for our next expedition!" Sara exclaimed.

"You still poking around the Attican Traverse?" Dad questioned. Sara almost beamed, she loved her work.

"It's amazing. We think we found a Prothean site. A big one. No artifacts yet, but still digging," she answered.

"Ah, I remember the day they found the first ruins on Mars. Changed my life. We knew for sure that aliens were real," Dad reminisced. "We just had to go find them." Ah, I remember, those
remarks got me excited again. I was restless as hell guarding that Mass Effect relay.

"Yes! Every day. I'm looking at a Mass Effect relay and I keep thinking: What's on the other side?" I exclaimed. I remember dad's highly approving grin at my response.

"Don't lose that. The minute you stop wondering what's beyond the mountain, you die a little inside," Dad taught.

"No chance of that. It's in our blood. You infected us," Sara joked.

"What was it like? When you first went through the relay?" I questioned. Dad chuckled before responding.

"Don't believe the stories. The Charon relay scared us all shitless. Even Admiral Grissom," Dad answered. "Why don't we have this dinner your mom's been slaving over all day, and I'll tell you about it." That sounded like a good idea to all of us, and we began to leave. Then the memory faded to black once more. And I returned to the 'real world.'

"I remember that. Weird seeing myself. It was sad that our family wasn't often all together," I remarked aloud.

"I found that odd, considering you were family, and reports of the families of others," SAM stated, a question clear.

"Life happens, SAM. Sometimes you can't help it," I explained.

"At least you shared a common interest," SAM suggested.

"Yeah, we did. For better or worse, your parents rub off on you. Sometimes you learn to continue what they did, sometimes you learn to change what they did," I answered.

"A form of symbiosis?" SAM questioned.

"Sure," I chuckled. "I suppose. Though in some cases, as I said, it's for worse," I reminded.

"The emotional bonds among family became clear to me that day. Shall I play the next memory?" Upon my request, I found myself within Dad's memories one more time. This memory was beginning within an office. Not dad's however. And there was a woman bringing him a cup, likely of coffee. And... huh, the Initiative logo on both her shirt and the mug in her hand.

"It will be just a moment," she reassured. As she set down the cup, there was a woman's voice and the comm terminal in front of dad was activated, the call begun.

"Hello Alec," the woman greeted. She had olive skin and short, black hair, and had a very professional look on her face.

"I'm too old for cloak and dagger. I got your message, I'm here. So, who are you?" Dad questioned. Woah, that's weird. The image just changed to a Turian man, no colony markings, and grey plates. But the voice didn't change.

"A benefactor, if you like," 'she' answered. Again, the image changed to a Krogan man.

"You have something to offer me?" Dad questioned further.

"A future."
"That's vague," Dad muttered, looking down, taking a sip of his coffee. This time the image was a Salarian. But as with all Salarians, the sex was impossible to tell from face alone.

"A future for your wife," the benefactor continued. That caught Dad's attention. Now, an Asari was on the screen. "You're out of money. Your contacts have dried up. You can't finish SAM," the Benefactor pointed out. Now the image was of a human male, a smug grin on his face.

"How do you know about-" Dad questioned suspiciously.

"I can help you. Whatever you need," she cut him off. Well, this is leaving me with many, many questions.

"Start by telling me what you need," Dad replied. The image returned to the woman from the beginning, and back to the Turian.

"Your AI is more than a cure for your wife; it could also be the salvation for many others," the Benefactor answered. The Krogan appeared.

"I don't follow," Dad stated. The human male.

"Where we're going, we'll need a different perspective to understand things," the Benefactor answered.

"Where's that?" Dad continued to question. A terminal on his side lit up with an image. A large disk in space, a bright light in the center. "The Andromeda Galaxy?"

"I have a proposal for you… and Ellen doesn't have much time. Are you interested?" The Benefactor asked. The memory ended. Though Dad's answer was obvious. My conscious mind returned to SAM node.

"SAM, any idea as to who that Benefactor was?" I questioned.

"I believe there was more to the Andromeda Initiative than was publicly understood," SAM answered. Well that's hardly surprising. "Perhaps some of your father's private logs will shed light on the matter," SAM suggested. I nodded, and headed straight there, sitting down in his chair. Two data packets had been unlocked. SAM development, and the Benefactor. I knew upon hearing whatever I'd hear in Benefactor would simply launch me away, and my curiosity drew me to SAM's development. The first file was spoken by mom. Explaining that the right kind of implant and the right kind of AI could bolster Human physiology. Which we know to work, thanks to SAM's connection with me. The other two files were interesting as well. One labeled 'The Geth Mistake,' and the other, 'Shadow Broker deal.' The last isn't surprising in hindsight, but something I didn't expect to see. That ruthless information broker from back home. I started with The Geth.

"As a Quarian and a historian, how do you view your people's reaction to the Geth?" Dad questioned in the log.

"Well, we banned artificial intelligence, which was understandable-but that was taking a hammer to a rather delicate nail." The Quarian was clearly male, and I could easily make out the speaker in their helmets slight synethetization of their voice. Given every Quarian needed an environment suit, and thus, such helmets, it was more cost-effective for them to resort to this quality. It was sad, really.

"Which was what?" Dad continued.

"The very thing that sparked their revolt: The first Geth who asked us, 'Creator, does this unit have
"a soul?" the Quarian explained.

Well, that's something I didn't know about the Geth rebellion. And it's… unnerving, almost, to think about hearing that question asked by what you thought were just VIs. The Quarian continued:

"But how could it have a soul? Geth had no meaningful perceptions of the world or diversity of experiences we take for granted."

That itself is very thought provoking. It's hard to argue. And I find it to be a very good description of what a 'soul' is. At least I know that SAM does have meaningful perceptions of the world. Through me. The Historian further explained for dad. "Worse, the Geth saw us as 'the creator.' The revolt was inevitable. We were their superiors… and they resented it."

The log ended, and it struck me how much sadness the historian's voice seemed to hold. Your home world, taken from you. Billions of your people, dead. Men, women, and children alike. The survivors forced to live on a fleet of ships getting closer and closer to Junkers, not being allowed to settle on any world, forced to remain in environmental suits… And worse, that your suffering is a result of the actions made by people long dead. It's wrong. All wrong. Sighing, I selected the Shadow Broker file.

This audio file was less interesting and thought provoking. Simply a message from the Shadow Broker to dad that he knows Dad was looking for him. The Broker confirmed that he could get Dad the codes, the data, the tech he required, though the price would be high. He knew that if the council learned of this deal, Spectres would be set loose. With those files done, I played the one about the Benefactor.

"I had a strange meeting yesterday. I thought it would be with Jien Garson, who founded the Initiative. But it wasn't. I guess Jien's the visionary, the one who gets everyone excited about the project and drums up publicity. But then this 'Benefactor' apparently provides resources and money. And I mean a lot of money. It's a little unusual, but everything about this project is," Dad muttered.

I wondered if Tann knew anything. My curiosity was piqued, and either Tann would give me a lead, or he'd tell me to drop it, convincing me I needed to do anything but drop it. I wasted no time in making my way to the Pathfinder lounge in ops, where Tann had placed himself. I looked at the Pathfinder Memorial, displaying a hologram of my father as a way to motivate myself to finish this business.

Aside the other window looking out into space were holograms of three ships. The first human ship with a Mass Effect core, the first Turian ship to venture through a Mass Effect relay, and curiously, a hologram of a ship named the SSV Normandy SR2, like the model resting in my quarters. I had noticed it in the past and read the description. The blueprints were acquired by secret, based off the Normandy SR1, which was co-developed by the Alliance and Turian Hierarchy. Very curious indeed. But these were passing thoughts as I approached Tann. He was in the middle of a call.

"The Angara have nothing to fear from the people of the Milky Way," he calmly stated. An Angaran woman replied.

"But do you have anything to offer?"

"Our wisdom, our knowledge," Tann stated. I rolled my eyes. Horrible salesman.

"We have plenty of that on our own," the woman remarked.
"Of course. And you also have food and water. Necessities of life," Tann hinted.

"Now we get to the heart of the matter," the Angara responded.

"I would like to lay a groundwork for trade between our people," Tann offered.

"What would you trade?" The woman questioned.

"Well… Wisdom… and… knowledge," Tann stuttered. Alright, time for someone to step in and do what this damn idiot can't.

"What he's forgetting to mention is that we can also trade our technological advances, including weaponry to use against the Kett, once we're on our feet with our own food supply we can offer to trade food with the Angara, enjoy the delicacies of other galaxies, and certainly other goods. Why don't we direct you to our economists on the station, whose job it is to lay foundations and make deals?" I suggested. I kept my tone friendly for the Angara, but an annoyed stare at Tann.

"The Pathfinder?" The Angara laughed. "Now we're making progress. Yes, we're willing to investigate this foundation further with your economists."

"I'll redirect your call," Tann stated, pressing a few buttons on his console. And it was over. Tann leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"I do know a thing or two about finances, Ryder," Tann groaned.

"Uh huh. From what I remember you were an assistant director for managing everyone's paycheck. You were a bookkeeper, Tann. Not a salesman. Big difference," I argued, crossing my arms against my chance.

"Why are you here?" Tann questioned.

"What do you know about the people who backed the Initiative?" I responded. Tann raised an eyebrow.

"What everyone knows? Jien Garson was the founder and visionary, and unfortunately she died during the Scourge disaster," Tann answered.

"I know she was the founder, but she couldn't have funded it all on her own. Was there anyone who invested, I mean," I continued.

"Hmph, I'd almost welcome them. A voice to silence the rabble. Then Kesh might listen," Tann mumbled. Yeah, more likely they'd tell you to shut the fuck up, and tell Kesh she's doing a good job. I struggled to not roll my eyes again. "But no, we're alone. Why do you ask?" His answers are just rubbing me the wrong way. Something's off.

"Oh, call it wishful thinking, hoping the cavalry was coming…" I trailed off.

"Yes, if only she'd lived. No, Jien Garson was the beacon. A sad end to someone of such stature, dying alone," Tann remarked dramatically. Wait, died alone? So, she was awake?

"Oh?" I pushed for more details.

"It was chaos. By the time they found her, she was already dead. Succumbed to her injuries," Tann answered.

"Some shitty luck. Dying after a 600-year trip she organized personally. Anyone look into it?"
asked.

"No one ever said fate is kind. If you're suggesting something else happened, Ryder… I'd rather you didn't. Let's not add to the confusion," Tann warned. Well, as if I already didn't hate and distrust Tann enough, he throws that my way.

"I'll think about it," I replied icily, a cold stare into Tann's eyes. I stormed off.

"Scott, I suggest accessing Nexus security, the records may have information," SAM suggested.

I did not speak, but I had my next destination. Just on the other side of Militia HQ. I sat down at the security console and searched for all the security files relating to Jien Garson. I found two. One, a missing person's report. She was woken up during emergency stasis revival, and then went missing. The other was a case closed report. She was found in a Nexus apartment, severe burns on her body, like those seen on other victims of the disaster. How the hell, and why was she over in the apartments? Those were all closed off during the event. And… this apartment was right next door to Kesh's. That's the landing bay the Tempest is at. I know for a fact that was closed off. I ran another search for records.

Huh. That area had relatively minimal scourge damage. This is getting more and more suspicious.

"They just wanted this to go away," I murmured.

I returned to the tram for a ride to the docking bay. I attempted to appear as if I was calmly walking around, but I think some people didn't quite buy it. I entered the apartment and activated my scanner. Looking everywhere. I found the first bit around the bed. Environmental data, residual particles and marks that had not been cleaned up. This apartment was uninhabited. There was evidence that two people had been in this room, before the body was recovered, and a body left on the bed, face down. Garson.

This confirmed it. She was murdered. But this was over a year ago. The killer's trail is cold. What was she doing here in the first place? I scanned the room further, upping the intensity. There was a hidden door in the entryway. A small office and bed, even a toilet. A hideaway. There were two data pads. I played them both.

"This is Jien Garson, I don't have much time," her voice appeared from the data pad. She sounded panicked, scared. "I've been hiding in the sealed off sections of the Nexus since we got here. Someone's trying to kill me. I can hear them down in the hydroponics area. They're coming. I've embedded what I know in the VI in the cultural center. This log has the code. And whatever happens-Oh god, they're outside the door!" The audio log ended, Jien likely having turned it off.

"Fucking hell," I murmured.

"I have the code, Scott," SAM informed.

"Good, we'll listen to this last data-pad, and then check it out."

These were notes from Garson:

*In 2179, once mentioned "A Storm is coming." Said "Evidence was clear." Meaning? Andromeda-why?* 

*Hyperion, still no contact. Where is Alec? Did they get him, too?*
2179? What happened then? And the who must be the Benefactor. But what led them to believe that a storm is coming? That must mean something big and bad, no mere natural disaster. Being left with even more questions, I entered the Cultural Exchange. Jaal was still inside, talking with Andraknar.

"Jaal, I'm sorry but I need to borrow you for a minute," I stated, lightly grabbing his shoulder and pulling him along.

"Scott? What is it? Why the urgency?" he questioned as I led him up to the VI, and to the wall.

"Pretend we're having a conversation. Pretend to laugh sometimes, smile, or nod in understanding," I whispered. He was confused, but seemed to at least follow through. "SAM, patch it into the private channel, record it," I whispered again. SAM did as told, and as the message played, I would mouth or whisper, making fitting facial expressions and Jaal responding accurately in turn, making it appear like a private conversation.

"For years there was a silent partner with the Initiative. The truth is, I was running out of money. Then a 'Benefactor' stepped in. I didn't ask questions. I never met them face-to-face. That was a mistake… I lied to everyone. Something big spooked them in the Milky Way, and now they're moving 100,000 of us to Andromeda. I hope it's all for the good, but… I have my doubts. And now I think they're going to remove me. Alec Ryder and I had a codeword for this: Fulcrum. He may have learned more." Something big in the Milky Way? What the hell does this mean?

"Thanks Jaal, explain later," I whispered. "Well I'm glad that's cleared up. I'll let you get back to it," I finished louder, and moved to leave the cultural center.

"Scott, perhaps your father's memories hold the answer. Perhaps the final encrypted log as well. I am detecting additional security," SAM explained.

"Fuck, so now it's just a waiting game," I murmured.

These secrets… I didn't like them one bit. And I can't just sit on the matter of the murder, but if it gets out, he or she will likely hide their tracks even better than they are now. I need someone I can trust putting feelers out. I have a few ideas… I sent three messages. Two were to Turians, and one, was to an Angara who needed an explanation. A request to meet me in my quarters on the Tempest, ASAP.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Kandros was, understandably, the last to arrive. I had pulled chairs around to surround a single table. Four chairs, four people. Damn, with what we were about to talk about this, I should have gotten four tinfoil hats. Jaal and Vetra had asked just what I had called them here for, but all I told them was that it would wait until everyone arrived.

"Scott, what's going on?" Kandros asked, as he stepped in with a confused look on his face. I gestured for him to take a seat before activating a vidscreen I had placed on the table, turning it to face the others. As per my request, SAM played the memory of my father 'meeting' with the Benefactor.

"What was that?" Jaal questioned.

"Me explaining to you what I needed your help for, and asking for help from two people I trust. What you just watched was a memory of my father's from before we left for Andromeda.
Obviously, this is what got him on board," I explained.

"And why do you need our help with… whatever it is you're asking for?" Vetra asked.

"You'll have a better idea in just a moment. So, I went to Tann asking if he knew of any Benefactors that helped Garson fund the Initiative. He told me he didn't know of anyone, and mentioned offhandedly that Garson died alone. Something I wouldn't have expected given she died in the Scourge disaster. I figured it would have been in a cryo pod or crowded place. Even worse, Tann tried to convince me to NOT look into it. Which I obviously did. I checked security files, and found the report of her gone missing and death," I continued.

"I remember that report. Always thought something was off, but had bigger things to worry about," Kandros remarked.

"And something was off. I investigated the apartment she died in, ran my scanners as strong as I could, and found that there was evidence of someone else in there before her death. What's more, there was a secret room. Found an audio log," I continued. I took out the data pad and placed it on the table, pressing play. They listened intently.

"Spirits, she really was killed…" Kandros muttered.

"Is this VI why you needed my help?" Jaal asked.

"It is. SAM recorded the message. Play it," I ordered the AI, and he complied. The others continuing to listen intently.

"Did he? Your father? Learn anything more?" Vetra asked.

"No idea, those memories are still locked to me. They unlock as I reach certain accomplishments. I don't know what they are or how to do them, just that it happens. For now, on that front, I'm waiting, and this is all we know," I explained.

"I'm trying to figure out what would have spooked them in the Milky Way," Kandros murmured thoughtfully. "The attack on the Citadel? Maybe? But the Initiative was around long before that happened. Something with the Krogan? Batarians, maybe?"

"No, not the Krogan. No ships, and their numbers have been declining ever since…" Vetra trailed off.

"And the Batarians would never have something to last in a real fight with everyone else," I argued.

"True. Geth, maybe? Might have been that the Citadel was the Vanguard of a full assault," Kandros suggested.

"Maybe," I shrugged. "Regardless, that's not why I've called you here. There's a killer on the loose who knows about this Benefactor, who had Garson killed. And I think Tann knows something. I trust you all, and I know that you two, Vetra and Kandros, might be able to investigate," I explained.

"I'll see if my contacts can pull anything," Vetra nodded.

"I'll check security files thoroughly, see if I can find a lead. Get forensics on the body," Kandros stated.

"Good. I don't want word of this getting out until we have the killer. Word gets out now, and they'll
vanish," I warned. The others nodded understanding. "Vetra, any idea if we could sneak in and check Tann's apartment, see if he knows anything?" I questioned.

"No, not now at any rate. He's not popular and he knows it. Ever since the mutiny he's had some pretty tough security. I think there'd be a camera watching his door with a feed permanently open in his office. You want in, he'll need to be away, and I don't see a reliable way to have that happen anytime soon. Not where we can have someone in position," Vetra explained.

"So, more waiting. Guess there's nothing else to really do about it in the meantime," I muttered. "If no one else has anything to add, then we're done here," I ended. I gave everyone a moment, no one said a word. "Alright, good. Remember, don't tell anyone, no matter how much you trust them. The less who know, the better," I reminded as they stood to leave. Had a lot on my mind now. Only one way left while we're here to reduce it a bit. But who to bring with me?

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

It must have been an odd sight, a Human leading an armored Krogan into a med-bay, but here we were, taking Drack to meet my sister. I had messaged Doc Carlyle ahead of time, before going to see Drack in Kesh's office. Obviously, he was willing to meet Sara, else I'd either be walking in alone, or with someone else.

"How's she been doing, Harry?" I asked as we came to her room, she was still laying in that bed, her eyes closed.

"Brain activity has been on the rise, as predicted, but still unresponsive. Aside from the implant, that is," he answered.

"Any idea when?" I questioned, looking over at my sister sadly. It occurred to me just what might happen if word gets out of my investigation. She's an easy target right now.

"Unfortunately, still no. Can only tell you that progress is being made," Harry shrugged.

"She'll be ok, kid," Drack reassured.

"Yeah… We good to start?" I asked. Harry nodded and SAM began the connection.

"Sara, you there?" I called out.

"Wha- Oh, hi Scott," she greeted.

"Shit that's weird…" Drack mumbled.

"You should experience it from my point of view," Sara chuckled. "So, who are you?"

"Nakmor Drack, part of Scott's crew," he introduced.

"Scott told me about you. How you cooked a real dinner for him and the others. More than a bit jealous about that," Sara remarked.

"How about I make it up to you with something when you wake up, eh?" Drack suggested, a warm grin on his face.

"Please, don't tease me with that now. Makes this so much more painful," Sara chuckled.

"Treat it like motivation," I joked.
"So, tell me a bit about you, Drack," Sara requested.

"Well, my granddaughter is Nakmor Kesh, Nexus superintendent," he began. "And I'm old enough to remember the Krogan rebellions."

"Shit, that's quite a long time," Sara murmured.

"Thanks for reminding me how old I am," Drack chuckled.

"Sorry, just didn't know how far past a thousand Krogan can live," Sara defended.

"Bah, don't worry about it. If every Krogan got pissy from little shit like that we'd have killed each other before the Salarians ever found us," Drack reassured.

"True. So, what have you been up to since last time you were here?" Sara questioned.

"Well, you know we went to Voeld. Managed to find a Vault there and warm it up, even take out the main Kett base. Oh yeah, even got stuck in a blizzard when liberating a slave camp," I answered.

"Ouch, what's the story?" she asked. Drack smirked and leaned back.

"Before we could get to the Vault, Jaal contacted the team I had in our land vehicle with me, Cora, Vetra, and Peebee, an Asari, that a blizzard was coming and we were the only team in range to save a slave camp about to be transferred to a high security facility. We liberated the Angara, but a Kett ran off with intel on more prisoner schedules, and Vetra and I had to chase after him while the others stayed with the slaves. We followed him into a little cave in the mountains that Kett couriers use to survive inclement weather, but in the fight the generator powering the heater sprung a leak. Fortunately, I still remembered my Alliance survival training. We spent six hours in that cave, just trying to keep warm and stay awake. Think we both had passed out by the last hour," I explained.

"Oh? Trying to keep warm, you say? How so?" Sara questioned teasingly, her implication obvious.

"Not like that Sara," I groaned. I noticed a glance and wider smirk from Drack. Why? "It was light exercise and then huddling to conserve body heat. Remember how a big part of survival training was to NOT sweat?"

"Oooh, defensive," Sara teased. Ah shit, she knows me well, after all.

"Sara..." I began.

"Just dicking around, Scott," she reassured. "So, anything else happen?"

"Well, we got an outpost on Voeld now. Taerve Uni, it's called. And there are a few Makos stationed there, drove one around with the team, blowing up Kett," I remarked. I knew that would dig at her a bit.

"All this awesome shit you get to do while I lay here," Sara grumbled. "If I don't wake up soon I'm going to break something," she groaned.

"Sure there ain't any Krogan in either of you?" Drack chuckled.

"Well, we're lacking in the scales department and redundant organs, so..." Sara remarked. Knowing her, she'd beshrugging if she could.
"No quads?" Drack smirked.

"Well, I sure as hell don't, but wouldn't know if Scott does," Sara chuckled.

"Last time I checked, I only had two," I snickered.

"More than I thought you had," Sara teased. Drack and I both laughed. "So, what's next on your plans?"

"Well, probably go back to Aya if we don't have any interruptions," I answered. "We planned to go there after Voeld but Liam Kosta, one of the crew members, had something personal come up along the way, had to detour."

"It get handled alright?"

"Yeah, everything ended on a positive, so," I shrugged.

"Well, you got a lot of people counting on you. I should let you go," Sara trailed off.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, you come back often enough. Time just feels weird in here," Sara replied.

"So long as you're sure," I repeated, leaning down to hug her.

"Yeah, go out and have fun," she reassured. I gave my sister a farewell, as did Drack. I sent a message for the crew to meet on the Tempest soon. Last thing was to simply drop off the Taerve Uni flag at the bar. Drack parted ways with me to go give Kesh his farewells, and I had a silent ride in the trams over to the docking area, and quickly stepped over to the Tempest to grab the flag before returning to the Vortex. I stepped up to Anan and Dutch, unfolding the flag, and handed it over, they knew what to do with it.

"Hey everyone!" I called out, pointing to the flag as it was pinned above the bar. "Here's to Taerve Uni!" The others in the bar cheered, holding their drinks in the air before taking a large swig. I turned back to the bar to get a glass myself.

"Drink of the hour is a Lucky Leprechaun. Wanna give it a shot?" Dutch asked.

"How lucky are we talking here?" I asked, not quite so sure about this one.

"I forget where the ingredients are from," Dutch answered. Well... at least none of it should kill me, right? I think bartenders separate where the spill from Dextro and Levo drinks go.

"Well... sure, I'll try it." Ah shit, Anan made a face. A 'wishing you luck,' face.

"Excellent!" Dutch grinned, and poured a drink. Cautiously, I took a sip and- Jesus Christ that's bad. I struggled to swallow the tiny sip I had and set it down.

"That one wasn't lucky..." I groaned.

"Here, this should help," Anan handed me a glass of water and another drink. Graciously, I drained the water in one gulp, and cautiously sipped the other drink, before taking a larger swig. A rum and coke, putting a good taste in my mouth to replace the horrid one.

"How many times have you had to do that so far?" I questioned with a smirk.
"Less than you'd expect, more than you'd hope," Anan chuckled.

"The Lucky Leprechaun won't be drink of the hour again. I'll save it for the bad customers," Dutch shrugged.

"A good way to set them straight," I smirked. I thanked the two of them and returned to the ship. I waited in my quarters a small while, reading APEX reports as I waited for the signal that everyone had arrived. Which I soon received.

"SAM, tell Kallo to set a course for Aya," I ordered, and settled in for the flight.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We were coming in to land on Aya now. I had already messaged the Moshae that we would be arriving soon, and she stated that she'd prepare the Vault for my arrival, so a shuttle would be waiting. After that, I had planned on seeing how the Initiative's embassy was coming along, however the Angara had requested a delay. I wonder why. I had also asked Jaal to drop off the statue we found on Voeld to Avela Kjar, and I'd check in with her personally afterwards.

The less than fun part of my wait was that I brushed up on Aya's trade laws. Fortunately, SAM was able to pick out everything to do with basic trading. Just what I give and for what. I wouldn't be doing any complex enterprising like Vetra, and I ordered SAM to send a copy to Liam, just to be safe. Otherwise, I'd play it by year as to what happens down there.

Upon landing, everyone dispersed to do what they had planned on doing, or they simply stayed on board for work. Lexi was studying Angaran physiology, and Gil was working on the Periphona's black box. And I made my way to the designated shuttle, already active, simply waiting for my arrival. After a quick greeting with the pilot, a man named Qaj Te, we lifted off and flew out towards the bright green plains of Aya.

"The vault's located in a jungle not far ahead. There's a squad of Resistance soldiers waiting at the entrance and medics on standby, more so out of caution and Evfra's request rather than her condition," Qaj informed. I chuckled.

"She seems like a tough woman. I think if she didn't get out and about soon, she'd have hurt someone."

"That sounds like our Moshae alright," Qaj laughed.

Looking out the viewport, I could see Monoliths in the distance, glowing green, and a clearing in the center of them. The shuttle slowed and began its descent, setting down next to another shuttle in front of the vault entrance, and several Resistance troops moved to investigate. "There's room on the other shuttle for you and the others. It was a pleasure meeting you, Pathfinder," Qaj stated, giving a farewell as the hatch opened.

"The pleasure was mine. Thanks for the ride," I smiled, stepping out and allowing the Resistance troops to make their security check. Their scans finished.

"You're clear. Apologies but we've only just got her back, not eager to lose her again," an Angaran woman chuckled. "She's down inside. Head down the gravity well, and she'll be waiting." I gave my thanks and proceeded to the Vault entrance, and then proceeded down the gravity well. As I descended into the main chamber, I looked down and saw the Moshae turning and looking up, waving at my arrival by the door to the next chamber. I waved back, and my feet gently touched the ground.

"Good to see you again, Moshae Sjefa. Recovering well?" I greeted, stepping closer.

"I am, thank you, though the doctors still keep pestering me about taking it easy. Hmph," she chuckled, reaching her hand out. I returned the Angaran greeting as best I could.
"I know how you feel. So, shall we?" I suggested, gesturing towards the door. She nodded, and we both approached, the doorway opening as we neared, no need to interface. It was the heart of the Vault on the other side, where before I would normally see a beam of energy from the center of the room emitting downwards, and a lack of plant life, this one lacked the stream, and there was plant life anywhere. From trees, to ferns, to moss.

"I haven't brought anyone here in over twenty years," the Moshae remarked as we approached the main console. "There's always been an active display for Aya, but we could never affect it."

"Then let's see if we can change that," I replied, and reached my hand over the console, my Omni-tool glowing to life as SAM established a connection.

The console glowed, the pillars within it shifting down and back up like a wave as it responded to my interaction. A series of green rings appeared around my arm, connected by a holographic stream connecting those rings and the console as it accepted the input. The vault hummed and a display of dots and lines linking them appeared before us.

There were hundreds if not thousands. A star map of Heleus? In the center of it all was a triangular figure. Its center was much like an equilateral triangle, yet at each corner it extended into a long and narrow triangle. Two had a line connecting to them, while the third lacked any. There were two primary lines emerging from two different large dots on the star map, and each had one smaller icon joining that line. Wait… One of those pairs should be Eos and Havarl, the other being Voeld and Aya. It would make sense given the locations of those planets in the cluster, relative to this map. And… hold on a second. That triangular symbol, I've seen it before, but where…

OH! On Habitat 7, as Dad interfaced with the Vault! It glowed and formed the same kind of triangle as it accepted his input! Could what this emblem represents… link all the vaults? The Moshae's eyes widened.

"Yes! This is new—is it similar to the vault on Eos? Tell me, what are you seeing?" She asked.

"Well, it looks like a map of the cluster, and that's like what we saw on Eos. But That symbol in the middle wasn't there. You know more about Remnant than I do. What do you see?" I responded.

"I see the Vaults. They're a network, as you discovered. However," she trailed off, moving closer to inspect the symbol. She seemed to recognize it. While vaults seemed to be connecting with one another, it seems to be a singular path linking up to that symbol, not all individually to one another.

"They're connected to… whatever that is," I nodded understanding.

"This was on a relic the Archon showed me. He called it, Meridian. And I believe that Aya, Eos, Havarl and Voeld are the only ones connected to it. Fully, at least," the Moshae continued.

"And all those Vaults are terraforming. Doing what it was meant to do," I finished her train of thought aloud.

"Precisely. I think that Meridian is the control center for all the Vaults," she stated both with confidence, and a slight bit of awe. While I suspected it could be, while a control center is what we had been looking for, I felt a wave of relief on this confirmation.

"Thank you. This is… unbelievable," I remarked. "If we can get to Meridian, maybe we can turn everything on from there. Make Heleus live. A true home for all our people," I smiled.

"Wait, Ryder, the Archon knows where it is. He's already been there," The Moshae revealed. Shit.
"Then how do we take that information?" I questioned, fully determined to find Meridian.

"On his flagship, I would assume. He brought me there, tortured me, thinking I could help him use it," the Moshae answered.

"Meridian is my people's best chance for survival here. Not just that, but activating it will help the Angara survive immensely just the same as us. We HAVE to take it from him," I stressed.

"Agreed. Such power in the hands of such evil could mean the end of both our people," the Moshae nodded.

"Then we'll take the bastard down, together," I stated firmly. I returned to the console and saved all the data I could from it.

"You're going to need the Relic I saw. The Resistance might have intel on the location of the Archon's ship. I'll talk to Evfra, and let you know what he has. Come, let's return," the Moshae suggested, leading me away with a wave of her hand. We can do this.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I'll admit, I was having difficulty waiting. All I had managed to do was stop by Sohkaa to ensure his supplies had been returned and he knew of his contacts' death. His unfazed reaction seemed to reveal his hand. It was a test from Evfra. A test I passed. Then I simply stood outside the Resistance HQ, waiting to be signaled inside. Finally, I got a message from the Moshae, requesting my presence. Eagerly, I stepped inside and into Evfra's office. The whole room had been cleared of people aside from Evfra, the Moshae, and myself. And she did not look pleased.

"Go on, Evfra. Tell him what I deserved to have been told," she scolded with a wave of her hand. While Evfra's hands were across his chest, the look on his face reminded me of myself and Sara whenever mom had to scold us.

"Again, it's an ongoing investigation. I meant no disrespect," he defended. She sighed and bent her head down in annoyance, raising it into the sky again.

"Did Jaal know?" she questioned with a sigh.

"Of course not. Neither did the Pathfinder," Evfra answered, relaxing his stance.

"Come on, Evfra, what's this all about? If it's all on a need to know basis, well I figure I'm in the need to know now," I remarked.

"And I say you are. We need to find the Verrikan," the Moshae stated to Evfra. "Go on, Evfra. Tell him the truth about my capture," she ordered. Evfra sighed as he began.

"Moshae Sjefa, please…” He began.

"It may be our only route to the Archon," she argued further, refusing to budge. Evfra relented.

"One of my men turned traitor. Helped the Kett take her. A now Ex-Resistance commander named Vehn Terev."

"Well, shit. One of your own did it? Figures that would be hushed up until you had him in custody," I murmured.
"This isn't about hiding the truth," The Moshae exclaimed.

"And I'm in full support of revealing it once he's behind bars. Should make capturing him easier," I defended. The Moshae seemed to ease at that.

"I'm working to capture him. Make him answer for what he did," Evfra revealed.

"You know where he is?" The Moshae questioned.

"Kadara Port. My contacts are hunting him," Evfra answered.

"Contacts? You can't trust anyone there. They deserted our cause, our people," The Moshae scoffed.

"And now they're ruled by exiles… from your galaxy," Evfra turned his head towards me. Before I could interject, the Moshae continued.

"Vehn may know how to find the Archon-and his ship. We can't leave this to a pack of renegades and outlaws."

"Agreed. I have plenty of experience from my time in the Human military back home dealing with outlaws. I can handle them, and hopefully find a way to make things equal over there. If I can't convince them to come back to the Initiative I can at least convince them to play nice. And shoot the ones too far gone," I nodded.

"I don't like it," Evfra muttered.

"I don't care," the Moshae scoffed. "Ryder is right." Evfra sighed.

"I'll transmit my files on Kadara to your ship."

"And the traitor may have useful information. We need him alive," the Moshae stated.

"Then you'll have him alive, one way or another," I confirmed.

"Will you be staying on Aya a bit longer?" she asked.

"Yeah, a few things to take care of, then if we don't get anything else demanding our immediate attention, we'll head straight there," I nodded.

"Good. Be safe, Ryder. As for you Evfra," she began turning back to face him. "We're not done."

Really glad I'm not Evfra right now. I quickly stepped out. And could hear muffled yelling through the door, the translator unable to pick it up. Yeah, really glad I'm not him right now. Guess I'll check on Avela. I found her in the end of the Repository closer to the waterfalls placing the statue on its pedestal, giving it one last wipe down.

"Hey Avela, like the gift?" I asked walking up to her. Peebee was looking at the Remnant exhibit again and gave a nod of the head in her direction, followed by stumbling slightly on her feet. I think I'll want to speak when I'm done. Avela stopped wiping and looked over, not expecting me just yet.

"Oh, yes, of course. Thank you, Scott. Jaal said you got this from Ja Nihk?" she questioned.

"Yep. Found it half inside an ice block, carved it out, and here we are," I answered.
"I wonder what else is buried in that city. But this piece is very curious. It clearly looks like an Angaran, but distinct differences as well. See the head?" she pointed out, moving to the side so I could expect. "While the figure is clearly masculine, the head is wide at the top. Almost as if there were bodily structures protruding outwards," she rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"An ancient Angaran deity?" I suggested.

"Perhaps. Maybe artistic interpretation, or perhaps we truly looked like this centuries ago. It's not a huge evolutionary leap, depending on when such features began to devolve from our genome," Avela answered thoughtfully. "You may have discovered our earliest artifact yet. What's more, is that there's something... odd about it. Both myself and my aides felt as if something in it was... calling to us. Like a friend would. But that doesn't make any sense. There's no transmitter," Avela murmured.

"Maybe some Rem-tech?"

"It's not impossible, but our scans haven't detected anything. Most peculiar," Avela murmured. "I'll ask the Moshae for her input. When you saw her at the Vault did she mention where she was going next?" Avela asked.

"Well she actually went to see Evfra first. And right now, he's being scolded. So, might be a bit," I chuckled.

"Truly? That does sound like her. Only thing I think Evfra fears is her," Avela laughed.

"She even had me feeling a bit scared, and none of it was directed at me," I continued.

I gave my parting, and moved to see what was going on with Peebee. She was still staggering to the left and right slightly.

"Getting acquainted with our new neighbors?" I asked as I stepped close. She spun around, almost falling over, and her eyes were puffy and a purplish shade, like Asari blood. Her cheeks were the same color.

"Sort of. All this... stuff. The Angara sure do have a rich culture and blah blah blah," she babbled off. It began as a coherent sentence and then... yeah. It went out the window.

"I think somebody's been drinkiiiiiiing," I chuckled. "What's your poison?"

"Ah, pssh, yeeeeeaaaaaah," she dismissed, waving a hand accordingly as she staggered again. "I visited that Cafe the Angara consider a bar. Asked for their hardest stuff. It was weeeeeird, and I liked that. But it had almost no," she hiccupped. "Punch." "Heh. Lightweights! Woah..." she cheered then staggered again.

"You sure about that?" I questioned with a smirk.

"I think that stuff must have had a slow absorption rate. Whoops," she smirked. "Damn, just, this museum reminds me of being on Hyetiana during my indentured service as a student," Peebee began explaining sadly. "They even have a whole section on the Remnant. I didn't come to Andromeda to follow in someone else's footsteps..."

"Don't worry, Peebee," I reassured, placing a hand on her shoulder. "The Angara barely have a foothold. Sure, they live among the ruins, but they haven't seen what we've already seen." Peebee smiled.
"Hmm. You might have a good point there…" she trailed off. She hiccupped again. "Bet nobody here has ever outrun an ancient vault purification field huh? YEAAAA-" she hiccupped mid cheer. "AAAAH!"

"Probably not," I chuckled.

"Or spat in that Archon's ugly mug and lived to talk about it?" she exclaimed. "That was nice work, by the way."

"Thanks, felt good too," I smiled.

"Ah, you're right. Not sure why, but ever since I packed up my apartment on the Nexus, something's crawled under my skin," she murmured, and hiccupped again. "But whatever it is, I promise: I'll get over it lickety-split."

"You're fine, Peebee. We all need to cut loose once in a while, we all got unpleasant shit that we have to deal with occasionally. I'd say it's part of being human, but…" I shrugged.

"That's awfully understanding of you, Scott. You're a good," she hiccupped once more. "Egg." Ok, why the weird old human phrases? "Think I'll stay in your operation a little while longer," she smiled. That's good to hear. I like her being around. Always provides an… interesting viewpoint.

"Good to hear Peeb-" I began, before her eyes grew wide and her hand moved over her mouth.

"Shit," she murmured, and ran out the door and bent over the railing and I could hear the noises she was making in the direction of the firewall. And the look of mixed surprise and disgust on passing Angara. Chuckling, I walked over and patted her on the back. If she was human, I'd hold her hair to keep it out of the path of the vomit. She seemed to stop, breathing heavily, and groaned, wiping her mouth off.

"Head back to the ship, grab some water, take it easy," I half suggested and half ordered as she stood straight.

"Yeah… I think I will. Thanks," she groaned, before cautiously moving through the streets as to not upset her stomach again.

Wondering who I'd go see next, I passed by the Tavetaan, and I noticed something. I noticed that the atmosphere was completely different than last time. Before, it was friendly, cheerful, and generally upbeat. But now? There was sadness on the faces of many. An air of mourning. Even a corner of the lower area had been set aside for portraits, flowers, and other gifts. These people were mourning. Taking a sip of their drinks far more often that I noticed last time. I moved towards the bar, and the bartender.

"Is that about what I think it is?" I whispered. He looked up and over, barely hearing my question.

"The Resistance told us yesterday," he whispered, nodding his head sadly. Yep. Exaltation. At least it's out there now. Better than finding out on their own. Drack was standing by the bar, Liam next to him. Neither were in a conversation. Just nursing their drinks. Drack noticed me approach first.

"Hey kid. Funny, with the Moshae, and Voeld, a lot of doors have been opened to us. Yet here I am, exclusively heading over to the bar," Drack chuckled. "And most Angara still keep their distance."

"Well, you are a bit of an eyesore," I teased.
"Speak for yourself. When I saw my first human, I couldn't understand how you keep your blood inside. Skin that thin," Drack murmured. Sounded like a teasing threat. No intention whatsoever, just banter.

"And I'm surprised Krogan can learn anything, skulls that thick," I retorted. Drack let out a hearty laugh.

"Never said we did learn anything," he continued laughing. I asked the bartender to surprise me.

"Getting a taste of the local liquor?" Liam asked.

"Might as well, while we're here," I remarked, as the bartender handed me a glass. This tasted less fruity like the others, closer to a whiskey, maybe.

"True. Hey, help with something?" Liam requested.

"Liam, Verand didn't get kidnapped again, did she?" I asked, half joking, half really hopeful that didn't just happen again.

"No! No! Nothing like that. She just pointed something out to me is all," Liam reassured, then lowered her voice. "Pointed out some tech that could help out our outposts. Agriculturally. Just want SAM to take a look."

"Go buy it then. Just take what's needed from our official requisition, just check with Vetra and or Kesh to check if it's a fair deal," I answered.

"It's not that easy. The vendor won't sell to aliens," Liam began. For both my sake and his, I cut him off before I heard another bad idea. This is me giving him a freebie.

"Then find another vendor. I highly doubt one Angara has a monopoly on farming equipment," And I sipped my drink again.

"Er… yeah, of course. Thanks," he stuttered. I won't give him a freebie for the next time. Whatever he was going to request was probably illegal. And I'd rather not confine him to the ship whenever we're in a port that isn't the Nexus. I finished my drink and made my way towards the marketplace, passing by the public forum. There was a small crowd, with three 'ringleaders' so to speak, leading the discussion, and several groups behind each.

"We must find common ground. Exaltation affects us all," a woman stated.

"Exaltation is just another word for how the Kett kill us," a man muttered.

"And if you're wrong? If we've been killing for them-without realizing it?" another man pointed out.

"I saw a Kett up close when they attacked. It was nothing like our people," the woman argued. The last man to speak looked up and over the crowd, seeing me watching and listening. He waved over, gaining my attention.

"Pathfinder, you were there, at the facility. What do you say?" he questioned. Cautiously, as I hoped I would represent my people well, I stepped forward, the crowd politely parting to allow me towards the center.

"Well, I can tell you what I saw in that facility. Angara in a trance, and then transformed. Their free will burned away. For all intents and purposes, they kill the Angara and replace it with Kett. A
bonus for them weaponizing their victims is that they make their enemies hesitate. It is one of the most evil things I have ever witnessed in my life," I answered.

"And when the Kett begin to exalt your people? What will you do then?" the same man questioned.

"Hope that I'd be showing them mercy. It's what I do with the Angaran victims," I answered.

"Thank you for that… insight, Pathfinder," the woman responded thoughtfully. "The issue facing us is complex."

"I meant no disrespect with my question. This is what our public forum is all about," the man who questioned me clarified.

"No offense or disrespect taken. Healthy debate is always a good thing," I responded. They nodded, and the crowd let me pass towards the market place. Vetra was there, speaking with the general goods merchant Suvi and Kallo were shopping at last time. I think she was just finishing a deal, the Angaran handing her a bag. I waited for Vetra to turn away before heading over.

"Hey Vetra, what's in the bag?" I asked cheerfully. She looked up and her mandibles flashed in a Turian grin and she gestured for me to walk with her, as we spoke. It looked like our destination was the stairway towards the Governor's office, overlooking the marketplace.

"Favor from Suvi, for the movie nights. Gotta say, they make me really glad I'm not levo," she chuckled. "A kind of candied seed the Angara give to their kids. While it'll probably keep Jaal off the popcorn, I doubt any of you are going to enjoy it."

She opened the bag and allowed me to investigate. Oh, yeah, I think I remember Suvi mentioning those before. They… did not look pleasant. Now we were where I thought we were going, and I could see Vetra's eyes scanning the marketplace, analyzing everything going on down there. From the one merchant glaring at us occasionally, to the other business deals going on.

"I feel so out of place here," she murmured. "People keep staring at me. I can't tell if they're fascinated or afraid." I smirked, and while it sounded like a joke, I hoped she wouldn't notice my cheeks redden.

"Maybe they've all got huge crushes on you."

Vetra let out a very light chuckle.

"Scott. That's a little far-fetched." Ok, this is a safe time for me to safely bail out of this train of thought and make sure the wrong thing isn't said. Here goes…

"I don't think so. Everyone wants a tall, spiky girlfriend," Shit. That was not at all what I wanted to say. I swear to god if I have a tiny secondary brain linked with either my heart or my dick that can overrule my primary brain's choice of words I'm gonna be so pissed… Vetra lightly chuckled again.

"Sure, Scott." Ok, I think it's ok right now. Just gotta keep my waist close to the wall so that no one notices the awkward boner I have from that. And then change the topic of the conversation so that everything can calm down and go back to normal.

"So, our next op should be on Kadara. Have any contacts there?" I asked, barely containing the awkwardness. Vetra's mandibles flickered slightly as this was unexpected.
"None I've been able to talk to for a while, but… I know some people who should be there. May take Drack with me to check up on them. Work some things out," she mused. "What's bringing us there anyway?"

"Angara turned traitor and turned in the Moshae to the Kett," I whispered. "He's there, and may be able to lead us to the Archon's flagship. He has an artifact we need for the heart of the terraforming network."

"Right into the thick of it, huh? Guess it would happen at some point," she muttered.

"Maybe we'll even get to take the bastard out," I remarked. "Well, I don't think there's really much more we can do here, for now, at least. Go finish up whatever you have to do, we'll be leaving shortly," I stated, and she nodded acknowledgement.

Oh, that's good, changing topic was starting to get rid of my stiffy and-ah shit, noticing it again just brought it back, and all the thoughts that brought it out in the first place. My cheeks reddening slightly, I hurried back to the Tempest and to my quarters, issued the message for the crew to begin their return to the Tempest, and decided that I should probably read Evfra's files on Kadara Port.

As the Nexus had figured out, they were led by a faction calling themselves the outcasts, led by a woman, the ex-head of security, Sloane Kelly. She was ruthless, and had embraced social Darwinism. Kadara port was survival of the fittest. Pay tribute, or get the shit beaten out of you, and then kicked out into the wilderness. Kadara Port itself at least has rules that prohibit shooting, but the wilderness was free game, where those not even welcome in the port find themselves. Murderers, Pirates, Bandits.

There was something curious though. There was another band of exiles calling themselves 'The Collective.' They were competing with the Outcasts for control of Kadara Port. And while the Outcasts have a vendetta against the Nexus, The Collective is indifferent. They care about making a profit, likely some of their own interests. If it would benefit them, they'd work with us, sounds like. No one knows who their leader, or leaders, are. Not even their species. Just a name. The Charlatan. This report also explained to me how the Exiles took control in the first place. When they arrived, Kadara Port was under Kett control. The Angara who lived there all enslaved or barely resisting, and being shipped off to exaltation facilities. Sloane Kelly led the Exiles in a surprise attack on the Kett, slaughtering them all, and assumed power.

As for what I'd be doing, specifically, when we get there for Vehn Terev, would be speaking with one of Evfra's contacts within the port. They would meet me at a bar in the port, Kralla's song. All I had for the contact was a code name. Shena. Well, I figure it'll be an Angara. Well, now what? Sit here, snack on something, read APEX reports? We had just left atmosphere by the time I finished reading, and the trip was reported to take about four hours.

"Pathfinder, Peebee seems agitated. She may require some assistance," SAM informed. Huh, wonder what has her concerned. Least it was good timing. Curious, I made my way up there to investigate. As I opened the bridge door, I could hear friendly conversation between Kallo and Suvi, but wasn't paying attention to the contents of it. I opened the door to the escape pod bay and found Peebee pacing rapidly back and forth.

"Come on, think… think. I need… something!" she exclaimed throwing her hands into the air.

"You ok?" I asked, stepping inside. Her head snapped towards me, eyes wide and she staggered back.

"Scott! Shit, you shouldn't sneak up on someone like that!" she cried out.
"Sorry, SAM just told me you seemed agitated," I reassured. "If I wanted to be sneaky I'd have cloaked," I joked to try and ease the tension. She was still pacing, and Poc was hovering in the corner.

"Still hate that he can see everything," she shuddered. "Just… talking to myself. Don't tell me you never do that," she defended.

"I think everyone does here and there," I chuckled. Her eyes were darting around.

"Well, are you stressed?" I questioned.

"Yeah, I am. Don't know why," Peebee relented. She started pacing again, sometimes throwing her hands in the air, sometimes resting her forehead in one. "I'm not built for this kind of… homesteading. Don't like people knowing where I am, where my stuff is… Ugggh," she exclaimed, and stopped, leaning back against her desk.

"Ever do anything back home to try and help with this?" I suggested.

"Well… I'd look for a zero-G chamber, or maybe an isolation tank, but… don't have any of those here," she murmured. Her eyes were darting around. "Someplace to just drift away. I could really use that now…"

"If I may, gravity can be overridden in the escape pod. You can create a zero-G chamber," SAM suggested.

"Of course! How the hell didn't I think of that?! Thanks SAM!" Peebee smiled, and began moving towards the pod. Two rows of seats inside, a space in the center for feet, and a console at the front for piloting and control. She threw a leg over the entrance and stepped inside, strapping her rolled up bedroll to the chair. "It's easy. It'll make a huge difference Scott, you'll see," she reassured.

Huh, haven't had any real zero-G time in a while, not counting gravity wells. Could be fun to just float around. "You know, there's room for two," she suggested.

"Sure," I shrugged, and stepped inside. She smiled again and turned off the gravity in the pod, the entrance to it closing.

"Aaaaaand, there," she stated, as the pod hummed and I began to float off the ground. She breathed a sigh of relief as she curled up her legs. "Close your eyes… relax… let yourself go." She sprawled herself out near the top of the pod, chuckling and I squeezed myself through a gap at her right side to end up in front of her, and she was righting herself up before nudging herself to the side so she'd spin slowly. "Oh, this hits the spot," she almost moaned. She was with her stomach to the ceiling when she lightly kicked off the entrance, and I maneuvered to be floating above her and out of her way. There were a few feet between us when she opened her eyes again. "Scott?"

"Yeah?" I responded, enjoying the feel of weightlessness.

"There's something else that would relax me," she suggested with a sultry grin. Oh, um. Shit. This is awkward. Even if I didn't have feelings for a certain Turian now, I uh, I'm not exactly the kind of guy who hops into a girl's pants just because they offered. Still, maybe, maybe, it's something else.

"And that is?" I asked, as she slowly spun herself around and I maneuvered out of her way, we had essentially swapped spots.

"Pfft, you haven't taken the bait yet, thought I'd be blunt. But hey, I'm not afraid of rejection," she
answered. Yeah, it is what I thought. "Want to fool around?"

I could definitely tell my cheeks were reddening and I could feel that my secondary 'head' was more willing than my primary. But while it had the strength for a slip of the tongue, it doesn't have this much strength. Apparently, these thoughts had been taking a while.

"Just fun, two people blowing off steam. No strings attached," she continued. "Only, if there's no strings." Already knew she wasn't much for commitment. I think the color in my cheeks began to normalize as I took a breath to respond.

"Sorry, Peebee, I… don't," I answered.

"That's fine," she grinned. "Say no more." I don't want her to think I don't like her, so…

"Just, clearing up," I began.

"Shhhh, don't you know what say no more means?" she smiled. "Really. I mean it. No explanation necessary. Just… thank you, for this," she gave another reassuring grin.

"Alright," I responded.

"Hm, only if you're willing, let me guess. Vetra?" she smiled teasingly. My eyes widened. Am I really that bad at hiding this shit?

"Ye-well, no, er… Not… Not yet, soon, maybe," I responded awkwardly, the red returning.

"Thought so," she chuckled. "Don't worry, I won't tell. I know your crush, you know my interest. Fair, wouldn't you say?"

"Heh, guess so. How'd did you figure it out anyway?" I asked.

"Uh, I'm an Asari. We kind of have our culture revolving around that kind of fluffy romantic stuff, remember?" she laughed. I shrugged with a smirk.

"You good just floating around for a while then?" I questioned.

"Yeah, thanks again. This was nice," she smiled.

"Alright, sorry but this field will need to come down for a minute," I requested. She nodded and let me pass, righting herself up as the gravity returned, and the door opened. She waved a farewell as the door closed again, her getting back to the zero-G. Huh. You know, I may not be willing to provide her with that… extra relaxation. But I think I know someone who might…

Jaal Ama Darav

I had called Sidera Nyx after takeoff to check up on her. While I'm sure Vetra does so all the time, especially after… what we learned, I'm still concerned for her myself. What happened to her will affect her the rest of her life. We had been enjoying a good conversation. Sometimes discussing more… sensitive, information, stitching the wound, as I said to her once. But also, more casual topics. Keeping us both cheerful. I was still on a call with her, and I could see in her eyes that though a sadness still lurked, there were also the signs of recovery. I heard a knock at my door and I called for them to enter. It was Scott.

"Hi Scott!" Sid called out from our call, having seen him enter.
"Sid? Hey, how're ya? Having a chat with Jaal?" he grinned. I smiled my greeting and Scott nodded.

"Yeah, I'm on my break right now, and he caught me just as I got my lunch out," she answered.

"I just wanted to check up on her," I explained.

"I'm sure Vetra would appreciate that. So, Jaal, when you have time, I think Peebee could use your help. Talk to her a bit, and stuff," Scott suggested.

"Oh? What's wrong?" I asked.

"She's a bit stressed. Not sure why, but I think an idea from SAM helped her a bit. And I thought you'd be able to give her… the little something extra she could use," he smirked… slyly?

"Go ahead, I'm doing fine right now, Jaal, thanks for calling," Sid grinned.

"If you say so," I remarked, with a shrug.

"Yeah, see ya Jaal, bye Scott," she waved goodbye on the video call, Scott and I both returned the farewell and the call ended.

Curiously, Scott and I both stepped out of my room and he patted me on the back. He went down towards the cargo bay while I made my way towards the escape pod Peebee curiously uses as her room. We had spoken on many occasions since I joined. I like her personality. Very energetic. And she has seemed rather open to me in a way she isn't to the others, such as telling me her real name, while I believe some of the others don't know it yet. I also know that she has done several things that, in Angara culture, would either be done as a way to initiate courtship, or something only those already courting one another would be doing. Such as looking at my… rear. And, if I'm honest, I've caught myself looking back. And I remember some of the things we said while celebrating on Voeld. What I can remember alone were… suggestive. I wonder what I don't remember. I opened the door to the escape pod, confused to see no one within the bay, and the door to the escape pod itself. I knocked on it.

"Wha- who's there?" Peebee asked, almost seeming startled.

"Peebee, it's me, Jaal. Scott said you were a bit stressed?" I questioned. She paused.

"He did? Did he? Well, he's not wrong. Come on in, I'll reset the gravity," she answered. Her tone… hm. And, gravity? The door opened, several objects like books and writing utensils were everywhere, the only thing strapped down being a bedroll. I stepped inside, and the door closed, floating into the air. Peebee laughed at my surprise. "Zero-G chamber. You like?" she smiled. I chuckled as I recovered and got used to the feeling.

"Yes, I haven't done this in a while," I remarked.

"Yeah, so, I hear you were promoted to… what was it? Heskaarl?" she asked.

"Yes, they are accepting me into their ranks. I haven't even told my family yet. I still don't believe it myself," I answered, shaking my head.

"Wow, big deal huh? Impressive," she grinned. Is it getting hot in here? She floated closer to me. Whispering into my ear. "Guess you deserve a kind of gift…" I shuddered, slightly. That tone, the look in her eyes.
"W-what do you mean?" I asked, stuttering.

"Come on, Jaal, you've seen the way I look at you. I've seen the way you look at me. Wanna give it a try?" she suggested in a sultry voice. "Just two friends, having some fun, getting to know each other," she breathed lowly yet heavily. Several different feelings were boiling up, I was at a loss for words and not sure what- I crashed my lips against hers. She was shocked for a moment, before embracing it, wrapping her arms around me, and then pulling away, a suggestive grin on her face. "I'll take that as a yes." Her lips returned to mine.

It was a fun way to spend the journey.

Chapter End Notes

Enjoy the PB&J!
Hive of Scum and Villainy

Chapter Notes

I may not have time to make Halloween specials for my stories (work and school, plus the regular schedule) but I think I'll leave a few a few chapters as your little trick-or-treat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Just because I had the strength of will to not have zero-G sex with Peebee, I did see the perfect opportunity to provide Jaal with a nudge towards her Zero-G spot. Wonder how messy that would be, I mean, come on, there are liquids I'd rather not end up flying into my face during the aftermath. Anyways, I may have had the strength to resist that, but I still needed to go have some… alone time in my cabin. I might have been thinking of a certain Turian… Afterwards, I had taken a brief look around both Jaal's and Peebee's normal hangouts on board, all except her room. Neither were anywhere to be found. You're welcome, Peebee. Enjoy that bit of PB&J, getting his Jaaly, and all the other sexual innuendos I can think of. There was still time before we arrived in Kadara, and I did not expect to see either of them for a while yet, so I refreshed my energy with a nap.

I awoke, as planned, just as we were exiting FTL, and entered the bridge just as the black void of FTL travel was replaced with a view of Kadara ahead of us. A planet with brown and green, and the black hole at the center of Heleus was eerily visible behind the planet, despite being light years away. The planet looked livable, but looks can be deceiving. According to the Resistance reports, the water is toxic, an excess of sulfur in the content, only drinkable through unique filters that the Angara have developed. I ordered an orbital geographic scan to map the planet for us, and we descended into the planet's atmosphere, seemed to be either dusk or dawn. Hell, don't even know how long a day lasts on this world. There were mountains everywhere, mild plant life too. Seems that Kadara Port had been built in the badlands, and the port itself built at the top of a mountain. There was clear civilization, shuttles coming and going. Some were stolen Initiative, some were Angara, and some were of a new type, seemingly built from scrap metal. Buildings and neon lights with a central structure that was taller than the others, and likely the seat of the Port's… government. Also, curiously, I could see what looked like fossilized coral formations along the mountains and even down by several lakes on the ground. So, was this all underwater a long time ago?

"Hey, you, unidentified vessel. Tell us who the hell you are and what you want or we WILL open fire," a gruff voice threatened over the comms.

"This is the Tempest, Pathfinder Scott Ryder requesting permission to land. I wish to make contact and speak with Sloane Kelly," I answered.

"Initiative? Talk to Sloane? Ha! You know what, go ahead, land on the southern landing pad. I'm curious to see how she strings you up," the gruff voice chuckled. I glanced over at both Kallo and Suvi, they were uneasy.

"Yeah, you do that. You're allowed to bring a weapon with you, but start shit, and you'll get a taste of frontier justice," the air traffic controller warned. Yeah, I think I might bring some armor. Nothing obvious, but a ballistic vest to wear under my clothes, and I'll be keeping a barrier up with my biotics.

We were starting to set down so I ventured to the armory, grabbed a Carnifex and folded it, placing it within the holster, and grabbed a decent sized ballistic vest, removed my shirt, just as Vetra and Drack were walking into the cargo hold, strapped on the vest, and put my shirt back on.

"Smart. I wouldn't trust anyone here," Drack remarked.

"Why not just wear your real armor?" Vetra questioned. She was already in her under suit and began strapping it on herself. And Drack is always wearing his armor.

"Huh, yeah, why the hell would I walk around here vulnerable? They don't like us here at all," I remarked. "Fuck it, I'll be back in a minute. Mind waiting?" I requested. They nodded and I changed into my under suit, returned to the armory, and chose to don my Pathfinder armor. After all, the N7 was for assaults or high-risk ops. With my Carnifex attached to my right outer thigh, the cargo bay door began to open. I was keeping my helmet off for now, but had left it secured to my belt. It was a positive coincidence that Vetra and Drack were already leaving the ship, if we went out into the badlands they'd be great choices to bring along. For now, for our safety primarily, I ordered the crew that until we are certain of the situation in the port, they are to remain on the ship unless they have specific business, or I call for them. Plus, it's likely that Vetra and Drack could gain some Intel themselves while I'm talking with Sloane and finding Vehn.

No one was there to greet us at the landing pad, just a walk down and out to the port's gates. If we get checked, that'll be where. And… huh. There was a Kett head on a pike, the blood now dry as we walked towards the gates.

"Don't you just feel safe and welcome here?" I remarked sarcastically.

"Damn. Even in the revolt they weren't this brutal. Except for…" Vetra muttered, then almost snarled. Drack glanced, a concerned look in his old eyes, but said nothing. Not only that, but there was a sign board with a Kett body strung across the front, a kind of bird resting on its shoulder and pecking its face and eyes. There was a warning above the corpse.

"The fate of all Kett and any who support them." It was painted in a dark green. I suspected Kett blood. Just above the gate into the port was another sign. "Sloan's Law. No killing in the Port. Solve your own problems. Pay your tribute." Simple. Guess not only does she make people pay to live in the only safe place, she likely gets a share of all the trade. We stepped into the cities gates, and a pair of guards, Krogan, gave a rather poor attempt to intimidate us as they scanned for anything they didn't want us carrying, blowing air out their nose like a bull, showing their teeth, staring into your eyes. We stared right back. And Drack even feinted a headbutt into one, and he flinched back, Drack chuckling at the Krogan that was more bark than bite. We walked up a staircase to enter the central district of the port, and found ourselves on a balcony looking over the market and entrance to the central building. We leaned against the railing observing what the situation was.

"Not bad for folk who got kicked off the station with nothing to show for it," Drack remarked.

"The Angara built it, Kett took it, and the Outcasts took it from the Kett. From Evfra's reports, the way leadership here does shit is unacceptable. But that's just leadership. Everyone who disagrees with them, everyone being trampled by them, I want them back on our side," I remarked.
"Well, we know they can fight Kett, but I agree," Vetra mused.

"Vetra, isn't your supplier waiting," Drack suggested.

"Do I want to know?" I smirked. In unison, they gave a simple reply as they turned to leave.

"No." I chuckled but stopped immediately as I watched several armed and armored figures drag a human man out into the center of the street, his nose appeared broken and he was crying out for help, that he'd pay with a bit more time. I think Vetra noticed my features set into a glare.

"Scott… you try and fight them off and they'll kick us all out, we'll lose our chance to help all of them," Vetra warned.

"I can't just let them do this," I muttered as they began kicking the man, a woman running out, crying for them to stop and a girl, maybe in her early teens, following her, crying for her father. A Krogan broke off from beating the man to hold them back.

"This is what happens when you don't pay on time," he growled. I shook my head, unable to stop myself and I don't think Vetra tried, just hoping I wouldn't do anything extreme.

"You're no better than the Nexus!" The woman exclaimed. The Krogan snarled and reared his head back.

"HEY! LEAVE THEM THE HELL ALONE!" I yelled. They turned to see an unfamiliar man wearing black and red armor, still emblazoned with Dad's N7 commendation.

"And who the hell are you?" the Krogan growled.

"Pathfinder Scott Ryder," I answered.

"And who let Initiative scum land here?" he questioned with another snarl.

"Please, I wasn't even around for the mutiny," I scoffed.

"Makes no difference to me. What are you gonna do to stop us anyway?" the Krogan continued, as a Turian in the group kicked the man again as he struggled to get off the ground. The girl cried out again. "We'll just kick you out of port."

"He was behind on his payments?" I questioned, arms crossing over my chest. This confused him.

"Yeah, those who don't pay get kicked out to the badlands," he recited.

"Well, everyone who lives out there has either been kicked out or prefers living violently. You have a finite supply of people who are willing to pay those fees. The guy has a wife and kid, what difference does a few days make so long as you get the payment? You beat the shit out of him, that'll just make it harder for him to make that money. You kick him out, you get nothing but another corpse and a starving, grieving family. You give him time, you get paid," I argued.

"YES! YES, EXACTLY, I'LL PAY! I PROMISE I'LL PAY! ALLIE'S A GROWING GIRL, SHE NEEDED MORE THAN WE EXPECTED THIS MONTH, THAT'S ALL, PLEASE!" the man sobbed. The Krogan paused, considering the arguments. He'd find it hard to debate the math.

"Fine," he relented. "Let him go. But if he doesn't pay up what else he owes by the end of the week, it's the badlands." The man's wife breathed a deep sigh of relief as they released the man and he struggled to his feet and embraced his wife and child both, still crying. The Krogan shook his
head, and led the others away. I approached behind them, the still crying wife opening her eyes, looking at me behind her husband.

"Why did you help us?" she questioned sadly.

"Despite whatever they've been telling you, only a handful on the Nexus actually think the Exiles are all bad people. And those who do, no one listens to," I answered. "It was the right thing to do."

"Thank you," the girl cried. I heard someone approach from behind, and lay a three-fingered hand on my shoulder.

"You handled that well, Scott, I'm impressed," Vetra smiled, and turned to face the family.

"Having a rough time making ends meet?" she asked.

"Yeah, the Port is rough enough on its own, having a moral compass, refusing to take certain jobs, makes it worse," the man murmured, ending the embrace with his family and turning to face us.

"I'll see what I can do with a few contacts around here. Keep an eye out," Vetra reassured.

"Really?" the man asked, not quite believing.

"Yeah, I got family too, and I know how hard it can be providing for them. Keep an eye out for a few… care packages," Vetra hinted. "I need to go for that deal with Drack, don't test your luck though," she warned, patting me on the shoulder, turning to leave. I nodded my thanks.

"Why don't you head over to the Tempest? Go see our doc. We'll spare some rations for you," I suggested.

"You're lying… you have to be," the man murmured shyly. I smiled warmly.

"I'm not. They'll be expecting you, get you fixed up. Go on," I patted the man's shoulder. He and his family began crying again, unable to believe that anyone would be nice just to be nice.

"Thank you," they breathed through the tears and made their way towards the landing pad, and I ensured they'd be expected. I only now noticed the crowd that had formed to watch what happened. They were murmuring amongst themselves, the Angara in particular. I guess the ones on Kadara hadn't witnessed a Milky Way species do anything like that here before. There wasn't much I could do or say. Kralla's song was just to the side, and that's where I went. Seemed as if each table was filled, people drinking, some people very obviously groping one another, others passed out on the damn floor. I did my best to discreetly look around, but my appearance was anything but discreet. I had many eyes on me, and I had no idea which was Shena.

There was one amusing scene that caught my eye, a Turian woman leaning back against a wall with a human man trying to tell her something. The Turian had green face paint, a pair of short horizontal lines on the cheeks that arced over the nose, and another pair following her mandibles and arcing down with them. The man had light skin and black hair, a few freckles here and there. Both were drunk, clearly, both of their eyes were hazy and had a bit of the color of their blood in them. Red for the human, a bluish shade for the Turian. Every time the Human would begin talking, she would pop one of her mandibles out as far as they could, making a clicking noise, while the other one stayed put. The man paused, began again, and she repeated the process with the other mandible. This process repeated a few more times before the man called out her name asking for her to stop, a drunkenly annoyed voice. She raised a brow plate, and he began again, only for her to pop the mandible out again. The man groaned out in frustration before taking a large swig of his beer, the Turian woman doing the same, with the ghost of a smile appearing. Two old friends,
looks like.

I approached the bar, the Asari running it looking like she'd quite happily jump right out the balcony and down the cliffside if someone gave her one good reason. Or that she'd throw the person who gave her a reason off. Hard to distinguish the two, really. Shena has probably spotted me by now. There was an obviously drunk Krogan wearing armor colored in the style of the Outcasts.

"Hey!" The bartender called out angrily.

"Piss off," the Krogan grumbled in reply.

"You order, you pay," she growled.

"I said-" the Krogan turned just as the Asari stabbed a rather large knife into the table, slamming her other fist down as well.

"You don't fucking pay, and this knife is cutting off your fucking quad, and I'll shove it down your throat before this knife goes right up your fucking dickhole," she threatened. Wow, I don't think that's an idle threat. The Krogan paused, and keyed his Omni-tool reluctantly, paying for his drinks. As I was watching the endeavor, a human man approached. Olive skin, slick, black hair combed or gelled to the side. He had a casual smirk on his features, and purpose in his steps. And unlike nearly everyone else in this bar, he wasn't drunk. He had a kind of jacket, reminiscent of the old leather jackets on earth, but clearly different material and color perhaps a light shade of green or brown, and a holster, with a pistol, on his thigh.

"You look like you're waiting for someone," the man remarked, a clear Hispanic accent. Couldn't tell if it was from Spain directly, or almost anywhere from central or south America. He leaned his side against the bar, facing the bartender. "Umi, whiskey for me and the gentleman here, please," he requested. The bartender, Umi, silently grabbed two glasses, and a bottle, filling each with the liquid. She did not seem to enjoy her job. I watched everything carefully, even as he handed me one of the glasses. Looked safe.

"I have time for a drink," I nodded, and accepted. Smiling, the man held his drink out, and I knocked mine against his, making a satisfying clink. Hm, as I suspected, as I took a swig of whiskey, I knew it was the cheaper kind. Burns the throat a bit. But it'll get you drunk all the same, which is probably all the people in this bar care about.

"Shena. But you can call me Reyes. I hate code names," the man introduced, holding out a hand. I accepted his hand for the shake.

"You're less Angaran than I expected," I remarked. He chuckled.

"The Resistance pays me to supply information. Among other things…” Reyes trailed off. A smuggler. I can see it now. Quite the Han Solo act going on here.

"Evfra had me jump through quite a few hoops to earn his trust. Wonder how you did it. Anyway, Vehn?" I questioned. Reyes nodded, and gestured for me to walk with him, looking out the windows to Kadara, a more secluded location.

"He was arrested by Sloane. Word spread about his little deal," he answered. "And I'm sure you saw the sign outside. The people are calling for his execution and Sloane… heh, she's a woman of the people," he remarked sarcastically.

"Oh yeah, sure, only if they pay money to live in the only place where they're actually protected
from brutal murder," I responded, just as much sarcasm.

"Quite. I doubt Sloane will give up Vehn easily. Especially since you're Initiative," Reyes warned.

"Well, it's not my choice. He's going back to Aya, alive, with or without her permission," I remarked.

"We're gonna be friends, you and I," Reyes chuckled, bumping his shoulder against mine.

"There might be a way to get to Vehn. You talk with Sloane, see if you can perform a miracle, I'll talk to the Resistance," Reyes whispered. I nodded and he began to leave. Wait, one more thing I should know.

"How do I contact you if things go south?" I called out. Reyes smiled, and winked in reply, leaving. I stopped and considered just what I'd say to Sloane when-Ah shit, Reyes just left me with the tab didn't he? I moved to catch up with him when Umi called out.

"Hey! You paying or am I gonna have to repeat my threat to that Krogan?"

"Er, sorry, I think I just got left with the tab. Here," I responded, keying my Omni-tool. Not a sum to be concerned with.

"Yeah, you aren't the first," she murmured. I chuckled at the thought, and made my way towards the central building. The markets were still full, people selling their wares. General goods at some, including filtered water, and some vendors selling weapons and armor. I wouldn't see myself buying anything from them anytime soon. I can requisition from the Nexus, and what weapons the Nexus doesn't have, I can take from the corpses of exiles who try and kill us. I got quite a few stares along the way, either curious, angry, or perhaps… enterprising? Must be Collective. I strode up to the main building's entrance, and grudgingly, the guards opened the door without a word, likely already knowing to expect me. I suppose you could call this a waiting room. That image was helped by the several chairs leading to a door with another pair of guards, Krogan, at either side. Plus, a crudely painted sign above the door.

"Come with complaints, leave with a bullet." Well, she's a hothead. I approached the guards.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," one recited, sounding quite bored. I cooperated, holding my hands in the air while the other did a pat down, and secured my Carnifex. "You'll get it back when you're done." He opened the door, and the two Krogan provided an escort. Hm, bit of a throne room in here. In the center and back of the room, the throne, with a dark-skinned woman, black hair shaved everywhere but the middle of her head, and heavy scarring on her face. To both the right and left were slightly lower areas and some tables. To the side of the woman who was obviously Sloane, was a Turian wearing a greenish armor and arms crossed over his chest. Sloane had her left arm half resting on the armrest as she leaned to her left side, her right arm interacting with a holographic tactical interface, likely a map of a region on Kadara. She was giving orders. The Krogan behind me needlessly shoved my right shoulder but I ignored it.

"Focus defenses here and here. The Kett have been quiet for too long," Sloane ordered in a slightly hushed voice. No one responded, so it was likely that she was communicating with a field commander over comms. With a wave of her hand, the hologram flickered from existence and she focused her attention on me, straightening her posture, then leaning forward, her elbows on her knees. "What?" she questioned, annoyed, an English or English related accent.

"Very funny," Sloane, replied, a slight sigh. While she wasn't pissed, she wasn't about to start making snide sarcastic comments in turn. Huh, she has one brown or hazel eye and one that looks... teal, wonder how that happened. Would explain part of the Outcast color scheme. "So, what brings a Pathfinder to our humble port?" she questioned dramatically, leaning back.


"What's he to you? And some free advice, don't lie to me," she warned, resting her left leg and foot up on the throne. Well, she hates the Kett. I could use that to my advantage.

"I need him to infiltrate a Kett flagship. The Archon's flagship," I stated. "Looks to me like you aren't exactly fans of the Kett. Think I'm doing you a favor," I shrugged.

"Kadara is an Angaran port. They want Vehn dead, I want to keep them happy," Sloane answered slowly.


"You don't need Vehn. You need his intel. Talk to him before I put his head on a spike," Sloane offered. Honestly, if the Resistance didn't want him alive, I'd take the offer. It's not a bad one after all.

"I can't agree to that, Sloane. It's not my call. Not yours either. That calls already been made by the very woman he betrayed. Moshae Sjefa wants him alive," I answered.

"Then we're done here. Dismissed," Sloane ordered, annoyed, and a mock salute. Alright.

"Your Highness," I retorted, a mock bow. I turned to leave before the Krogan had, and the moment the doors behind us closed I grabbed my pistol and left. Damn. Annoyed, a bit angry, I stormed out of the Outcast HQ, and Reyes was there waiting. Leaning his side against the support for a storefront.

"Have a nice chat?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Fantastic one. Tea and crumpets and everything. I think she likes me," I joked. Reyes seemed to enjoy that.

"Don't worry. I found a workaround," he whispered.

"Strings attached?"

"Not any new ones..." Reyes trailed off. I raised a brow curiously. "There's another entrance to the holding cells. Take this," he began, handing me a canister. "Get him to talk, give him this, and tell him a Resistance agent will be waiting. The contents of the canister will eat right through the bars, and they can't be traced back to us."

"Alright, where exactly is the entrance?" I asked.

"Maintenance shaft, just around the corner behind me. Here's the access code," Reyes answered, sending me the codes via omni-tool.

"Thanks for the help Reyes," I grinned.
"Anytime. When you're done, come to Tartarus, down in the slums. First rounds on me this time, I promise," he chuckled. We parted ways. I followed the buildings to the alley that Reyes pointed me to. Nothing back here but a console. Must be where the codes go. I was right, a panel opened in the floor, allowing me access into the shaft. It did… not smell good. At all. Another console, another panel. SAM scanned the room, no heat signatures. It was a stockroom for the Outcasts. The next door led me to a holding cell. Metal bars lining the walls and door on the other end, benches inside, and a lone Angara in there, leaning forward, staring down. I approached the door. I was not unnoticed.

"What do you want?" he mumbled.

"The Verrikan. Where is it?" I questioned. That drew both a surprised and confused look on his face. Then suspicion.

"This a new interrogation tactic? Sloane's getting lazy," he replied calmly.

"Not with Sloane. Evfra, and the Moshae, sent me. Answer my questions, and I get you back to the Resistance," I offered.

"So, I'm trading one cell for another?" Vehn scoffed.

"This is what happens when you make deals with the devil," I remarked. "Besides, Sloane's gonna have you killed soon. Least with the Resistance you serve your time, maybe even get a chance to do good again." Vehn took a moment to think, then sighed.

"I'd rather be miserable than Kaerkyn food…"


"I never saw it. Got my orders from a Kett transponder. However… you could use its frequency to trace it back to the Archon," he explained, stepping towards the cell door. "It's buried by a… hotel, I think your people called it, out in the badlands. Just before I was arrested. Should still be there. The place is run by a Turian. At the bottom of the building, there's a room. Outside of it, one side has stairs up to the rest. On the other, it's below the supports for the upper levels. It's buried there," Vehn explained. Well, that's satisfactory. I handed him the canister.

"And this is your key to freedom. Wait a few minutes and head down that maintenance area I came from. A Resistance contact will be waiting," I told him. He looked at the canister and I began to walk away.

"Don't you want to know why I did it? Why I betrayed the Moshae?" Vehn asked sadly. This should be… interesting.

"Enlighten me."

"We're losing the war against the Kett. Still, Evfra puts my brothers and sisters in danger to protect a useless old woman," he answered bitterly.

"And you took things into your own hands."

"I made the call he wouldn't. The Archon only wanted the Moshae. I thought if I gave her up…" he muttered. What desperation can do. "I didn't know what they were doing to my people."

"You resent Evfra, and the Archon used that against you. The Kett are manipulative. But your decision cost the lives of many Resistance soldiers sent, volunteered even to save the Moshae.
Morale isn't useless," I argued. Vehn sighed and sat down, toying with the canister in his hands.

"I'll accept the consequences." I left the HQ the same way I entered, emerging from the maintenance hatch.

"Vetra, Drack, you back from your little deal?" I asked over comms.

"Yep, our completely legitimate business deal went off without a hitch," she answered.

"Benefit of bringing a Krogan along," Drack chuckled.

"Good to hear. Get ready to go outside the city," I ordered, and then called Gil to prep the Nomad. Wonder how we'd even get it down there. I was about to go talk with someone running the docks to figure that out myself, but there was a crowd in the center of the marketplace again. A few Outcast guards keeping people back. As I got closer, I realized it was a dead body. Angara, male, lot of light blue blood. I gently pushed my way through the crowd to get closer.

"Pathfinder. I can get to the bottom of this," I told one of the guards. He shrugged and let me through to get a detailed scan.

"Multiple lacerations on the face and abdomen," SAM informed.

"Another one... I don't get payed enough for this shit," the man inspecting the body murmured.

"There's been more than one?" I asked.

"Seven by my count. But that's all I know," the man answered, not even looking back. Hm, maybe Reyes would have some info. I thanked him and left through the crowd. I returned to the area just inside the city where I entered from the landing pad, looking for some figure of authority. A human man typing away at a data pad noticed me and walked right up.

"You're the Pathfinder, right? A pair of your crew, Vetra and Drack, secured parking for your vehicle. It's waiting in a garage down in the slums, it exits out into the badlands. And they said they'd be waiting for you in a bar, so look in Tartarus," the man explained. I thanked him and made my way towards the elevator when a five-fingered hand grabbed my shoulder. I turned to see a nervous looking human, young, staring back.

"He called you, Pathfinder, right?" he asked.

"Yes…?" I trailed off.

"You might just be my only chance. Hell, her only chance," he whispered. He glanced around and led me to a corner. "I joined the outcasts a few weeks ago. Kaetus, Sloane's second in command, tasked me with collecting protection fees," he continued. Oh, so he's that kind of guy. "I thought it'd be easy." I felt my features harden. "We talked to so many people… I got names mixed up. Banished someone who payed…" he finished. I think he could tell I was not pleased.

"You're going to have a hard time convincing me to help you now," I growled.

"I know, dammit! I can't go looking for her myself, because if Kaetus finds out… I need this job to feed my little brother. Our mom's still in cryo. He has no one else," he argued.

"Both of your names. Now," I ordered.

"Grayson Wessler. My brother is Eli Wessler," he answered meekly. SAM ran a check and verified
the DNA with a scan. He confirmed their identities.

"Give me the name of the woman you kicked out," I answered, arms crossed over my chest.

"Remi Tamayo. She would have gone down to the slums for processing. No idea after that. Maybe
the warden can tell you something," he suggested.

"Fine. I'll do it. But if she's hurt at all, it's on your hands," I warned, and returned to the elevator,
angrily sending it all the way down. In the meantime, well, this world is Angaran in control of
exiles. Might be a good idea to have an Angara on hand. I keyed my comms.

"Jaal? You there?"

"Er, yes! I'm here, what is it, Scott?" he stuttered. I think I could hear a slightly feminine groan.

"I know you're having fun and all, but we're gonna need you out here. So, get out of Peebee, get
suited up, get out here, take the elevator down to the slums," I requested with a chuckle.

"What are you-how did-what?" Jaal stammered awkwardly. I could hear Peebee laughing.

"Jaal, you were nowhere to be seen, and your last known location was Peebee's escape pod. I've
known Peebee's liked you for a while, just gave you a nudge," I chuckled.

"You… knew…" Jaal replied slowly. I heard Peebee giggle.

"Thanks for that, by the way," Peebee spoke through Jaal's comms. "Don't worry Jaal," she
reassured, and I heard what sounded like a kiss.

"Alright," I heard Jaal groan as he stood. "I'll be there-" there was a loud, fleshy smack, a surprised
yell from Jaal, and more laughter from Peebee. "Soon," Jaal ended. I was laughing the rest of the
ride. Soon enough, the elevator came to a stop. They don't call these the slums for nothing. By
the daylight shining in, was the gated entrance to Kadara port, separating here from the Badlands. To
the left of that was a two-story structure, Tartarus written across in neon. To the left of that, shanty
town implies a better situation than what I see. Crates stacked on crates. Forming a makeshift
apartment complex. People starving, begging, and given the attire of certain people, hooking. Not
one of them looked clean, and all looked to be some manner of sickly. The smell wasn't exactly
nice either. If I ever needed evidence that Kadara needed a change of leadership, it's in there. I need
to see it upfront. The crates were all built and placed around pre-existing Angaran catwalks, metal
plates strewn about to block off water, keep people from stepping in it. Or drinking it. It's poison
here after all.

There was a drug den, a woman not being allowed to take someone away. There were men and
women of all species curled up almost everywhere, crying, or just with a lifeless stare. I could even
hear the crying of infants. Must be Angara, Initiative species still have fertilization blockers in our
systems. I would pass by crates rocking or banging slightly, and those don't have much in the way
of sound insulation. I couldn't tell if what was going on inside was for payment, or stress relief. I
was very relieved to learn it wasn't all bad. There was a line set up outside of a building. I could
smell things cooking. Not great smells, but when living like this, food is food. And it wasn't being
sold. It was being given. I heard someone ask the Turian handing out the food why it wasn't being
sold. His response, I found very interesting.

"The Charlatan hopes you'll remember who fed you when you were down." I can't say I'm
convinced that the Charlatan is a true people person, but whoever they are, it's smart to cater to the
downtrodden, there's more of them than those on Sloane's payroll after all. Add on to the kitchen,
and there was a crate with three cots inside, a Krogan, Angara, and a Salarian resting on each. The Salarian was being treated by a human, a Doctor. I allowed him to finish what he was doing with the Salarian so I could speak with him. I was curious. He saw me approach came to greet me.

"Hm. You look well enough. My patients are usually leaking something from somewhere," he remarked. "Not to mention that N7 on your armor."

"No leaking here, just seeing all the wonders that Kadara has to offer," I replied sarcastically.

"A tourist, huh?" he questioned, clearly curious.

"Pathfinder Scott Ryder, this was my Dad, Alec's armor, it was willed to me," I explained.

"An Ark made it? Could've used you when we got to Heleus," he remarked. I could sense a bitterness, but not directed at me. "Dr. Ryota Nakamoto. I used to work as the Outcasts' physician," he introduced.

"Used?"

"I quit. Sloane turned what should've been a medical breakthrough into a drug," Ryota answered.

"And here I've heard so much of her being a woman of the people," I chuckled. Yeah, this woman is on my shit list.

"She's whatever she needs to be to stay in power. When we arrived on Kadara, I found a local string of bacteria that shares properties with penicillin," he explained.

"Damn, that's a helluva find," I nodded.

"It was. But then I discovered the drug is addictive and induces hallucinations, but only does either in large doses. I took my concerns to Sloane, and… well, check the drug den downstairs," he growled bitterly. "And I can't stop her. Not like I can charge into their production facility and destroy the formula."

"Can do. You don't want it back?" I asked.

"No, don't need it. I'm good with formulas and this one wasn't that complex, relatively speaking. I just need her to not know it, but… it's heavily guarded," he warned.

"My crew and I are heavily armed and well trained. We can handle some outlaws," I reassured. Ryota shrugged.

"Well, alright. They produce the drug in my old lab. Just to the east, in the mountains but below that weird alien structure. Please, don't get killed trying to fix my mistake," he requested. Wait, weird alien structures? I sense a vaaaaault.

"We'll be fine, doc. Just continue keeping this people as healthy as you can," I responded. Ryota grinned and returned to his patients. I began heading towards Tartarus when I saw a familiar figure step out of the elevators. Jaal. Grinning, I moved to greet him first.

"Hey buddy! Have fun?"

"Um, it was… nice…" he stuttered.

"Everything ok?" I asked, maybe it wasn't just awkwardness.

"Alright, I'll lay off. Sorry," I reassured with a pat on the shoulder.

"It's fine, thank you, Scott," he smiled.

"Come on, let's meet up with the others. We'll debrief together. Speak with a friend," I offered. Jaal nodded, and we entered the bar. The door opened, and the bar was full. Tables everywhere with all the seats full. Except for one in the back that had two seats open, a certain Turian and Krogan both waiting. They nodded, waiting for us to arrive. There was a cage with two dancers inside. Two dancers I expect to not be looking at very much at all. One was a human male, in a thong, several human women and Asari cheering as he danced. The other was an Angaran man, dressed similarly to the human. Definitely don't want to be looking at him either, they still look weird shirtless. By some people dancing to the left was another cage and… a Salarian inside? Why would anyone watch a Salarian stripper? Oh, the strippers making a show of their feet. Yeah, that's weird. Salarian or not. The only cage down here without a dancer was the bar itself. And the only reason I really call any of these cages are the bars lining them. They all have doors on the backsides, and the bar one has kegs and drink racks. Plus, a lone bartender, but several serving girls, dressed like it's that old Human Restaurant, Hooters, that died out a long time ago, taking drinks as people at tables ordered.

"Quite the… establishment," Jaal muttered as we walked over towards the others.

"Enjoying the view down here Scott?" Vetra teased.

"Given that I have no idea if that Salarian is male or female, I'm starting to think this is the opposite of the kind of bar I prefer," I chuckled.

"I dunno, either works for me," Vetra shrugged.

"What? They bring back some old memories?" I teased in turn. Vetra's eyes widened and she bit her 'lip' slightly, knowing that I caught her.

"Should have seen that coming?" she murmured. I laughed, Drack raised a brow, not knowing the story, and Jaal was simply confused.

"So, kid, what's the deal?" Drack questioned.

"I'll explain in a moment. Come on, we'll find the Resistance contact in here, talk with him. I think he can be a big help," I stated. The others shrugged and I moved to the bar.

"What's your poison?" the bartender asked.

"Please tell me you mean alcohol," I chuckled. "I wouldn't normally ask, but…" The bartender laughed.

"Fair enough on Kadara. Water's poison, killer outlaws, but here? Just an expression," he reassured. "Here, let me give you my special, on the house. You're certainly more… reputable than my usual clientele," he offered, handing over a glass with a brown liquid inside. Whiskey, again, but unlike the one I got from Reyes in Kralla's, this one was of better stock. Sliding down more than it burned.

"Looking for someone, actually. Reyes Vidal, told me he'd be here," I explained.

"Oh, yeah, check the private room upstairs. He and I have a deal worked out," the Bartender answered.
"Thanks, see ya round," I ended, and moved for the stairs. "Alright, so it's the upper level of the bar I'll prefer to hang out in," I remarked loud enough for Vetra to hear. I could hear her chuckling.

Three cages, or, truthfully, one large cage. The first had a human woman, topless, a rather thin bottom, barely hiding anything at all dancing on a pole. To her left, a Turian woman, also topless, but that doesn't mean anything, but like the Human, very little on. The last cage was an Asari. While all cages had onlookers, the Asari had the most with the most variety. She had apparently gotten to the part of the routine where all the clothes were gone, and just making a show of all her assets. While I may need to know someone well before I'm willing to be intimate with them, it's another to… appreciate their physical appearance. But that moment of appreciation, at least on the Asari front, was quickly cut short by my own mind reminding me of the Asari's dirty little secret. The same secret that nearly killed Sid.

"Well, one of these is nothing new to me," Jaal whispered as we walked by the Asari. I had been successful to not keep my head staring right at any of the women up there, but my eyes were another matter, and I was barely able to properly direct myself to the private room. Well, at least the one marked as a private lounge, and not private dances. Like hell it's only dances that happen in there. Damn, it's been awhile since I've had a round. Would have been before mom was diagnosed, while I was still in the Alliance. A squad mate turned friend, turned girlfriend. We kept track of each other for a while, but never got the chance to meet up again. The last I ever heard from her was when she was reassigned to the 212th division on Eden Prime, guarding a dig that she couldn't talk about. I remember her excitement when she told me that a member of the division was Ashley Williams, granddaughter of General Williams at Shanxi. Laura died when the Geth attacked. She was one of the few people to not completely disassociate themselves with me when the Alliance caught wind of Dad's AI research. Can't help but wonder what would have happened if she lived.

"Scott? You ok?" Vetra asked, shaking my shoulder, concerned. Damn. Well, at least I got to meet Vetra. I shook my head.

"Uh, yeah, yeah, just a few random memories from back home decided to hit me," I answered, suppressing my emotions. I may have had a lot of time to mourn her, but… it's never that easy.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," she whispered. "Almost thought we had lost you to the dancers," she joked louder.

"Wonder if you can narrow it down between the three up here. I bet it'll surprise you," I retorted. Shit, really hope I didn't reveal myself. A Freudian would say that it's a slip, revealing what I truly want to say. My response to them? Shaddup. Vetra raised a brow-plate with a Turian smirk, and we entered the private room. Reyes was nursing a drink.

"Oh? These don't look like the dancers I requested," Reyes smirked. He stood to greet us. "So, why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

"This old bag of bones wearing bones is Drack, this Turian is Vetra Nyx, the queen quartermaster, and the Angara is Jaal Ama Darav," I introduced.

"Nyx? Now that's a familiar name," Reyes smirked. Vetra tilted her head to the side curiously. "We've never met, but your reputation precedes you. A few friends of mine have repeatedly mentioned how much they miss working with you," Reyes explained.

"This is Reyes Vidal. Smuggler, and also Evfra's contact on Kadara," I mentioned. The others nodded understanding.

"At your service," he bowed dramatically. "Come, I'm sure we have much to discuss, but let me get you some drinks," he offered, gesturing for us to say what we wanted. Drack of course, wanted
Ryncol, Vetra shrugged, accepting a simple Dextro beer, Jaal politely declined, and I just accepted a beer myself. We were about to go out into the field, after all. "Ryncol and two beers, for my guests. One Dextro, one Levo," Reyes spoke into a comm device. We sat, and a moment later a serving girl entered with the requested drinks, handing them off to the proper recipients, and left. "So, just what did Vehn tell you?" Reyes questioned as he continued nursing his drink.

"There's a Kett transponder buried outside the city. At some kind of hotel. Should be able to use it to trace back the signal," I answered.

"I know the place. The only relatively safe location on this damn planet aside from the Port. It's called Charybdis Point. I certainly wouldn't call it a five-star resort, but for those banished to the waste, it's a cheaper safe haven than the Port," Reyes explained. "Here's the coordinates." He transferred them. It was out to the west of here. "But there was a matter I was hoping to speak to you about. I'm sure you saw the murder outside Kralla's song after our chat?" Reyes asked.

"I did. In fact, I wanted to talk to you about those," I remarked.

"Good. You may have heard the Outcasts claiming that it was the work of the Charlatan but…” Reyes rubbed his chin and shook his head. "I don't buy it. Everything the Charlatan does points to them preferring discretion. Whoever did this wanted those bodies found."

"Making a statement," I nodded in understanding.

"But to who?" Reyes questioned.

"Sloane?" Vetra suggested.

"No, less than a third of the victims have been Outcasts. If I was a betting man, which I am, I'd say Roekaar," Reyes stated.

"Senseless murder…” Jaal grumbled.

"This would be quite a place for them to target, make statements," I agreed.

"I think they came here, looking for recruits, and it got out of hand," Reyes theorized.

"Wait, but the body outside Kralla's song was Angaran," I remembered.

"I did some digging. That wasn't the only Angara victim. All of them were public Milky Way supporters," Reyes answered.

"They kill our own people, and claim to be helping us?!" Jaal exclaimed.

"Blinded by hate," I murmured. "So, all the victims have either been Milky Way or supported us. I don't see any other explanation. It has to be," I agreed.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any proof. Concrete or otherwise. And I understand that the Resistance is still… hesitant to antagonize the Roekaar," Reyes warned.

"So, anywhere I can find proof?" I asked.

"Glad you're eager to help. People are scared, Ryder. This is your opportunity to win a few more friends in Kadara Port," Reyes stated appreciatively.

"So, Detective Pathfinder Scott Ryder, at your service. Maybe I should get one of those English hats I forget the name of and a pipe. SAM could be my Watson," I joked.
"Elementary," Reyes chuckled.

"Uh, what?" Vetra asked, confused.

"Old fictional Human Detective, Sherlock Holmes, had an assistant named Watson, when he asked Holmes why he came to the conclusion he did, Holmes would always respond, 'Elementary, my dear Watson,' I recited in an over dramatic fake English accent. She just shrugged.

"Anyways, there was another crime scene just outside Charybdis point, actually. A homestead, owned by a Krogan," Reyes explained.

"Sounds like a plan. We'll investigate, grab the Transponder, go from there. Maybe get the vault online if you're working a lead," I suggested.

"Vault?" Reyes asked, confused.

"The Remnant structures, ancient alien pillars. Part of a terraforming network that spans the cluster. I'd bet good creds that it'll make the water safe. It's how I got Eos and Voeld livable, even Havarl," I answered.

"Well, that would have been good to know a while ago," Reyes murmured.

"Wouldn't have done you much good. We need SAM to interface with them, get them active," I reassured.

"More's the pity. Ah well, good luck out there," Reyes nodded, and we finished our drinks and left. I plan on stopping at the Warden's office as the others get the Nomad outside before heading out, see if he has any leads on that woman the Outcast requested help with. Though as we passed the Turian stripper, now fully naked and making a show of her assets. I whispered to Vetra.

"Maybe if you take some notes, you won't need that baton anymore," I teased. She punched me in the shoulder, but I swear I heard a slight chuckle.

Chapter End Notes

Scene with the Turian woman in Kralla's Song? Cameo. River. The guy she was paired with in there was another mutual friend of ours, Grave.
The Warden had told us that Remi Tamayo, the exile who payed her protection fees yet was wrongly banished from the port speaking with a man named Johan and his crew, her and a few other fresh banished. The Warden didn't give details about their crew, instead that they were bad news. Very bad, and gave us the coordinates for where they make their home. To the south east. Given that they were bad enough to make the Warden, a Krogan, shudder, we knew we had to go there first. We hadn't even left the port when we saw the first of the Monoliths, pointing east. No possible way to deny it. There's a vault. We hadn't even gone halfway when we began to pass through a small valley. Two buildings on either side and... I was getting a headache.

"Ugh... the hell? Was there something in those drinks? I'm getting a headache," Vetra grumbled. Her too? Jaal and Drack both stated that they were feeling something similar. But SAM confirmed no toxins within my body. Was something inside one of these buildings? I parked the Nomad outside the closest, and led the others inside, weapons drawn, to investigate. It was like a dorm room. Three figures inside. Two standing, one sitting. The one standing closest to the door was an Asari, staring blankly, and reciting the same phrase, speaking like a VI. The other figure standing was a Krogan by the window, saying words and then defining them, like a dictionary. Formally as well. The figure sitting was a Salarian. Panicked.

"What the fuck..." Vetra murmured. I moved towards the Salarian.

"Who put this data pad here? It's not mine! Why do things keep appearing like this?" he exclaimed. "It wasn't here yesterday, or the day before. Things kept changing," he sounded incredibly nervous.

"Hello? What's going on here?" I called out.

"Who are you? Is this your data pad? Are you one of them?" he questioned.

"Easy, whatever's going on, I'm not part of it," I reassured. His eyes narrowed.

"We'll see..." he trailed off. "Everyone's acting crazy. Spouting all that nonsense. I can't remember how it started... I'm not even sure how I got here," he explained, talking as fast as lighting.

"Woah, slow down, what do you mean?" I asked.

"Nobody's in their right mind. And there were these people... others... they showed up and left this data pad," he explained, and then grunted in pain.

"You ok?" I asked, wondering what the hell was going on.

"Terrible migraines. They strike without warning. I think it's them," he theorized, holding his head in a hand. "I heard one of them say: We left the data pad behind." he grunted in pain again. "I'm... I'm fine now. I'm sorry to trouble you. It was nothing," he stated much more calmly. "Goodbye." Like hell do I believe that. I picked up the data pad. It was text.

*The Krogan and Asari show no signs of neural disruption. Their patterns remained entrained. The Salarian shows signs of some resistance with occasional breaks in patter. Will likely need to adjust for Salarian physiology. To be on the safe side, entry code has been rotated to 9XA2.*

I held on to the data pad and rushed the others out the door, looking at the other building across the
small valley.

"I think they're part of some kind of experiment. Unwillingly. We're investigating," I explained and everyone got in the Nomad.

"Pathfinder, while you were speaking with the Salarian, I ran scans of them all. They are experiencing unusual brain wave patterns. Something external is interfering with their minds. It is across the valley," SAM explained. Just as I thought. I saw Jaal and Drack glance at each other through the rearview mirror. The Nomad was parked outside the far building and we entered formation at the door, weapons ready, just to be safe. I opened the door and led us inside. Two humans. A man and woman. Both noticed us, neither raised their hands into the air. They were confident.

"You're not supposed to be in here," the man complained.

"What the fuck are you doing to those people?" I questioned angrily.

"It's an experiment," the man shrugged, as if this was normal, everyday bullcrap.

"Physically, no harm has come to them. They're fine," the woman stated.

"They're fine? Their minds are fucked! And you're doing this on purpose? What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you insane?" I exclaimed.

"Hmph. We've been called worse back home," the man scoffed.

"We used to work for an organization called Cerberus." The woman explained nonchalantly.

"FUCKING TERRORISTS?! I biotically pushed both to the ground, and rolled the man onto his back, keeping him down with my boot on the center of his back as Vetra did the same. We both recognized the name. She told me about them.

"Used?" I growled.

"Agh, yeah, used. Until our boss decided he'd rather spend money on truly crazy ideas like bringing people back from the dead," the man answered with some pain. Like I feel any sympathy though.

"Project Lazarus. Pure voodoo," the woman scoffed.

"Bringing people back from the dead? Anyone in particular?" asked sarcastically. I didn't believe them.

"Commander John Shepard," the man answered. That surprised me. I glanced between Vetra and Drack, we all knew who he was. And we had all heard the rumors of his death. But also, the rumors, just before we left, that he was back. "But that doesn't matter here. In Andromeda, we're our own masters. And what you saw out there, it's the birth of something amazing. A biological network."

"A host of minds, linked together. Connected. We're harnessing the power of consciousness to create a new kind of supercomputer," the woman explained.

"Using unwilling test subjects?" I growled.

"So? If we're all connected, we won't fight each other. End war, violence, a perfectly fair society," the man argued.
"Only without our free will and everything that makes us who we are," Vetra retorted.

"You're just as bad as the Kett..." Jaal growled.

"Enlighten me. Just what was Cerberus all about?" I questioned.

"Purity. We think humanity should chart its own course. Free of alien laws or the morality designed to hold us back," the man answered, still feeling completely justified.

"Our boss was straying from the path. Lost his focus. In Lazarus, and he and that Lawson woman were recruiting all the wrong people. Or considering it. Krogan, a Turian merc, Drell assassin, Salarian, even a fucking suit-rat," the woman growled. Suit-rat. A senseless term to further insult a species that had already lost everything. The Quarians. "Not to mention that he seemed obsessed with tech from old civilizations. Obsessed with some kind of threat coming. Bloody madman." Wait, could she be talking about what the Benefactor believed? Could her old boss and the Benefactor be the same person? Regardless, I doubt she knew more.

"You do realize that my squad here are all non-human, right? You're not exactly making me like you more," I reminded, pressing the barrel of my rifle into the man's skull to make my point.

"You disgust me," Jaal growled.

"You can follow our lead if you want. But we, humanity, should call the shots here," the man argued.

"And what the hell gives us the right? What makes us, a species that had only been part of the galactic community for thirty fucking years the right to control all the others? Why the fuck not a simple, let's work together?" I questioned, annoyed and angry. They gave no answer. "Figures," I muttered. "SAM, how do we shut this shit off?" I asked.

"NO! DON'T! Those people depend on the signal now. Their minds need it to function. Let them be!" the man exclaimed.

"So you've permanently ruined the lives of three people to research ruining the lives of so many more..." I grumbled. SAM led me to the machine, Drack taking my place, keeping the man pinned.

"I can alter the nature of the signal to ease the victim's predicament, and lock the system from further changes. In essence, they can be waned off the signal, slowly restoring their minds to normal," SAM explained. I told the AI to do it.

"You've ruined it!" the woman growled. "Those people are no good to us now!" Alright, I've had e-fucking-nough. I took the butt of my rifle and slammed it into both of their heads, leaving both unconscious. I ordered the others to tie them up, and made a call. Soon, the man I wanted to speak with answered.

"Evfra, any chance you can pick up some prisoners on Kadara and transfer them into Nexus hands?" I requested.

"I can, but I need to know why," he answered.

"I have two humans that used to be a part of a human supremacist group back in the Milky Way. I caught them experimenting on unwilling subjects in what was essentially mind control. They're too dangerous to simply let them go free, and I'm hoping that they can be interrogated, and perhaps even dealt with in a certain, final way, but can't myself as they're unarmed," I explained.
"These people sound like a danger to me. But why not Initiative shuttles?" Evfra questioned.

"You know Sloane hates the Nexus, better chances," I answered.

"Fair enough. Send the coordinates and we'll bring them to Nexus authority," Evfra agreed. I thanked, and sent him the coordinates. As I ordered my squad to leave their unconscious bodies in an obvious location, I pulled all the data from the terminal. Nothing that they hadn't told us, or nothing that was important to their experiment, but there was a letter they saved.

To: Cognitive Applications Group

From: The Illusive Man

Despite a direct order from Miranda Lawson, you continued your research into unauthorized neural research. We already have methods that show great potential for mental control over large groups of people. Your particular avenue of inquiry is unnecessary. Effective immediately, your services will no longer be required and your position within Cerberus is terminated.

So, The Illusive Man? A codename, obviously, but likely the boss. Sounds like a prick. I'm concerned about how they claim to already have methods, that's plural, that, in his words, have great potential for mind control. Alright, who knows if anyone else from Cerberus made their way into the Initiative? I need to make another call. And this one should be a conference.

"SAM, patch me into the whole crew, and get Kandros on the line as well," I ordered. As requested, all my crew were immediately on the line, and I simply requested they wait until Kandros picks up. Which he did shortly.

"Kandros, Crew, I just learned that members of a Human supremacist group made their way into the Initiative. I have two ex-members in custody, that the Resistance will help transfer to Nexus authority. They were attempting to enact a kind of mind control, use it on unwilling test subjects. I want all of you to help me keep an eye out for anything relating to them so that we can ensure we are clean of their filth. The leader of their organization goes by a codename. The Illusive Man. The ex-members kept a letter that also mentions a key lieutenant, Miranda Lawson. If we caught former members practicing mind control, I don't want to know what full members would be practicing," I explained.

"Cerberus? Here? I heard of them during my time in the Hierarchy. The only things we had listed as a larger threat were the Geth and the Krogan," Kandros remarked. "Not even the Batarians ranked higher than those assholes. The reports I've read… and that's just what we KNOW Cerberus did."

"Not sure I want to see those reports…" I murmured. "But, if we're lucky, these two assholes are the only ones with a link."

"Understood. I'll have my men keep their eyes open," Kandros acknowledged, and left the call.

"The reason I keyed the rest of you in on this call is on the off chance that any of you had ever heard of or had someone mention Cerberus to you. We can't have them roaming around," I explained. "You're all dismissed. Curiously, I noticed that Cora had remained connected noticeably longer before signing off. Well, nothing more we can really do here, just head off to help Remi. Still further to the southeast. I left the building, my destination being the Nomad, with the others behind me, but had to resist the urge to kick those terrorist bastards while they're down, or simply kill them both. But… if I kill unarmed prisoners, unarmed anyone, to be honest, how much better am I than the pirates here on Kadara? Sighing, shaking my head, I let those bastards be, tied up like
"It seems the Roekaar's ideals are not exclusive to the Angara," Jaal muttered.

"And unlike the Roekaar, I don't think we'd ever convince Cerberus of otherwise," I grumbled.

"Why is that?" Jaal asked curiously, as I began driving.

"The Roekaar live their reason for distrusting aliens every day. And they have eighty years or history to back it up. Cerberus? Hell, even their name makes them suspicious," I remarked.

"How so?" Jaal questioned.

"Cerberus is a name from old human mythology, the Greeks, to be specific. So, there was Hades, the god of the underworld. Not sure if it's heaven, hell, or a bit of both. But Hades had this three-headed guard dog, named Cerberus," I answered.

"And what's a dog?" Vetra asked.

"Mankind's best friend," I smiled. "Back when humans were still tribal, there were these predators called wolves. Four-legged, fur, good with smelling, effective hunters, not much smaller than a man. Humans domesticated some of them, and they became dogs. Over time, a whole bunch of different breeds. Some bred to be great hunters, some bred to be tiny little things. Others were somewhere in the middle. Humans love having them as companions, they're playful," I explained.

"Ah, like what we have done with Adhi, but more agreeable to living in the home," Jaal nodded.

"Pretty much, yeah. So, anyway, Cerberus. Sure, there was the first contact war with the Turians, but that was a minor conflict that was, relatively quickly, settled once the rest of the council races got involved. And then, a few decades later, the Human Alliance and the Turian Hierarchy are buddies. Sure, the Batarians hate our guts, but they also hate the rest of the council races because they sided with us, politically, at least, in that conflict. Terra Firma, which was a political fringe group that wanted all non-humans to leave humans alone, and I have little doubt has ties to Cerberus, claim that we were oppressed by the council. Problem with that is, we very quickly earned the Council's favor. Within thirty years of joining the galactic community, we had the first Human Spectre. The very same man those scientists mentioned Cerberus was trying to bring back to life. Then, after the Citadel was attacked by the Geth, rogue synthetics developed by the Quarians centuries ago, who unexpectedly became full AI, and turned on the Quarians, Humanity gained a seat on the Council. Thirty years! The Volus were the third species to join the community, and they set up the galactic community, yet they never had a seat," I explained.

"This… council, doesn't seem all that fair…” Jaal murmured. Drack certainly got a kick out of that.

"You're right, it was a political body that liked to consolidate its power, not much different from most political bodies. They didn't like giving up power unless they had to, or were confident that a new entry would only help them. Humanity had a powerful military, and our fleet had just rushed into the Citadel to repel the Geth attack. The Turians, when they joined, had just helped stop the Krogan Rebellions. The Salarians were the second species to reach the Citadel, so of course the Asari formed the council alongside them. But this system was one a lot of people didn't agree with. I fully expect that, whether Tann likes it or not, every species will be an equal member of the new council. Even the Krogan," I answered.

"Why did the Krogan rebel in the first place? I've read references, but only little," Jaal questioned. I glanced back to Drack as he let out a huff of air.
"It was stupid..." he grumbled. "The Salarians found us some time after we engulfed our own planet in nuclear winter. They were desperate, and thought it would be a good idea to uplift us to help them fight off the Rachni. An arachnid race with a kind of Hive mind, they were tearing the Galaxy apart. We drove them to extinction. And idiotically, we weren't keeping our breeding rates in check ourselves. A single Krogan female can produce approximately a thousand eggs in a single clutch. And we had a lot of females making a lot of clutches all the time. Our population kept getting bigger, and we kept needing to expand. Then one of our warlords occupied an Asari world. They refused diplomacy, and the Rebellions began," Drack muttered. "We almost did the same thing the Rachni did, and the Turians came around to help fight us. At the end of it, the Salarians developed the Genophage, and the Turians pulled the trigger. It both lowered our fertility rates, but that wasn't enough. Most of the children who actually get conceived are stillborn. Now our birth rates can't keep up with our death rates."

"Well, you certainly aren't showing yourselves as a perfect society. Why are you telling me these... unsavory stories?" Jaal asked.

"Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it," I shrugged. "And we aren't a perfect society. We trust you Jaal, you deserve the truth. Better than just finding out on your own, hm?"

"True. Though this makes me wonder just how you two, Vetra, Drack, are such good friends," Jaal remarked.

"Vetra's asked me about that before. She's not like most Turians. She knows what it's like to hurt a little..." Drack trailed off. There was a flicker of understandingly Jaal's eyes and I glanced over, noticing that Vetra had, understandably, been remaining quiet for this conversation, keeping her eyes straight ahead on our path. Now her gaze weakened, her eyes lowered. I grasped and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. We continued the drive in silence, arriving at the structure home to the gang of the man named Johan, where Remi should be. It was a single-story building, but built along a ridge line and support beams lifting it high over the small spring it was built next to. Guess they have a way to filter it. I parked us against a ridge line slightly off in the distance, with a perfect view of everything and everyone that wasn't inside the complex. A little Recon never hurt after all.

I set up with my sniper on the ridge, though was unsure if this is where and how we'd begin our attack. Resistance would certainly be higher by the top of the complex. More Pirates were on guard, and bored, up there. Some humans, even an Asari. But we had no way to tell who did and didn't have shields from up here. Those sensors built into the HUD need closer range. At the bottom of the structure was a Turian, his tech armor glowing, which is stupid as that drains power, and a Krogan. Couldn't see his face, but it's obvious given the massive body, the hump on his back, and the massive, helmeted head. We'd need to take him out first. Alright, I don't want to charge that position. We need to even the odds a bit. I told Jaal to set up alongside me.

"I'll take out the Krogan. I need you to work on some of the other Pirates by the top. Preferably the Asari, get those biotics out of play," I ordered. Jaal nodded, and we took aim on our targets. Krogan, let alone their armor, were heavily armored, not to mention their regeneration. But if a Carnifex is advertised as being able to stop a charging Krogan, the Black Widow can send him flying back the other way.

And you can't regenerate an obliterated brain... unless you're some comic book superhero who's completely insane and aware that he's in a comic book. But this is real life. Not a comic book, not a book, not a TV show, not even a video game.

We counted down, and pulled the triggers. The Krogan's head near exploded and he fell dead, and
Jaal muttered a curse.

"Shields," he explained as he took aim once more, but I don't know at what. I was taking down the Turian the same way I did the Krogan. I immediately raised my scope to aim at those Jaal was working on. All were in cover, but that wouldn't stop us. I looked for a shade of blue, and found the Asari's head tentacle things just barely sticking up behind the wall she was hiding behind. Hopefully, her shields hadn't recovered yet. I lowered the crosshairs slightly, predicting where the center of her head would be behind that wall, and pulled the trigger. I saw a shower of purplish blood and bits of flesh pop out, and one of those Pirates stood reflexively out of shock, which Jaal quickly put down. I reloaded. Hopefully, the biotics were now out of play. It's possible one of the other Pirates have them, but we took out the only one guaranteed to have them.

I pulled the same trick on another pirate, but he was beginning to stand, so that rather than the round striking him in the head, it struck him in the center of the chest and knocking him back. Unless they got him to proper medical facilities, he'd be dead. So, scratch up another kill for me. Three more Pirates had begun to stand just like the one I killed, and Jaal was able to put one down, but the rest managed to escape inside the complex. We'd need to have a careful entrance. We got back into the Nomad, and drove up to the structure, and climbed the stairs to its main door.

I have absolutely no doubt there's a firing squad waiting for us. I could just open the door and toss a grenade, but I don't want to hurt any hostages, like Remi.

"Stand at the sides, breaching procedure. I'll flashbang, and then we breach. Non-lethal takedowns, just in case they keep prisoners elsewhere, small place after all," I explained. My team got into position, and I pulled a flashbang grenade from my belt, thumbing the pin to throw it. I gave a countdown, and with my other arm, the door opened. Gunfire greeted the open door, and the flashbang greeted them. Exploding in a blinding white light almost immediately. I heard several of them exclaim in pain as they felt as if their eyes were melting, and we stepped in. I shot my target in the kneecap. This one was without a helmet. Drack simply strode forward and launched his forehead into the one of the three Pirates inside, and Jaal bashed the butt of his rifle into the last. The two helmeted Pirates from outside were either knocked out or dazed enough to be safely secured, while the one missing a left knee was crying out in pain, growling.

"Vetra, find Remi," I ordered as I moved to secure my target.

"Will d- SPIRITS, WHAT THE FUCK!?!" She exclaimed. Confused and surprised, I looked up as the man I shot in the knee began laughing.

"What? Don't approve of our… cuisine?" There was a kitchen, covered in blood of all different kinds of shades. Red, blue, purple, even orange for Krogan. What's more? On one counter, there was the corpse or a Turian women, split vertically straight down the middle. Not cut in half, but the entire abdomen opened and peeled away, revealing what lays inside. On another counter was a Human male, the exact same done to him as the Turian. Both corpses were naked. There were pans with slabs of meat in them. I then noticed both corpses also had several cues and gashes along their bodies. Even fingers removed. I felt nauseous, and then furious. We heard a whimper. Vetra turned to look to the left, the monster on the ground in front of me still rumbling with hideous laughter.

"Remi? Remi Tamayo?" Vetra asked quietly, still fighting off the surprise and disgust herself. She must have nodded as I didn't hear her respond. "We're getting you out of here. You're going back to the Port," she began.

"No, fuck that. We're bringing her back to the Nexus. We're getting her the help she needs and the safety she deserves," I growled. The anger wasn't directed at Vetra, but she knew that. As did the
others. "And it Tann even dares to try and argue…” I heard Drack growl lowly, barely even audible. But it was there. I can tell he agreed.

"Who are you?" A terrified, feline voice asked meekly. I stood, kicking the monster in the ribs, and approached the voice. It was a woman curled up in the corner, barely looking up to see us. She appeared to have been stripped of her clothes. That makes this even worse. That makes this like Sid. My anger grew, but I contained it for her. The moment she was gone however…

"I'm Pathfinder Scott Ryder. This is my team. We were sent to find you, as the Outcasts learned they wrongly exiled you. I say screw that, you're coming home," I reassured. "You'll have all the care you need." She began to weep. I moved away to rummage through containers, hoping to find some clothes. Or at least a large blanket. I found scattered collections of clothes, and picked out a shirt that was too big and what were essentially gym shorts. I opened her cage and gently placed the clothes down beside her. "We'll give you some privacy, get dressed," I requested softly. She looked up and nodded? And I got out of eyesight. It was silent as we waited, and soon, Remi emerged from the cage, hesitantly, and even though she was clothed, covering herself. Eyes darting from side to side.

"Bring her back to the Nomad. I'll be with you shortly," I murmured. My crew of three paused a moment. Drack nodded, understanding, but Vetra and Jaal were concerned. Drack gently grabbed her by the shoulder, causing her to look back at him. Solemnly, he nodded, and she glanced back at me, before following Drack out. Jaal looked back at them, then back at me, sighed, and followed, Remi ahead of them. The monster grinned evilly.

"Want me all to yourself huh? Sorry, but I don't swing that way." I pinned him to the ground and launched punch after punch after punch into his face. Breaking his nose, knocking teeth loose. And still I kept going, my hands and his face only getting bloodier and bloodier. Finally, I stopped, breathing heavily. He let out a pained chuckle.

"Gonna kill me slow? Cut me up? Like I did the others? You just used up a lot of energy, maybe you'll feel a bit... hungry." My fury returned, and I grabbed him by the throat with a single hand, lifting him into the air in front of me, and stormed out the back entrance, with him in my hand, looking over the sulfur lake in front of me. I dangled him over the balcony. He was still chuckling.

"You don't have the-" I threw him forwards. He screamed as he fell to his doom in the acidic lakes of sulfur. I returned to the last of the two cannibals, but didn't know what to do. They were just as guilty as the one I just threw out, but he got me royally pissed and made me do something I normally wouldn't. I stripped them of their weapons and armor, leaving them in nothing but their undergarments. I led them outside, shoved them into the ground, leaving their hands tied together.

"Run," I growled. They did just that and I had to resist the urge to shoot them in the back. They would likely die out here. But not by my hands. The adrenaline began to wear off, and I could smell the stench emanating from the complex. I remembered what I saw in there. I threw off my helmet, collapsed to my knees, and vomited. I did that twice before I was left as a cold sweating, dry heaving mess. Soon I heard footsteps behind me. I didn't even turn to look. They dropped to one knee, and their long arm came around my side, wrapping me in a half hug, her three-fingered hand holding me tight, and her head rested itself, slightly tilted, on the back of my shoulder, and her mandible slightly rubbing against my cheek. I moved an arm to place it atop the one grasping my side for the half hug.

"We'll make this right. We'll make all of this right," she whispered reassuringly. "But we need to take Remi to Lexi." I squeezed her hand and nodded. Just like I'm good with her, like when we learned what Sid was hiding, she's good with me. This only reinforces those feelings I've grown for
her. We returned to the Nomad.

"Vetra, you drive, and go with Jaal. Let Remi have the back for herself. Drack, help me bury the two bodies up there," I ordered. Vetra nodded acknowledgement still concerned, not quite wanting to leave me here, but could take comfort in knowing Drack would remain. Drack nodded as well, and got out of the Nomad, grabbing a shovel from one of the many kits we store in the Nomad's compartments. "Take it easy, get her to Lexi, come back for us," I restated.

"Thank you…" Remi murmured. The Nomad doors closed, and they drove off.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Nomad soon returned to this… disgusting place. We had kept in contact with each other, as a precaution in case less than friendly faces came to investigate. Remi had seemed to be calming down once she reached the Tempest, according to Vetra, but Lexi had sedated her, allowing her to get some much-needed sleep, and Cora kindly donated a spare set of her standard Initiative clothes. Lexi had also confirmed that she had treated the man I had sent here earlier, and even provided some basic medications on top of rations for the family, ensuring more mundane ailments they all were afflicted by would be cured. But we still had a lot to do on Kadara. Somehow, I managed to call and explain the situation to Grayson Wessler without going ballistic at him, and he was relieved to hear of her safety, and fortunately for his sake, extremely guilty to learn of what happened to her. Drack and I both were quiet as we buried the bodies, as we carefully closed the large openings that had been cut into their torsos, even placing organs that had been removed and placed beside them back inside. It didn't feel right giving these two victims of monsters graves only a few feet deep, no real ceremony for them. The most I could do was cut off parts of the building's walls, place them in the ground as makeshift headstones, and etch a simple message.

Here lies two victims of despicable acts by despicable people. May they, and their fellow victims serve as a reminder of the horrors inflicted by a society that embraces Survival of the Fittest. A society that embraces social Darwinism. A society built by Sloane Kelly.

I don't think I'd ever, in good conscious, allow Sloane to retain her power. Not if this is what her society allows to happen. There may be the old saying, Better the devil you know, but if the devil you know is this bad, it might be a good idea to give the one you don't, the one that appears to be helping those abused by the Outcasts, a shot. Almost as if to emphasize that point, I resolved that our next destination would be the drug lab. The Nomad parked beside us, and Vetra let me have the driver's seat. I began making our way towards the Monolith, and thus, the lab. Kadara was not the easiest of places to maneuver around. While if we tried, we could likely find an easier path, to do so would be to admit failure. Translation? I'm a stubborn son of a bitch. It made me slightly grateful that we left the Mako behind on Voeld. Traversing this terrain, while doable, would be at a turtle's pace. We crested one more rocky slope, and there was the lab, a short ways ahead. There were plenty of rocks for us to use as cover in front of the lab, which meant that we shouldn't be at a disadvantage when the firefight begins. Not a huge one, at any rate.

We parked behind one such rock, rounds already pinging off the shield, and exited. Adhi charged towards us, but as they got sights on us by rounding the corners, that only left them vulnerable, and we ended their threat. There were still rounds pinging off the rock, but I was hardly concerned. Interestingly, the lab seemed to be slightly defended. Perhaps so that it wouldn't paint as large a target. I noticed less than a handful of humans guarding, maybe a Turian, but that doesn't make him some higher tier soldier, just another defender. By combining our fire, and a healthy dose of disorientating biotics, let alone a Krogan, we were easily able to put them down, and were approaching the building when a shuttle descended to drop off troops, we ran back to cover,
expecting exiles, especially with the scrapped look of it, we even heard boots hit the ground, but no gunfire. Time to find out what was going on. I holstered my Sweeper and replaced it in my right hand with the Hornet SMG, and my left arm generating a biotic barrier. I stood, weapon raised, and a squad of exiles, in a different color scheme to the exiles, holding weapons up, in formation, but not firing. And wait, some of those aren’t exiles, some of those are Angara. Where the outcast color scheme involves shades of blue, orange, and or red, these were brown and red. Their leader seemed to notice that I wasn’t pulling my trigger yet, so she lowered hers, and gestured for her troops to do the same. The others were growing curious, they stood, weapons still raised themselves. While they weren’t firing, they weren’t ready to drop their weapons just yet.

"Identify yourselves," I ordered. The leader removed her helmet, as I expected, Human. She let out a whistle.

"Well, when the Charlatan sent us to eliminate Sloane's oblivion production, we didn't expect to see the Pathfinder doing our work for us," she remarked casually. The Collective?

"So, the Charlatan doesn't want to simply steal the formula and use it for himself?" I questioned, not exactly believing that to be the case.

"The Collective sees Oblivion as one of Sloane's tools to control the people. While under normal circumstances, we wouldn't be opposed to the sale of otherwise illegal narcotics, the Collective also believes that we stand on a… precipice, if you will," she explained, stepping closer.

"Oh? How so?" I asked, still suspicious.

"We live on a planet where the water is acidic, a Hostile alien species that will likely want to take this planet back sooner or later, and members of an Angaran terrorist group who want us all dead. Not to mention that when it comes to food, we could be better off," she shrugged. "If we want to survive, we need to rectify these problems. While they may not provide an immediate return of profit, it's a kind of long term investment. As for narcotics? Now isn't the time. We can hardly effectively work to solve these issues if a sizeable portion of our population is high off their asses, can we?" Well, she's making sense. I can't claim to like that they'd be selling narcotics like this otherwise, but one step at a time, right?

"So, what comes next?" I asked, lowering my weapon, and the barrier. That gave the signal to my team that they should lower their weapons as well.

"We leave. Your goals align with ours. We'd rather not get in your way. Dr. Ryota had mentioned this target to us some time ago, but it seems that just as we had a proper plan of attack put together, you show up," the woman answered.

"Just how closely do you work with the good doctor?" I questioned. "The doctor often finds… anonymous donations to his clinic. He has no proof who it is, but he has his suspicions…" she remarked. "It allows him to continue to treat the needy in the slums, and occasionally, he finds himself with patients suffering from bullet wounds…"

"And why didn't you just shoot at me?" I asked.

"Simple. The Charlatan knows the cost of picking such an enemy. The Charlatan does not see a threat, in you, Pathfinder. Rather… an opportunity," the woman answered.

"So, when can I expect the meeting?" the woman laughed at my question.

"Quite hasty, aren't you? The Charlatan is careful, cautious. He won't make his move until he's
certain that you'd be a positive business partner." The same shuttles they were dropped in earlier had circled around and returned for pick up, nearly landing onto the ground to take the troops back. "Perhaps we'll meet again, Pathfinder. Perhaps not. They're watching you," she reminded, as she placed her helmet back on her head and entered her shuttle. They sped off.

Color me intrigued.

With weapons raised, we entered the lab. There were plants growing in containers, with machines below waiting to extract the bacteria they produce and refine it into Oblivion. At the far end of the lab, was a petrified Asari holding her hands in the air.

"Don't hurt me," she pleaded. I kept my weapon out, but checked the remainder of the room, and then holstered it. Approaching her. "I'm unarmed," she continued.

"Just give me the formula, and we'll be gone. Who are you?" I questioned.

"Dr. Arenna Farenth," she answered, her eyes darting to the side, then shakily trying to stare into mine. "Ryota sent you? Some sob story about Sloane misusing his medical breakthrough?" her tone suddenly hardened.

"And?" I responded, not seeing her point.

"Oblivion wasn't his breakthrough, it was ours," she answered.

"And how do I know you're telling the truth?" I retorted.

"Because I'm not hiding behind a false sense of morality. We always meant for Oblivion to be a highly addictive drug. That it has medicinal value was a coincidence," she argued. Her eyes began darting back and forth again.

"Pathfinder-" SAM began.

"No need, SAM. I can tell she's lying. A doc running a free clinic, who just wants the outcasts to NOT have this formula? Not the kind of guy to come up with this shit in the first place," I remarked. Arenna's eyes widened.

"T-That clinic's a front! The Charlatan-" she began to argue.

"Give anonymous donations, and he cares for Collective members. You didn't see the Collective drop in, see we were doing their job for them, answer some questions, and leave? Even if he does provide care for some Collective, he still provides care for the people living in the slums because of Sloane's bullshit laws. Not to mention the drug den just below him," I cut her off. "Even if what you're saying is true, we're here to destroy the formula. It doesn't matter," I remarked.

"You do that, and I'm dead! Sloane will make sure of it!" Arenna exclaimed.

"Then we'll tie you up, maybe tape your mouth shut. She'll just pin it on my not killing non-combatants," I shrugged. She began to argue again, but I just clasped my hand around her mouth. "Don't bother. Just stay quiet and make this easier and less annoying," I requested, removing the hand so I could look around. I found some duct tape lying around. Perfect. I taped it across her mouth, ensuring she'd still be able to breath just fine through her nose, and tied her hands together behind her, setting her onto the floor. I accessed the console she was standing beside, and to keep things simple, I ordered SAM to wipe all files. One of those would be the formula. Our job was done. We made a pit stop by the Monolith, wiping up the Remnant guarding it and then activating the Monolith itself. Better to do it now than just pass by and come back later, after all.
If I remembered the roads we saw from the Port's exit, and the map of the region that SAM had marked our objectives on, there should be a westbound road just in front of the port that should get us to Charybdis point. Easier than clambering over mountain after mountain after all. I backtracked to the sulfur lake just outside of the port that had filtration systems linked up, providing water for those inside. Parts of it were on fire.

"I bet I could drink it," Drack remarked. I smirked, not quite sure if he meant that or not, when there was a scrambling noise on our comms, as if someone was trying to contact us but in their rush, were knocking things around.

"DRACK NO!" Lexi exclaimed. We broke out in laughter, and I parked along the lake. I was curious to see just what its contents were, run a scan. With similar curiosity, the others stepped out. I ran a scan while Drack paced along the water's edge.

"Sheesh," I murmured. It was very hot, and acidic. Not something to swim in. I heard a splash. I looked up and Drack was knee deep.

"Shit tickles," he murmured. Vetra, Jaal, and I stared at him as he stood there, unmoving, uncaring. Shrugging. He got out. The paint on his armor was essentially gone where it was underwater, but the armor itself remained intact.

"How..." Jaal stuttered.

"Kid, I've been spit on by a thresher maw. This shit is nothing compared to that," Drack remarked. That old bastard can survive anything, looks like. I don't think I'll take him up on that bet he mentioned.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

On our way to Charybdis point, and the crime scene next door, we had passed a wind farm that was clearly inhabited. However, while the guards appeared to grip their weapons a bit tighter, they did not raise them. Must be a source of power for Kadara point. By now we had arrived in a large 'clearing' in the mountain range where the terrain was... decent. Not large rocky slopes, but still plenty of inclines with patches of flat or relatively flat land. There was a taller structure ahead that was no doubt Charybdis point, a Turian standing on the balcony by the entrance, watching us. I couldn't see a weapon, but that didn't mean he was unarmed. They can't exactly be too careful after all, I suppose. But before going over there to grab the transponder, we stopped at the single-story prefab building that Reyes had told us that a now dead Krogan had been using as his home. With my scanner active, I led the team in behind me, Drack remaining outside as a lookout. There was blood on the floor, both in streaks and bloodied footprints. Angaran footprints. The killers didn't care to cover any tracks or hide evidence here, it seems. There was a broken bottle on the ground beside a wall, and a stain on said wall. Couldn't tell if that happened in response to the intruders, or a regular drunken act. Ugh, the stench. Smells like something di-wait, something did die in here. And they never bothered to remove the body, it seems.

In the next room was the Krogan, the murder victim. Face up, on his back. His eyes were still open, glazed over, insects buzzing around his body, even some crawling over his corpse. His throat was slit, but that alone wouldn't be enough to kill a Krogan. What with their redundant systems and regeneration. The killers may have cut off air supply to his primary lungs, but his secondary? Still would have been in action.

"Well, he put up a fight," Vetra muttered, evaluating the scene herself. She's right, a large cabinet had collapsed, likely from something, or someone, being thrown into it. The counter was dented
and cracked, and there was the blue blood of Angara covering a Krogan blade on the floor. As I got closer, the lethal wound became obvious. While I had already noticed that the Krogan's front plate had been pried off entirely, I had failed to notice the multiple slices and stab wounds there, as the killer's tried and tried to pierce the Krogan's skull, taking out the brain. Most reliable way to take them down, after all. Not to mention the bullet holes pock-marking his body. The door opened again. Drack, sticking his head inside.

"Hey, Scott, Jaal, found something," he called out. Wonder why he called for Jaal as well. Curiously, we let the corpse be to investigate what Drack found. And for the benefit of our nostrils. Outside, Drack had left what he found where it lie. Honestly, it's hard to believe we didn't notice this in our way in. Resting amidst blood stains on a crate just in front of the door, was a knife. Angaran. Jaal stepped close to investigate it, picking it up to look at the markers.

"This Firaan… yes. Ceremonial in purpose, but made to be used in any situation, like my own," Jaal remarked. "And on the blade, there's a phrase carved onto it. It reads, 'A home filled with strangers, becomes a prison.' A common phrase of the Roekaar."

"Then if this doesn't confirm it…" I muttered with a shrug. I called Reyes. He answered a moment later. "Reyes, we've confirmed your theory. We found a Roekaar blade and Angaran footprints at the crime scene. I'd call that proof," I explained.

"Good to hear. Then let's pay our local Roekaar cell a visit," Reyes replied.

"You know where they are?" I questioned. There was no suspicion, merely surprise.

"Ever since I've had this suspicion I've looked into them. I'm watching their hideout from afar right now," he answered.

"Fair enough. We'll be there soon," I acknowledged, and ended the call. "Alright, we'll grab the transponder and head over," I stated for the crew. They followed me to the underside of Charybdis point.

"Hey! What are you doing down there?" the same Turian we saw earlier yelled down from the balcony, getting eyes on us with a pistol raised. I put my hands in the air to calm him. If he shot it would just strike my shields anyway.

"Relax, we've got a lead that something was buried here. And no, you won't want it," I answered.

"But this is my hotel. If it's buried here, I'd say that's mine," he retorted, eyes narrowing.

"It's worth nothing to you. Besides, you probably want it gone from here as soon as possible," I remarked.

"And why's that?" he questioned suspiciously.

"It's a Kett transponder linked directly with a Kett warship," I answered nonchalantly. The Turian's eyes widened and his mandibles flared, before hardening again.

"Dig it out, then. Prove it," he demanded. I shrugged, and went towards the underbelly and scanned for anything buried. I quickly found it, dug up a small mound of dirt, and pulled the transponder out, waving it in front of me to show it to the Turian. He lowered his weapon. "Keep it. But leave. I'm not eager to have strangers down there," he stated. I nodded with a mock salute, and returned to the Nomad with the others, getting a good look at it before we went off towards the Roekaar. The Kett tech's lights were dim, and it was scratched and dented.
"Looks busted," Vetra muttered.

"The transponder's power source is drained. With power, it should work," SAM informed.

"Then we'll drop it off with Gil later, let him do his thing," I shrugged, placing it within the glove box of the Nomad, and drove off. "Huh, you know the area around this lake down here would make a good spot for an outpost," I remarked. We had been driving south, just for a few seconds as we passed this sizeable lake with decent terrain all around.

"No way Sloane will let us build one though. You'd need to convince her," Vetra warned.

"Or perhaps the Collective might be an option," Jaal suggested.

"Right now, I'd be more inclined to go with the Collective as well. The current Kadara is not one I want to support," I agreed.

"Sure, but the question is how. That Collective Captain from earlier told us that the Charlatan was interested in us, but not what we need to do to gain their trust," Vetra argued.

"The tipping point is probably coming rather soon. I have no doubt that one way or another we'll get tied up in it," I shrugged. The others seemed to agree, and remained silent. Given that our route was bringing us past yet another Monolith, we made a pit stop, taking care of that along the way as well. Most of it appeared to be underground, including the control room. Fortunately, we found a cave leading to it. There was gunfire, Remnant and projectile both. As we drew closer, weapons raised, we realized that the Remnant were fighting Angara. Exclusively. No other species were a part of the squad. We rushed in to aid them as an Observer burned a hole through the chest of one unfortunate Angara, but with the element of surprise, and plenty of tech attacks, we turned this battle around, and scrapped the remaining Remnant. One of them, likely a leader, removed his helmet and approached.

"Greetings. While we appreciate your assistance, you need to leave," he warned. I raised a brow curiously.

"If you mean pressing the wrong button and summoning a lot more Remnant, don't worry. I know how to work these Monoliths. There won't be any Remnant response, I promise," I tried to reassure.

"You can trust him. I've personally watched him activate several Monoliths and the Vaults they were connected to. I've watched this on both Havarl, and Voeld," Jaal defended. This seemed to catch their attention, and the Angara glanced amongst themselves.

"Who are you?" the leader asked, focusing the question to Jaal.

"My name is Jaal Ama Darav. I'm with the Resistance. This is Scott Ryder, the Pathfinder for their Initiative. They're not like the exiles," he explained.

"And how can you possibly know how to interact with the Remnant?" he questioned me.

"Why don't I show you? I'll explain the process as I do so," I offered. He nodded, and I scanned for the wires. "Connected to this console via wires under the ground are a set of glyphs. Over time, you could scan and decrypt them yourselves, but I have an AI that does so far faster than any of us ever could," I began explaining. I moved to find one of the glyphs and the leader followed. "Once I have them all," I scanned the last one. "I return to the console, and let my AI decrypt and interact with the structure. The last thing I need to do, is a small, relatively easy puzzle to finalize it," I explained, as I interfaced and the puzzle appeared. I explained its rules, and solved the puzzle, the Monolith humming to life.
"Stars, I think I believe you," the Angara chuckled. We gave farewells and parted ways. Soon we arrived at the coordinates. A small structure built into the mountainside. No sign of Reyes.

"Weapons up, stay frosty," I ordered. Cautiously, we exited, weapons out and ready, looking everywhere for hostiles as we approached the building. "Reyes, come in, where are you?" I questioned over comms. Our helmets were on, which meant we wouldn't need to be concerned with being overheard. I got no response. We entered the structure, still no sign of anything or anyone. "They may have found him. Prepare for hostage-rescue," I warned. I heard steps behind us and I turned on a dime to face whoever it was. A lone Angara, and the door I had just turned away from opened. Shit.

"Don't move," one of the Roekaar growled.

"Shit," Drack murmured. This is too close quarters for my liking. We could probably fight off those with their weapons pointed at us now, but the odds of someone getting wounded were higher than I'd like. Even if they do disarm us, we won't be defenseless. You can't disarm biotics. Not to mention Brute Krogan Strength.

"Lower your weapons," I ordered. I could hear Drack growling, but he complied. I doubted it was anger at me. More Roekaar entered to remove our weapons, patting us down. I kept a close eye on the one who took my weapons, and passed the order for the others to do the same. But then our helmets were removed as well, and at gunpoint, they led us along inside. "Vetra, you wouldn't by any chance have that baton, would you?" I joked. She did a half snort half groan.

"Explain!" the Roekaar growled, stopping us.

"Nothing just..." I snickered. Oh, this joke is horrible. "It's just an," I snickered again. "Inside joke," I almost burst into laughter and Vetra just groaned. The Roekaar glanced amongst each other.

"Keep an eye on them," he ordered. Ok, internal question time. Why the hell weren't we cuffed? Sure, we had guns behind us and people ordering us to keep them raised, and on top of that we still had our shields. If they aren't careful on keeping those guns within the range of our shields, this will go very badly soon for them. But I'll let them try and figure that out on their own. We were led inside the compound, Roekaar stopping their training to glare at us. A woman, her forehead green and the rest of her skin blue, strode forward with an escort. Fury in her eyes.

"I don't need to tell you what happens next," she stated.

"Oh, the old spiel about how you're going to kill me and my friends and blah blah blah. Willing to grant a last wish? I have some questions," I remarked casually.


"No," she replied coldly. "You'll bleed. Just like the others," she twirled a knife in her hand.

"So, you did murder innocent people," I accused. This angered her.

"Invaders and sympathizers are not innocent. I will protect my home," she growled.

"You should really ask what the Resistance thinks of us. Not the Outcasts, they're assholes. But the Moshae, a lot of dead Kett, Havarl, Voeld," I trailed off, holding out my hand and both casually and dramatically counting with my fingers.

"You are all the same," she muttered. So that's how it is. Alright. Barely, I gave an ever so slight
nod of the head. I'd pop a barrier around us, and that would let Drack disarm and neutralize one and start making pics as we recovered. In 3… 2… The knife was shot out of her hand. The sound was from a Kett rifle, Zalkin. The second and third bursts hit the rock behind her. The Roekaar rushed to formation and my team sprung into action. My barrier went up and Drack headbutt the Roekaar who took his weapons, using the Roekaar's rifle to shoot the one with Vetra's gear as he grabbed his own. The newcomer shot another, the one who took Jaal's gear and rolled beside me, safely inside the barrier.

"Not so fast," he grinned at the Angaran woman.

"You're late, Reyes," I remarked.

"I've got a good reason. You'll see right about…" he trailed off.

"Don't just stand there!" the woman exclaimed. The Roekaar were shocked into action. And then explosions rocked the cavern.

"Now," Reyes finished. Debris came crashing down onto some of the Roekaar, crushing them and I retrieved my own weapons and helmet from the now dead Angara. As the explosions went off, and my barrier went down, the rest of my team and Reyes opened fire, slaughtering the Roekaar. By the time all my stuff was gathered, I only had time to fire off one burst into a Roekaar before the area was cleared.

"Still mad?" Reyes asked, sounding genuinely regretful that he didn't inform us of the plan.

"Not as much as I would have been had we needed to fight our way out of here alone," I answered.

"Sorry about that. When I was getting the explosives placed I couldn't risk communication, else they'd know," Reyes clarified. "But the streets of Kadara are safer, thanks to you. Don't worry, I'll be sure to let all the important people know who to thank," he smiled.

"Alright, I'll admit I found this a bit thrilling. Good working with you, Reyes," I returned the grin.

"Next time, let's skip the murder and go straight to the bar," he suggested.

"Name the time and place, but try not to leave me with the bill," I chuckled.

"Hmph, call it a personality test," Reyes grinned. "You passed it, by the way."

"Good to hear, professor," I joked.

"Don't be a stranger, now. I'll let you know if there's any more opportunities that show up," he waved as he left. There was scrambling on the comms as we began to head towards the Nomad.

"SCOTT! It's Cora! We have them! We have Leusinia!"
"SAM, patch me into the crew," I ordered as I brought the others back into the Nomad, making a beeline straight for the port. The AI obliged. "Tempest, prepare for liftoff. The moment we and the Nomad are back I want us at those coordinates yesterday," I ordered. "Do we have anything to support Leusinia having stayed in that location?"

"We do. Among the coordinates were standing orders from Leusinia. They managed to throw the Kett of their trail and would be staying put," Gil answered.

"Good. Then hopefully they'll still be there. We don't know the condition of the Ark and the people on board, but sounds like it could still run if they need to. And they're probably jumpy. Sorry, but Drack, Jaal, you'll be staying on the ship for this. Don't want to risk freaking any of them out with a new alien race or a Krogan," I explained. Jaal nodded and Drack shrugged, likely no stranger to that kind of image. "Any questions?" No one responded. "Good, you're dismissed. SAM, get me Kandros." A few moments later, the familiar Turian picked up.

"Sitrep?" He asked.

"We have the last known location of Leusinia as well as standing orders detailing that they'd remain where they were. While we don't have a guarantee they're still there, the odds are good. I want evac ships and teams, search and rescue teams, everything you can spare in case the Ark won't be able to leave with us," I explained.

"Send me coordinates and I'll have all that I can spare waiting nearby," Kandros responded.

"Sent. If we're lucky, all those ships will need to do is provide escort," I remarked.

"Hopefully. Bring them home, Scott. Kandros out," the call ended, and we continued speeding along towards the port. We parked the Nomad in the garage, and spoke to the man running it, explaining we needed it back on our ship immediately. Grudgingly, yet less so with encouragement from Drack, he got to work.

The Tempest lifted off and sped out of atmosphere, entering FTL for a straight course to Leusinia's location, not far from Voeld. Unsurprising, given the Periphona was on Voeld. ETA was about six hours, and that approximation is considering how we'll likely need to maneuver through some Scourge. I had handed the Kett transponder off to Gil, then got a call. Reyes.

"Leaving so soon, Pathfinder?" He asked, confused as to our motivation for a hasty departure.

"We'll be back. But we have the location for Ark Leusinia. It's not something that can wait," I explained. His eyes widened and he nodded in understanding.

"Found them, eh? Could be quite nice to have another Pathfinder around. Not to mention the supplies on board," he remarked.

"Even though those supplies are going to the Nexus?" I asked, brow raised.
"Of course. Better that someone who's not Kett has those supplies rather than them being lost. Besides, though with things here the way they are now it'll never happen, who's to say trade won't be possible later?" Reyes suggested.

"True enough. Who would you support?" I questioned.

"Honestly? I'm happier remaining neutral. The most I've ever been affected personally by Sloane is that, on occasion, I need to give up a cut of my profits when she managed to catch wind of them. But I certainly notice that not everyone is so lucky. As for the Collective," Reyes trailed off. "I can't say. Not for certain. I like what they've been doing in the Slums, but no one on Kadara does anything for free. There must be something they want, some ulterior motive. But maybe that's just cynicism."

"I've thought the same. Brings the old saying to mind. Better the Devil you know than the one you don't. But honestly? I feel motivated to give them a shot," I remarked.

"Can't say I blame you," Reyes muttered.

"It's the strangest thing. I was going after Sloane's formula for Oblivion, went to their lab, wiped out the guards outside, and then shuttles came in and dropped off troops. Collective troops. They didn't shoot, instead their leader spoke with us, then left. Turned out we were doing their job for them. She told us that the Charlatan was interested in us. Watching us. Where Sloane saw a grudge, the Charlatan sees opportunity," I explained.

"Interesting indeed… Well, I won't keep you. Good luck with Leusinia," Reyes ended. I returned the farewell and the call ended. With that done, I paid the med-bay a visit. I wanted to see how Remi was doing.

She was still asleep on the bed, an IV tube attached to her arm and a heartbeat monitor active. A slow beat as she was asleep.

"How's she holding up Lexi?" I asked. She turned and stood from her chair and desk to stand over her body with me.

"Physically, she's fine. Malnourished, dehydrated, but those are minor concerns easily fixed. Psychologically… she was a mess when we got her here," Lexi stated professionally, yet compassionately.

"Did they…" I trailed off quietly.

"I found traces…" Lexi murmured, nodding her head. Fucking monsters.

"We put those monsters down better than they deserved," I growled. Lexi glanced at me a moment longer.

"I've decided to keep her under until we reach the Nexus. That way she'll be right in the care of professionals," Lexi explained.

"Found one for Sid that works with Vetra?" I asked.

"I have, but, and Sid has seen her, but, believe it or not, Jaal may have found his calling for when this is all over," she remarked.

"Good to hear. Speaking of Jaal…" I trailed off.
"Peebee?"

"Peebee." I smirked.

"Jaal clearly appears confused. I think a part of him is torn, seeing similarities between Asari and Kett reproduction. But I haven't spoken with him and I can't be certain. As for Peebee, you know she doesn't like to be around me. But while she seems to be just fine, I suspect she's torn as well. Her pet doesn't help," Lexi revealed.

"How so?" I asked, brow raised.

"She wants to commit. She may not know she does, but I think she yearns for familiarity, something that will always be there. Something she can depend on. The Observer would have made an excellent stepping stone, keeping the pace, but add on the little event with Jaal and it's a lot," she shrugged.

"Think she's gonna leave?" I asked.

"Frankly, I'd be surprised if she did. Not only does being here allow her to investigate the Remnant, but, subconsciously at the least, this place, the team, is growing on her. Feeling like a home, I suspect," Lexi theorized. "Having… Poc? I think its name is? And Jaal here, while it will make her uncomfortable for a small while, might be the biggest reason she stays."

"Well, if nothing else it'll be interesting to see how all that plays out," I remarked.

"True. And I'll be ready to help either side with any potential fallout," Lexi nodded.

"All we can really ask of you. Speaking of fallout, Cora. This mission," I suggested.

"She has so much faith in us," Lexi chuckled. "In Asari. She thinks that with all the years we live, we must be perfect. All that means is that we have that much more time to make mistakes. If Sarissa is dead, it will break her heart, yet she'll martyr her. It'll strengthen her false beliefs of my species. If she lives, I can't say. Desperation can lead to risky calls that normally wouldn't be made. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't. If she's made a mistake, or a choice that Cora vehemently disagrees with… I'm not sure how she'll react," Lexi explained.

"I'll keep an eye on her, thanks Lexi." She nodded and returned to her work. I returned to my cabin for a nap. I may need the energy.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I had awoken relatively shortly before we would be exiting FTL. It was not a pleasant nap. The shit I saw with those damn cannibals... and then the comparisons I could make with what happened to Sid? I might have rested, but not well. After waking up, I had gotten myself a small meal for the meantime and then suited up in my Pathfinder armor. Afterwards, I remained on the bridge, waiting to exit FTL and be as up to date as I could for both scans to locate Leusinia, and maneuvering around the Scourge itself. When we did finally drop out, there was a large cloud of the crap ahead of us. But there must be a large entrance into said cloud that Leusinia used. We began our search going 'up.' from our perspective, hoping to circle the cloud that way, which appeared to be smaller than circling it another way. It would be useless trying to scan for such an opening, as the Scourge seems built to screw over your sensors. By some stroke of luck, as we 'climbed upwards,' so to speak, we found both a large opening, large enough to probably fit the entire Nexus, and the front of the Ark facing us. The opening was both in front of the ark, and to its
side. More than one exit for them, just in case the Kett find them. A grin spread on my face and I breathed a sigh of relief. We found them.

"Ground team, report to the airlock in the bridge. We found them. We'll attach to an exterior airlock and disembark, find survivors, bring them home," I called out over the intercom. "SAM, send a message to Kandros. Tell him we found Leusinia, and are investigating now. Keep him up to date on the situation, and ensure he has those shuttles waiting for an all clear."

"Acknowledged," was the AI's only reply. I lingered on the bridge as Kallo piloted the Tempest towards an airlock, inspecting the damage, assessing it with the limited knowledge of starships and just what Scourge damage looks like. The Ark appeared largely intact. Some structural damage here and there, a hull breach, but a smart Captain can negate or minimize losses from small breaches. So long as my team remained prepared for EVA, we'd be fine. As for other damage, I could see scorch marks, my best measurement of Scourge damage, but none seemed to be too drastic.

"Suvi, scans telling you anything?" I asked.

"The engines appear undamaged, I'm not getting any readings from their drive core. It might be that they turned it off to avoid detection, or it was damaged. I'm also getting life signs. Aside from a few breaches here and there, the hull is intact. So long as the core itself is intact, I do believe she's space worthy, and FTL capable," Suvi explained.

"Then let's hope our luck holds. Kallo, I want the ship holding position, hidden, nearby. Just in case we need to get the hell out, or just need some Krogan backup. If our luck does hold, we'll jump to where those Nexus shuttles are waiting, get back on board, and accompany them home," I explained.

"Aye, aye," Kallo responded, slowing the ship down as we approached the airlock. The rest of the team, by now, had already passed through and were waiting, and I joined them. We heard the airlock gently lock in place, and heard the hiss as it was pressurized. We entered, and as the safeties demanded, it checked the pressure of the Leusinia before granting passage. There was no hiss, and the door opened. They still had atmosphere.

"Hard to believe that Leusinia could survive all of this," Cora murmured.

"Well, it's here, that's the important part," Vetra responded. The lights were dim, but not off. It was a hallway we entered.

"True enough. Shoot Kett and help Asari. Very cathartic. Sarissa will have a plan for those Decimation hunters, I'm sure. Wrote the manual on crisis situations," Cora stated confidently. I couldn't hold in the sigh.

"If she had a plan, she'd have done it by now. The Asari need our help, Cora," I argued. Cora didn't respond. "SAM, run checks on all Initiative channels. Send out a message on the secure ones as well. Maybe we'll get something," I ordered.

"Scott, I've already been checking. Nothing. Maybe their sensors are busted?" Suvi informed and suggested.

"It's possible, but keep looking," I stated, opening the door to the next room. This looked nearly identical to the room just outside the med-bay on the Hyperion. The staircase up, power systems flanking the stairs, a door to our left, the right atop the stairs, and ahead. Crates were scattered, but the placement suggested on purpose, as if they were cover. On top of that, debris scattered as well.
And bullet holes, energy burns.

"Looks like borders, keep an eye out for Kett, survivors will certainly be jumpy," I warned. We approached the door at the far end when emergency lights lit up alongside, and there was a voice over the intercom.

"Beginning decompression! Die you monsters!" an Asari growled. Fortunately, our helmets would protect us. Still, better to calm them down.

"Stop the decompression! We're a Pathfinder team! We're Initiative!" I shouted into open comms. An extremely glitchy vidscreen lit up, but still there was the decompression. It was a suspicious Asari.

"Lieutenant Harper and… SAM, just send her our ident codes!" Cora exclaimed. A moment later, the lights stopped and the room began to recompress.

"Codes confirmed. Sorry, I'm Captain Atandra, of what's left of the Leusinia," she introduced. "Come up to the bridge. Maybe you can help fix this mess." The door opened, and we were led into the atrium, just like the one on Hyperion. Though instead of plants from Earth, there were plants from Thessia. Most however, were dead or dying. Sparks flew from damaged electrical panels, and lights flickered. And more barricades set in place. Entering the bridge, there were a pair of Asari arguing. One I recognized as Captain Atandra, from the glitchy vidscreen. The other was unfamiliar. But Cora almost staggered back, and began the motions to remove her helmet.

"But you'd vent a Pathfinder team into space?" the unfamiliar Asari accused, stepping closer to the Captain, who had her arms crossed in front of her chest.

"Respectfully, yes. We can't take any more chances," the Captain argued. Cora's eyes had a slight gleam to them as she studied the other Asari. That's Sarissa, isn't it? I removed my own helmet for this greeting, and I could hear the other's helmets coming off as well, though likely less for greetings and more just temporary comfort. I took a few steps closer, and cleared my throat, gaining the attention of the two Asari. The one I suspected to be Sarissa turned to face us. She had triangular black lines along her forehead and pointing down towards the bridge of her nose. She was wearing armor, and stood a bit straighter.

"Sarissa Theris. Pathfinder. Don't mind the Captain. Scolding me eases her blood pressure," she remarked. Yep, I was right. The gaze of the Captain hardened slightly at Sarissa.

"I've heard quite a lot about you from Cora, here. She thought the famous Sarissa would have everything in hand," I stated casually. Cora sputtered, she stuttered.

"P-Pardon me, ma'am, but I thought Matriarch Ishara was Pathfinder. And you were her bodyguard. Her tiamna?" she asked awkwardly. Cora, it's not a stretch of logic. Shit has happened on Leusinia, and now someone who wasn't originally designated Pathfinder is the Pathfinder. A bodyguard can't protect their charge from everything. Sarissa raised her brow, confused. Or surprised. "I served with Asari commandos, ma'am. Memorized all your battle manuals," she admitted shyly. The Captain glanced at Sarissa.

"Matriarch Ishara is dead. Sarissa was next in line. And her manuals haven't kept those aliens off my ark," she grumbled.

"We'll kick their ass off of your ship, don't worry," I reassured. "We'll see you and your ark safely back to the Nexus. Quick sit-rep from me, and then the situation here on the Ark. Those aliens are called Kett. We've had plenty of encounters of them ourselves, and they're extremely hostile. We're
sorry to say that we found you by tracing the records of the Periphona's black box. The Kett got
them, but they managed to offload groups of refugees. They arrived safely at one of our outposts," I
explained. "Additionally, we've been working alongside a native species to Heleus against the Kett,
who've been invading from outside the cluster for eighty-odd years." Sarissa nodded thoughtfully,
scratching her chin.

"Well, at least it's not all bad out there," Atandra murmured.

"Matriarch Ishara died trying to negotiate with those bastards. They took something precious from
us, I took something precious from them," she revealed. I cocked my head to the side curiously. "A
module containing tactical data. I believe it may be secret routes through this phenomenon," she
explained, pointing to the Scourge outside.

"We call it the Scourge. The Angara have plenty of routes themselves, but any routes the Kett
know could be quite a boon," I nodded. "How long have you had this data?"

Only for a few jumps. And even then, we've been keeping it random. We can't hide among their
own routes after all. And the Kett sent boarding parties before we last entered FTL. Still have
some stragglers somewhere on board," Atandra explained.

"Send the routes to me, I'll have my SAM analyze it," I requested. Sarissa pressed a few keys on
her Omni-tool and SAM received the map, and began decrypting and cross-referencing.

"We've only been able to intercept bits of data, but it appears that a Kett leader doesn't want us to
have this knowledge. It's when he sent his elite, I believe the Valiant, and his Decimation hunters," Atandra continued.

"We've gone over Angaran reports of them. Their elite hunter/killer troops hand-picked by their
leader, the Archon, personally, and answer only to him," I confirmed. "Though to be honest, I
wouldn't be surprised if he sent them purely out of principal. Not standing for enemies stealing
from them," I shrugged.

"Hmph, with our luck, I'd believe it. We take more damage each time we escape those fuckers.
Sarissa's theft has made things… problematic," Atandra huffed.

"Well, with limited intel, it would make sense to steal valuable data that could help, but still… this
data was of their own routes through the Scourge. It's completely useless to you while you're being
hunted. And it seems that it only pissed the Kett off. But… I don't know what you did and didn't
know when you took the data," I remarked, giving points to both sides. "I have learned personally
that Pathfinders have to take risks." I wasn't sure, but I could swear I heard Atandra mutter that
Sarissa knew more about the data then I'd think. "What will it take to get the Ark out before the
Valiant finds us again?" I asked.

"An FTL jump long enough to lose him. But since the evacuation, we've been stuck at minimal
power. The drive core's dead," Atandra answered, shaking her head.

"We have Nexus Militia waiting to provide either search and rescue or escort. A relatively small
jump should be all we need," I informed.

"My people are investigating the core, but those systems are below decks. Where we managed to
lock down the boarders," Sarissa stated.

"My team and I can back them up. And my SAM should help with repairs," I suggested.

"Then let my SAM and I work on deciphering the Kett data. Hopefully, when we're out, we can use
it against them," Sarissa offered.

"Consider it done, ma'am," Cora saluted.

"Wow, answering for your commanding officer hm? Shaaaame," I teased. "We can get it done, Sarissa," I confirmed with a smirk

"Our last Commando report came in from Hangar Patrol. I'll give you access. Please, be careful," Atandra requested, as she sent the proper codes to us. We placed our helmets back on our heads and ventured to the tram, in the same room where we Atandra first learned of our presence, and I keyed for it to bring us near Hangar Control, the tram speeding along, and both Peebee and Liam sitting down casually on one of the seats, Vetra leaning against the side. Cora seemed… distressed.

"You doing ok?" I asked gently.


"Scott," Peebee continued the train of thought. I smirked, and I could hear a slight chuckle from Vetra.

"We roll the dice, and…" Cora shook her head.

"Sometimes we win," I shrugged. "And if we didn't roll the dice at all, we wouldn't get anywhere but closer to death. Come on, the sooner we find those Commandos, the better," I reassured, patting her on the shoulder. She let out a breath and stood straight. The tram slowed and came to a stop. Travelling through the halls void of life, instead with scattered crates and papers. It was eerie as hell.

"Is this what it was like while the Arks were traveling through dark space?" Liam whispered.

"It's giving me chills. These halls were designed to be bustling," Vetra murmured.

"The Leusinia will be back to normal when we get her back to the Nexus," Cora stated, more so appearing to be reassuring herself. We arrived in Hangar control, crates and barricades a plenty. We formed a defensive formation, at least one person having eyes on each of our flanks as we proceeded.

"Scott, by the wall, on the terminal. Must be one of Sarissa's," Cora pointed out. Just as she said, there was an Asari working away at a console. We loosened our formation and approached. I was about to call out to her when she turned, a Crusader shotgun in hand.

"Stop! In the name of the Goddess, I'll," she began rather nervously, and then lowered her weapon. She sounded young. Which, doesn't say much as her age is likely still triple digits.

"Shoot your rescuers?" Cora responded casually.

"Rescuers? Turian? Humans? Your arks made it?" she questioned, full of hope.

"Vetra here is from the Nexus. We're still looking for Natanus, but yes, Hyperion arrived safely," I answered. "I'm Scott Ryder. Human Pathfinder. This is my team."

"I'm Vederia Damali, Sarissa's new second-in-command. Sorry about the mix-up. I hope I can help?" she introduced. She sounds, and speaks, like a rookie. Which isn't a bad thing. Everyone was a rookie once, after all. But if I'm right, it's surprising what they've needed to do.
"How long have you been second-in-command?" I asked.

"About… a week. It feels like less," she answered meekly.

"Sarissa wouldn't choose you if you weren't up to this. Can you help us get main power back for FTL?" Cora reassured. Vederia stood a bit straighter, presented with something she knew.

"Yes. I've tracked the power drain. Shutting the hangar bay doors should fix it," she answered.

"Why would that drain power?" Liam questioned.

"The aliens forced those doors open. The safeties are draining power trying to shut them," she explained.

"My SAM will find an override, let's get him in the system," I suggested, moving to the console and establishing a connection for the AI.

"Sure. These aliens seem able to survive vacuum for a little while. If we shut the doors, the boarders lose their last escape route," Vederia pointed out. "I pray the power will be enough for FTL. I just…" her gaze lowered.

"Vederia, I served as a Huntress," Cora began. Ugh, this is going to feel like a big ol' circle jerk of huntresses by the end of this, isn't it? Drinking game idea: Take a shot whenever Cora mentioned either the manuals or Huntresses on this mission. I hope I don't get alcohol poisoning. "Remember Sarissa's manuals." Already another shot. "Breathe, purpose, action, breathe-" she reminded. At least it seems to be working. Vederia let out a deep breath.

"Okay, finish the connection. I'll keep watch," she offered.

"Way ahead of you," Vetra called out. Her, Peebee, and Liam had already found defensive positions, their backs to the console and looking out for any visitors. Vederia paused, and found her own spot. I finished connecting SAM to the Hangar controls and took cover behind some low crates myself, staying close enough to keep SAM connected. If this was the Kett escape route, we can expect company. I was right. A squad rushed in from the catwalks above. Mostly Chosen, and some Wraiths. Cora worked more on guiding Vederia, helping her, while the rest of us kept the Kett at bay. It was starting to show itself that these were indeed elite units. While they were more prepared for afraid, small squads, maybe not that experienced in combat, they were adapting to the opposite of that relatively quickly. Concentrating fire, never being the only one out shooting, and yet it wasn't enough to deal with another well-trained squad. Let alone biotics. More Kett came to join, but they were essentially trickling in, either one by one or in a pair. And that's ignoring the Wraiths, that Cora and Vederia were focusing on. It only got slightly sketchy when an Anointed revealed himself and his revved-up weapon, pinning us only for a moment, before Vederia lobbed a grenade at him, and it detonated just behind him. While we were pinned, the other Kett had begun pushing. Now, they were in the open without covering fire. We slaughtered the remainder.

"Hangar bay doors are closed. Kett access is cut off," SAM informed.

"But… where's the power?" Vederia questioned, nervous again. The ship rocked, and we almost fell to our feet.

"I estimate that several of the Ark's electrical junctions just overloaded," SAM explained.

"Then we need to redirect the power," I nodded. Vederia waved for us to follow, leading us to the other side of the room and down to another console, along a pair of doors.
"Damn, the overload started a fire! That shouldn't have happened!" she exclaimed.

"What made them overload?" I questioned. She wracked her brains for a response.

"Maybe something else draining power on the lower decks? Something big?" she theorized using the Ark's readings.

"Then we put out those fires and find it," I stated.

"We'll need to hurry. Those aliens, Kett, Cora told me, they've been watching us. They delay us long enough, and the Valiant catches up," she warned.

"We need a distraction. Flash some lights? Make some noise?" Maybe fake a power draw?" I suggested.

"Well, splitting up would give them two targets, right?" Vederia shrugged. "I could go check on the last stasis pods. There's plenty of small routes that should get less Kett," Vederia informed.

"Only if you're sure…" I trailed off.

"I am," she nodded. "You could go below, find whatever's draining the power. Maybe help with the fire?" Vederia suggested.

"Sounds like a plan. Just point the way, and stay safe," I requested.

"Er, through the living quarters. Here, opening maintenance access. You can cut through," she explained, and a door opened. "Good luck. May the Kett wither in the void before you," she parted, exiting through another door. We did the same with the path she set up for us, and we followed it down towards the lower decks.

"Ryder, it's Sarissa. We got some power, then a damage report? What happened?" she questioned.

"Some electrical junctions overloaded. Power is being drained by something on the lower decks. We're investigating," I answered.

"Understood, I'll keep prepping the drive core," she responded.

"We won't let you down ma'am," Cora reassured.

"Of course not, Lieutenant. Sarissa out." Within my helmet, I raised a brow, an eye glancing to the side to look at Cora. She's really trying to impress her. I suppressed a chuckle as I thought of the perfect term for Cora. Weeablu. We continued down our path, down a flight of stairs, and amongst some debris, I found a data pad.

"It's an evacuation order. Don't wait for family. Shit..." I murmured.

"Spirits, that's rough," Vetra muttered.

"Can't imagine needing to do that," Liam barely whispered. Continuing along the path, a broken door forced us to take a detour. There was a door on our right side coming up.

"Pathfinder's Quarters?" Cora red. "Scott..." Cora began to ask. I nodded. She entered, the TV was on, but full static. Papers were scattered on the floor. On the bed were a collection of candles and small emergency lights, surrounding a helmet, nameplate, and several letters.

"Did you know her?" I asked gently.
"Only by reputation. She was a diplomat. Very wise and respected. And the Kett took her away," Cora sighed, lightly rubbing her hand against the nameplate. "It must be eating Sarissa up." I heard Cora whisper a few words, but not their contents, as she lowered her head. Once she finished, we continued. On.

"Vederia here, almost at the stasis pods. Damn, no power for the elevators!"

"If the ark is anything like ours, cut the mag locks. You can climb down the shaft," Cora suggested.

"Good idea! Thanks ma'am," Vederia responded. We investigated another side room. Bunks and sleeping bags all side by side, allowing as many people as possible to sleep.

"They really packed people in here," I murmured.

"Most Asari are just fine living close. Not me," Peebee shuddered.

"Really? You seem just fine living close with a certain Angara," Vetra retorted.

"I suppose I can make do with one person being close. If I know that person well. If I like them. And maybe if they're willing to have some… fun, here and there," Peebee trailed off jokingly.

"Besides, I'm willing to make a few sacrifices, he was quite the… gentleman, after all…"

"Wonder what he thought of that particular Milky Way cuisine," I joked. Cora stopped and held her helmeted head in her hands, and the others, Vetra, Peebee, and Liam, all in all, burst out in laughter. Still amidst laughter, Peebee struggled to respond.

"He-He really likes Peanut Butter, I can tell you that much," she continued laughing. That just led to even more laughter. Fortunately, we calmed ourselves down, and relented, knowing we had to continue the mission. Much to Cora's relief. We were about to turn the corner when I heard something. I raised a hand to signal them to pause. I think it was a snarl. In one hand, I held the Hornet SMG, and in the other, my biotics were flaring as the dark energy was prepared to launch a shockwave. I spun around the corner, and heard another snarl. The soundwave was launched, and two Wraiths were flung back, their cloak vanishing, revealing them to the world. With a pair of bursts, both were slain.

"They said that boarders arrived before their last jump, right? Hope that means all the children got off before they showed up," Cora murmured. Great, because that's what I need to be thinking about. I guess that, if nothing else, it's a positive that we haven't seen blood or bodies yet. We continued following our route through other rooms. Vederia had informed us that she had eliminated two Kett messing with the stasis pods. We passed through several more maintenance areas. There were fires. The hope was that fire control would be along our route, and if the problem is that, we can put out the flames. Vederia called again, being trapped in an air vent, and Kett knowing where she was. Cora offered tactical advice, using her biotics to pick them off as they pass, and then reassuring her when Vederia was afraid of them hearing her. Fortunately, it seems Fire control was along our route. Directly, and very close. We entered and there were Kett screwing around. A Destined fiddling with the controls, and I also heard several Wraiths cloak themselves. I ordered Cora to watch for them and allow us to focus on the Destined and the Annointed by his side, and any Chosen that may also be in the room. Liam charged and launched an Overload at the Annointed, and it arced between him and the Destined, frying both their shields, but the Anointed just revved up and fired, and a Chosen was now providing support. Vetra strengthened her tech armor, and pre-fired her Cyclone, having it shooting at a higher rate, but keeping her protected as she peeked out and fired a burst into the Anointed, center mass, killing him, and swept her Cyclone in the direction of the Chosen. A few of those rounds struck him, and I
think I saw one hit the throat. This left the Destined as Cora put down a Wraith that got close. I charged him biotically, knocking him to the ground, pinned him, and sent my Omni-blade into his throat. A squad of two Chosen and a Destined jumped down from above to reinforce, but they were too late, and left themselves fully in the open for us to neutralize quickly.

I tried to activate fire suppression, but the console just let out a large burst of electricity. It was fried. I'd bet my hair was now standing on end in my helmet.

"So, the fire suppression system is fried," Liam remarked.

"Ironic," Cora responded. Well, maybe we can re-route the power. I scanned for the wires, and it led me to a panel on the other side of the room. Crossing a few wires as SAM pointed them out, I took power from… whatever it was powering, to fire control. Just hope that I didn't divert power from, say, the drive core. I tried the console again, my crew noticeably taking a few extra steps back, and the system activated. Sprinklers sent out water, and other devices spewed out a kind of foam designed to fight fires. Vederia called again as well. She fought off the Kett, though had suffered a minor wound. And she also managed to directly track the power drain, and sent us a nav-point for rendezvous. Well, isn't that lucky? The very door we'd use to reach the nav-point was blocked by fire just a moment ago.

"Ryder, Captain Atandra. We're starting to warm up the drive core, but we need more juice. ETA on diverting that power drain?" she questioned.

"Soon, we have a specific location and our heading there immediately," I answered.

"Good. The Valiant's ship is still out there somewhere. Let's hope we can beat it. We've already lost so many, including Ishara. It can't be for nothing," she reinforced.

"Aye Aye, ma'am," Cora responded. We continued along and investigated another side door. The room was partially lit, and laden with various tech parts and scrap.

"Looks like an engineer was going at it. Left a lot of stuff behind though," Vetra mused.

"Look, some of these come from power systems. Were they trying to sabotage?" Cora theorized. I looked around more, and found a data pad.

"I don't think so. This data pad implies that a big bit of hull was sheared off, blocking a lot of civvies from escape pods. Looks like she had a eureka," I explained.

"I'd bet that's what's draining the power," Liam remarked. Taking another moment to look around, I found something that caught my eye.

"A sword? The hell is a sword doing here?" I questioned.

"Let me see," Cora requested moving over. "Scott, that's a Commando blade. Quite the find," Cora revealed.

"But… a sword? Today? Can it even cut through armor?" I chuckled, heavy skepticism.

"You'd be surprised. I've seen it cut through Colossus armor. The Krogan variant," she answered.


"They're built so that you can channel your biotics through them. You know how to use them?" Cora asked.
"What's so hard about swish swish stab? It's a sword, not a fighter," I chuckled. Cora lowered her head slightly.

"It's a bit more complicated than that. If you want, I can show you," she suggested. Well, this could be a fair way for some bonding. Reconciliation.

"Alright, sure. In the meantime, though, swish swish stab," I joked, and placed it on my belt. "Anyone have a sheath for this? No? Alright then." I chuckled to myself at a new thought. "Now I shall re-take the Holy Land from the Saracens. Deus Vult, infidels!" I joked. Not one most of my crew will understand, but it at least gives me a laugh.

"Deus what now? I swear I've heard Sid say the same thing," Vetra questioned. I burst out in laughter.

"Sid knows those old memes too? Fucking hell that's amazing. I need to sit down with her and just talk about stupid old memes." The others glanced amongst each other, and just shrugged. Guess Liam wasn't familiar with it either. We followed our route onto an observation deck. And-

"Aaaaaaagh, son of a bitch, motherfucker what is that," I groaned. I got a massive, ear splitting headache.

"I feel it too, fuck," Cora exclaimed.

"Here too, what the fuck is that?" Peebee cried out.

"Uh, I don't feel anything," Vetra shrugged.

"Me neither, Liam remarked.

"Must affect biotics," I groaned, "let's shut this shit off." There was a large wire plugged into the wall and outside I could see the hull breach that the engineer mentioned. It was currently sealed, must be biotic field holding it together. We followed the wire to the center of the room, we biotics doing our best to ignore the headache, and SAM distributing painkillers in our suits to try and help. We found a machine, quickly scraped together to be nothing more than practical, not a shred of metal or tech wasted, with Vederia inspecting it, holding her head in one hand, fighting off the pain. She managed to pick her head up and see us.

"Thank the goddess you're alright. This is what's draining the power," she explained, gesturing to the machine.

"Have a way to shut the damn thing off? It doesn't really matter anymore if that bit of hull stays intact," I asked. "Don't get me wrong, the creator was a genius and hero, but now it's a massive pain in the ass," I groaned.

"I pray she got out safe. As for turning it off… I tried pulling the plugs, but they wouldn't budge. Can your SAM help?" Vederia requested. I nodded and ran a scan.

"There are safety locks holding the plugs in place. It requires two people for shutdown, working in unison. One at the plugs, one at the device," SAM explained.

"Good. Cora, cover Vederia. The rest of us will get the plugs," I ordered. Cora nodded and we followed the wire back to the first plug.

"Caution, once the process begins, it must be completed, else the device will fuse," SAM warned.
"Shit, must have been bad for that much disparate safeties," Vetra muttered. Together, Peebee, Liam, and I gripped the plug, while Vetra stood guard. I gave a countdown for Vederia, and we pulled as she disengaged the safeties, and the plug was pulled clean out. Doors opened and I heard a Kett war cry. They were coming in from the opposite side of the room. I ordered Peebee, Vetra, and Liam to support Cora and Vederia in the middle while I kept on for the plugs. Didn't want them to fuse after all. As I went to the plug at the upper level of the observation deck, I got a look at just what our new company consisted of. Mostly Chosen, but also both a Destined and Annointed. I tossed a grenade over for good measure, and placed myself on the plug. Another countdown, and with biotics, another pull, one more to go. That grenade seemed to work wonders, because as I looked down so I could safely reach the third plug, only a few Chosen were still alive, and they had their backs turned to where I needed to go. I jumped down, shot all the Kett in their backs, and with another countdown, pulled the plug. Another squad of Kett arrived, but now all our focus was on them, and we eliminated them without much hassle. With all that said and done, we deactivated the machine.

"Ugggh, finally, my headaches gone," I groaned in relief. The other biotics confirmed they felt the same, and that bit of hull being held on by the machine began floating away into space, nothing holding it on to the rest of the hull.

"If anyone asks, it was like that when we got here," Peebee joked. A voice appeared in our comms.

"Ryder, this is Atandra. Drive core is coming online. A few more minutes and we're home free. Good work," the Captain confirmed.

"And what if, hypothetically, there's a large hull breach down here?" I questioned. The Captain groaned before continuing.

"The maneuver I have planned should hold. If not, we'll cope," she answered.

"Superb work, all of you, we're going home," Sarissa complemented over comms. I couldn't see Cora, but I'd bet she was beaming.

"It's finally over," Vederia smiled. "I'll go help, there must be something I can do."

"Hey, Vederia, you helped save this entire ark. Damn good for your first big mission," I complemented, patting her on the shoulder.

"Sarissa should be proud, Vederia. You'll make a fine commando," Cora reinforced.

"You'd know, Lieutenant," Vederia returned the compliment. "Thank you, for everything. Goddess guide you." She ran off towards either the bridge or drive core. She's a good kid.

"Pardon, Pathfinder, the restoration of power has freed up the ark's data cache. This includes the secession log from Matriarch Ishara and Sarissa Theris," SAM informed. "I believe you'll want to know the contents." I raised a brow and glanced at Cora, who shrugged.

"Play it SAM," I ordered. He did so.

"Forget the data! I need you! The barrier's collapsing!" An old Asari voice pleaded over the sound of gunfire.

"Ishara, they'll tear the Ark apart! I… that data might be the only thing that buys us time!" Sarissa argued.

"Alien reinforcements approaching, Pathfinder Ishara," the Asari SAM informed.
"Sarissa, my SAM can't... Tiamna, please!" Ishara pleaded.

"I have to save them! Even if I can't save-" Sarissa paused. Cora lowered her head and slowly took steps away, walking towards the glass panes. "Forgive me," the log ended.

"Tiamna used to mean guardian of temples. A champion who stayed faithful. Even when all was lost... Sarissa left her to die..." Cora murmured.

"Cora, if you had to choose between me and an entire ark, you better choose the goddamn ark. All wasn't lost. I can respect that she tried to save her people, but what I can't respect is that the data would only ever help them if they got away from the Kett entirely and back to us. With that they'd be better off having their Pathfinder. In desperation she thought that data would save them, but, it wouldn't. Any bit of logical thought would clear that up. What angers me is that she tried to cover it up," I explained.

"Look around! Does this look like the right call?" Cora argued.

"Their Pathfinder wouldn't be able to stop all this hull damage Cora! She's just one damn woman! The Asari aren't perfect! Cora, look at me," I ordered. "Right now, no hesitation, life or death situation. Me, or twenty thousand men, women, and children." She hesitated. "Cora." I urged.

"The- the ark... I'd save the ark..." Cora murmured.

"Good. If you're going to hate Sarissa for this, hate her for the right reasons. Respect that if nothing else, she thought she was helping her people," I argued. Cora lowered her head again and sighed. The alarms went off. I looked out the observation deck, opposite direction of the hull, to the side of the ark, blocking off that specific escape route, a Kett warship. Shit.

"Atandra here! The Kett hunters found us! They gave a dropship headed to the hull breach on deck twelve!" She called out over comms.

"How long till FTL?" I questioned.

"Too long. Sarissa's coming to help but you need to get there now!" Atandra answered.

"Will do. Let's move team! Double time," I ordered, running alongside them to the door that would lead us to the deck. SAM gave us an interesting tip as well. The mass device could still be remotely activated momentarily. We could use it to create a makeshift Singularity right at the entrance. Wouldn't be the same as a true one, but those caught in it would still be crushed by the gravity. We entered deck twelve, and everything went silent in the vacuum. I led the team to set up at the second and third level. Liam and Peebee on the third level, Vetra, Cora, and I on the second. I took cover on the console that would remotely trigger the device, and could see both the warship, and the shuttle approaching. It began to offload its squad of Chosen and Anointed, but I wouldn't let them set up shop so easily. As it approached, I had been charging up a shockwave. As the troops began to descend, I threw it out, launching them back and put away from the ark and into the void of space. Another shuttle arrived, and began to offload even more troops. Chosen, Anointed, Destined, even wraiths.

"Everyone hold on!" I called out, and activated the device. A biotic field formed just above the breach, sending every loose object in the room, including the Kett slamming right into the center. I could even feel it trying to drag us along, but our cover was holding us back. The Kett shuttle managed to fly away, it's thrusters stronger than the gravity, but every Kett in the room had been turned to paste. SAM confirmed that I wouldn't be able to do that again. Now a pair of shuttles were incoming, and Sarissa was still on her way.
"Enough! The Decimation will not be denied! I will have my prey!" Seems the Valiant was broadcasting on open channels. He wanted to intimidate us. He was the only Ascendant on the field, and had been dropped off on the upper level. Shit, don't want Peebee and Liam dealing with him all on their own. The other shuttle had begun dropping off a sizeable squad of Chosen, Annointed, and Destined yet again. I wasn't sure a single shockwave would knock them all away. So instead, Cora and I combined our biotics into a single large wave. Any Kett who weren't sent out into the void of space, found themselves splattered along the shattered hull. Now, only the Valiant was left. Following me, the others and I ran up to join Peebee and Liam against the Valiant. His orb was sparking, and he was clearly snarling, though we could not hear him. The barricade that Liam and Peebee were hiding behind was already scorched from rounds he had shot off, which meant that for a time that fight was a stalemate. He didn't like his odds against all of us, however, and began charging the large yet slow moving shot that would kill anyone caught in its way. But with his orb already sparking, he didn't even build up half the required charge before it and his shields collapsed. His mouth opened wide in fury, his eyes flaming, but again, we were in a vacuum. In space, no one can hear you scream. He teleported out of the line of fire, but not before one bullet struck him in the arm.

Grinning to myself, I grabbed the hilt of my new sword and charged at him biotically. It staggered him back and against a wall, nearly falling over. Diagonally upwards and to the left, I swiped the sword across his abdomen.

"Swish," I began, my comms on. I followed up with another slice, diagonally downwards to the left, making an X in the Valiant's abdomen. "Swish," I continued. I plunged the sword deep within the middle of the X, and I think the sword even poked out his back. "Stab," I finished. I removed the sword with a grunt, and the Valiant slumped against the wall. I turned back to face Cora. "Knew it couldn't be that hard," I joked. I think Cora actually smiled at that one.

"F-Forget capture! Launch everything! Kill the ark! Kill-" The Valiant strained to give the order to his ship, still speaking over open comm channels. I turned on a dime and sent the sword straight into his forehead. Deus vult, infidel. Sarissa stormed through the lower doors.

"Ryder? Where are you?" she called out, clearly concerned, looking around the room.

"Up here," I answered, running down to meet her, and hopefully whatever plan she had.

"Shit, missiles!" Cora exclaimed, we could see them approaching, the fire propelling them forward and towards us like a beacon. And there were a lot of them.

"Like the battle of Kerkis… there's still a chance," Sarissa murmured. She stormed forward to the edge of the hull breach, and reached out, forming a disk in front of her with her biotics. But it would never protect the ark. Even with her putting everything in it, it won't cover everything, and it would collapse. And she was clearly already feeling the strain. "Lieutenant, please," Sarissa strained her request. I see quite the parallel here. Sounds just like when she abandoned Ishara. Cora was hesitating, but this wasn't about trusting or saving Sarissa. This was about the Ark and everyone on board. I moved beside Sarissa and lent the strength of my own biotics to that barrier, as did Peebee. That shocked Cora into action, and all four of us put every bit of energy we had into forming a massive barrier protecting the ark from those missiles. We were barely holding it together, such was the size and strength, but we were doing it. I could see some missiles detonating against the barrier. "Push! Launch them back at the bastards!" Sarissa ordered. I could obviously see the logic, and didn't hesitate. All four of us, no longer on the defensive, pushed out with our biotics, and turned a lot of those missiles around, launching them straight towards the Kett warship. Explosions and detonations appeared across its hull, no doubt creating sizeable breaches and venting plenty of Kett into space. But the explosions weren't stopping, and the ship's lights
were dimming. If we just hit the ship's drive core, we don't want to be this close when it goes off.

"Atandra, get us the hell out of here!" I called out into comms, as we all entered the door Sarissa came from, providing us cover from FTL travel, and potentially the detonation.

"Jump initialized! Hold on!" she responded. And as the door closed behind us, we launched away.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We had soon ended our FTL jump, as we only needed to avoid the detonation, and the Tempest had followed. Currently, it was docked in a hangar bay, and most of the crew had returned on board. I had transmitted our new coordinates to Kandros, and the Militia ships were on route, due to arrive within an hour. Cora and I had both remained, currently on the bridge, watching the Asari crew make preparations and checking their systems.

"It's a skeleton crew, but it's enough. Kandros will see them home safe," Cora sighed, relieved. "Whatever it costs," she murmured.

"You need to talk to Sarissa about that message," I suggested. Cora had been glaring at her the entire time we've been here after all. She had clearly noticed. And she chose this time to approach us.

"I wanted to thank you both. That was exemplary work. I'm proud to-" she began.

"Ma'am," Cora strained to begin. "Sarissa, we know about Ishara." Sarissa's eyes widened, and she looked down.

"The log survived. Then her final moments won't be lost," she stated, straining to keep her voice matter-of-fact.

"Her final-" Cora began, simply exasperated. "You deserted your Pathfinder! You should be better than-" Sarissa set a stony gaze upon Cora.

"I chose protecting all these people over a single life. The choice they train us to make, Lieutenant!" she defended.

"Which is what I told her. Problem is, Sarissa. Is that one, you chose data that was completely useless to your people until after they reconnected with the Nexus, over the life of someone who could have helped you escape the Kett, or fight them off if nothing else. Second, you didn't tell anyone. That's a big no-no from me," I retorted, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Because then you wouldn't be their shining hero," Cora hissed accusingly. "And maybe that's how it should be." She's really taking that personally. Sarissa paused, and then looked to me.

"Being Pathfinder means giving them hope. Ryder, you know this. Don't you?"

"Sure, I'm all for giving people hope, but it crosses a line when you start covering up that you're not perfect. When we're back, watch some news reports from Keri T'Vessa. I'm completely honest, unlike leadership, about the situation in those interviews. And yet I still seem to be giving people hope. The Asari deserve the truth.," I answered. Sarissa glared at me with her hands on her hips.

"Ryder-Cora. Don't do this," she pleaded silently. Oooh, who's that approaching from behind Sarissa? Oh, that's Captain Atandra.
"Sorry, but we need to prep for the Militia arrival, then Nexus approach. We've got a helluva story for them," she remarked. I was about to open my mouth to speak, but to my pleasant surprise, someone else did.


"You… One of your harebrained ideas got Ishara killed?!" Atandra shouted.

"The Kett killed her," Sarissa argued. "I had to be sure the ark could escape them."

"Data on Kett routes through the Scourge is completely fucking useless, when we're trying to escape FUCKING KETT! You know that! And if you don't, if you didn't, then you are not fit to be a goddess damned Pathfinder!" Atandra exclaimed. "We escaped them again and again, without being able to use that fucking data, and it only pissed them off more, hunting us down with even more ferocity! It's only dumb fucking luck that Ryder found us, and that's the only damn reason we're still standing here!" Atandra shot her head towards the rest of her crew, all of who were watching and listening to this… conversation. "Who's next in line?" the Captain questioned. Seconds passed, and then, to my surprise, Vederia, meekly raised her hand into the air. Well, she's a good kid. I may not have started out as fresh as her, but on the other hand I don't really know just what kind of training she's received. But I think she'd make a good Pathfinder.

"Vederia? Maybe a Pathfinder with some humility can do better. You can look to Ryder's example," Atandra remarked.

"You know, if Sarissa hadn't tried to keep it quiet, I might have been willing to give her a second chance. But now? Nah. I worked out alright. You'll figure it out Vederia, you'll do great," I encouraged with a grin.

"I defended you against the Kett! Vederia can't face them, she's not-" Sarissa argued.

"Pfft, today, Vederia helped us fight off Kett twice, fought off Kett all on her own. All you did today was run in after we killed everything and the four of us made a barrier together," I scoffed. Sarissa began to argue again.

"A huntress without the trust of her team stands alone: she is a tree in the desert, bearing only defiance," Cora recited. Sarissa closed her eyes and let out a sigh, as if she recognized those words. Wait, Cora, did you just make someone eat their own words?

"My own words, Lieutenant?" Sarissa questioned. Holy shit she did. Alright, credit where it's due, that was good, Cora.

"They're true. Ma'am," Cora murmured. Sarissa stormed off.
"You ok?" I asked gently. Cora had not been taking the events of the Asari ark well. We were still docked on the ark and it was in transit to the Nexus. Cora hadn't left her quarters since the two of us returned to the Tempest.

"Do you know if by any chance life has a do-over button? Even if it's just single use? I'd like that a lot right now," she murmured. "Without a Pathfinder stripped of everything she loves?" I was about to respond, to tell her that she made a choice, and had to face the consequences, but she continued. "I put so much faith in Sarissa. In the Asari. But you were right. They were just as lost, if not even more so, than we are." Internally, I smiled. It finally hit home. While of course, I wouldn't complain if it happened in a gentler way, it happened.

"We know our mission. I think we're finding our way pretty well," I reassured. She chuckled, looking up at me.

"Should have known better than to say that to a Pathfinder. Thank you for being there, on Leusinia. Can I tell you something?" she requested. I nodded my go ahead. She looked at me in the eyes. "The old man was right to choose you as Pathfinder instead." I grinned in response. I would have been happy with an admittance that I was a good choice, or just as good as Cora, given that on our first day on the ship, she thought making me Pathfinder was a terrible choice. I was about to give her my thanks, when she explained. "I don't blaze a trail, like you do. I always look for the mentor, their plan," she trailed off, and sighed. "As a Pathfinder? My mistakes would be worse than Sarissa's." Everything about this conversation is quite surprising to me. I remember how she never noticed before, while she was still bitter about not being Pathfinder, how she was fully waiting to get the plan and strategy she was sure Sarissa would have. I think she's finally learned the lessons I had tried to tell her. I can be happy with that. Time to just be friendly. I think we can do that now.

"Sarissa? She lied to stay a hero. You fight, save lives, and don't even need applause for doing it," I reassured.

"That isn't-" Cora began to argue.

"It is true. Deal with it," I smiled. With a half grin, she sighed.

"Neither of us chose this, but maybe we both ended up where we need to be. Even if we lost Alec… But it's happened. If you can't outrun it, got to use it," she remarked.

"That sounds like one of Dad's quotes," I mentioned thoughtfully.

"I paraphrased. Still true," Cora answered. "I'll need some time to think, but I'll be ok. And on deck whenever you need me," she stated confidently. "In fact, there's something you need to know. Your father knew, I trusted him with this, now I'm trusting you," Cora murmured. I raised a brow. "You know the story about my youth, how my parents ran a freighter ship, and then vanished one day?"

"Yes, what about it?" I asked.

"That's not entirely true. My father, Jack Harper, was on Shanxi, a few years before I was born. He
fought alongside your father there. But… something happened to him. He never went into detail. Something about an old artifact, that it changed people, that it changed him. That something was coming. I remember once, when I asked how he knew something is coming, what they were. All he told me, was that he knew, because he heard their whispers. After Shanxi, he formed an Alliance black ops division. Had me shortly after. As part of that black ops division at the time, he and my mother had me, on a cargo ship. Disguised as merchants. I had finally managed to go into studies in my earlier teens, and that got me off the cargo ship. I had kept in contact with them, but a year later, they vanished. A few years after that, when I joined the Alliance, I got a message from him. He explained everything about the Black ops from before, he wouldn't trust that information to a child after all. But he told me of a new identity he had. That his black ops division had broken off from the Alliance. He invited me to join them. Jack Harper, invited me to join Cerberus. As the daughter of the Illusive man," Cora explained meekly. Ashamed. My eyes widened at this revelation. And of course, the connection with something coming. I trusted Cora, now, but still, that's quite the pill.

"And…?" I asked, struggling to reclaim my voice.

"I declined. Ever since they disappeared, Alec had been keeping an eye on me. I asked him about the organization, and what he told me… wasn't pretty. He said I needed to cease all contact with him. I did, but I always felt as if I was being… watched. I couldn't shake the feeling that getting sent off to Thessia as a Commando was arranged by him, that even by not joining that I was doing what he wanted. He was controlling as a father growing up. It just… made sense. Alec thought something was off too, but… never got to confirm," she answered. I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding in.

"...Alright. I believe you," I nodded. "I appreciate you telling me, Cora. You know I don't exactly have a high opinion of those bastards, but you trusted me to not flip my shit upon learning your dad made the fuckers," I responded.

"I'll admit, I'm surprised it went this well," Cora remarked shyly.

"Well, you aren't your father. Just like I'm not mine. Granted, I respect and like my father more than you yours, but still," I forced a chuckle.

"True, enough… Thanks, Scott," Cora murmured one more time, and I let her be. Swallowing that bit of news, I returned to my quarters, surprised to find Drack waiting for me on my couch.

"Good, you're here, we need to talk," Drack stated.

"Something wrong?" I asked, a part of me not wanting to know right now.

"Yeah. I got a message from New Tuchanka, on Elaaden. They're saying Morda, overlord of New Tuchanka, is up to something. It's bad," Drack revealed. I don't think I've ever seen him nervous before.

"Does it sound like Morda?"

"Yes, and no, all at once. I know she hates the Nexus, but I also know she's not stupid. What this message claims, is something stupid," he explained. "We need to go and confirm." I let out another breath, thinking this through.

"Do you think this can wait until after Kadara? I just don't want to leave Kadara unfinished and then get wrapped up in another planet," I explained. "Besides, SAM thinks he found where Spender made that deal on Kadara. We take care of that bastard, and that would only help with Morda," I
theorized. Drack took a moment to think it over himself, then nodded.

"Yeah, it can wait. We need to go there before the Archon, but… it can wait," he answered.

"Alright. We'll get it done. Thanks, Drack," I stated, and he moved to leave. Things are just piling up, huh? We soon got the alert that we had exited FTL, and that the Ark was beginning Nexus approach. I ordered Kallo to take us out of Leusinia, and for us to dock at our regular landing pad. Remi Tamayo still needs help, and shouldn't need to wait much longer to get it. Not with everything she's been through. Without any hassle for either ourselves or the Ark, we departed quickly, and Lexi had been slowly lowering the dose of the chems that were keeping Remi under. Now she was without them, and just waiting for her to wake up, and both medical professionals and therapists were on standby to assist. There would be some brief time between when the Ark completes docking and actually offloading those on board, but that wouldn't be enough time for me to go out and do any of the things I was hoping to do while we were stopping by. After all, I wanted to be there when they began offloading, and I'd want to spend some time with Vederia, help her get an idea of what to expect and what she can do, how she can do it. Help her find her feet, so to speak.

We were just beginning to land, when Lexi informed me that Remi was waking up. Guess she's had enough rest. I figured it would be good of me to pay her a visit. I arrived at the Med-bay to see Lexi standing outside the door, waiting.

"I allowed her some privacy to change into those clothes Cora gave her," Lexi explained. "And SAM is watching in case she tries anything drastic, but I already removed any immediate threats.

"I-I'm changed, Doctor," Remi meekly, barely above a whisper, called through the door. Lexi gestured for me to stand to the side, and she poked her head through the door.

"Scott, the Pathfinder, is here to check in on you. Is that alright?" Lexi asked gently. She must have nodded, not voicing her reply, as I heard nothing. Lexi waved me over, and I stood at the door. She was still clearly uneasy, frightened, even, but she wasn't the mess she was when we found her.

"We're just landing on the Nexus now. Would have gotten you sooner, but we had to make a pit stop and save Ark Leusinia," I smiled warmly, just trying to reassure her.

"You found another ark?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, they should begin docking any minute now," I answered. Remi nodded, maybe trying to smile, but couldn't. She looked down.

"Am I even going to be allowed to stay?" Carefully, slowly, I strode forward, and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. Her initial reaction was to jerk away, but she relaxed, and allowed the hand to remain.

"Remi, I promise you, if anyone, even Tann, tries to kick you off, not only are they going to have to go through me, but my entire team. You're safe. I promise," I reassured.

"Thank you…" Remi began to cry. I gently rubbed her shoulder as the tears came, and she leaned on me. I just let her let it all out. When she stopped, Lexi slowly joined us.

"We've landed. The doctors are waiting for us. And I'm sure leadership will want you to be there to welcome Leusinia, Scott," she suggested. Remi slowly looked up and nodded, so I stood and helped lead her out to where the doctors were waiting at the landing pad. They gave her a quick scan, and then gently, reassuringly, drew her away.
"Take good care of her," I requested.

"She'll receive the best care we can give her, don't worry," the lead doctor, an Asari, comforted. And off they went. I found my way to the tram, and it sent me off towards the docking bay that Leusinia's passengers would be exiting their Ark into. The same docking bay that when Vederia gets her own ship, will house her personal landing pad. It was nearly identical to our own docking bay, but without the science lab, cultural center, or a bar. Guess I really lucked out then huh?

A crowd was gathered, kept back in an orderly fashion, ensuring there would be room for the Ark's crew to come and go. A raised platform had been moved into the area, either a temporary construction or just wheeled in or something, but leadership were waiting on the other side. I worked to keep my gaze from hardening when I saw Tann. If he does know something about this Benefactor, I don't want him thinking I'm onto him. Not yet. I knew I'd need to go over there, but I made a beeline for Kandros, thanking him for his help, having those ships on standby. He waved it off, thanking me instead for saving the Ark. He was hoping to get a few Commandos, maybe even a Justicar or two to help bolster APEX. But he also remarked that he'd just be happy getting more troops, let alone biotics. His Omni-tool beeped with a message, and he quickly read it, then stood to quiet the crowd. Guess they were coming on board.

With the crowd now silent, the doors opened. At the head of the group was Captain Atandra, with Vederia on her flank. She was trying her best to appear stoic and confident, but there was still an air of nerves. Completely understandable.

Then Sarissa barged through and stormed off, shoving her way through the ground. That's just petty. Atandra rolled her eyes with such intensity that it was impossible to miss, and having the focus shifted off Vederia seemed to help her relax.

"So, who was that?" Kesh, who was on my other side asked. Tann began to stand to deliver his speech, but I don't care much what he has to say.

"That, my friends," I began, both slightly leaning in to better hear me. "Was the illustrious Sarissa Theris. The second of the deceased Matriarch Ishara, and Ex-Pathfinder," I whispered.

"Ex?" Kandros questioned.

"She made a very poor decision, involving leaving Ishara to die. What's more, she covered up the part where she left her. I didn't like that, and neither did the Captain. Now the Pathfinder is Vederia Damali. A bit of a rooky Commando. I plan on helping her get started," I explained.

"Pathfinder Ryder, would you like to say a few words?" Tann asked from where he was standing. Snapping my focus back, I stood and approached the crowd. Didn't have a speech ready, but I knew I could come up with something.

"I'm just glad that my team and I found Ark Leusinia and brought you home safely. We're one step closer to having all the arks, we're one step closer to making Heleus a home. And it's also my pleasure to personally welcome our newest Pathfinder. Vederia Damali. It'll be a pleasure working with you," I stated loudly and clearly, so the crowd would hear. I also gestured for Vederia to join him up there, which she did, though she certainly hesitated at first. I urged her on with a smile as the crowd applauded my few words. "On Leusinia, Vederia here, a rooky Commando, helped my team and I fight off waves of Kett, fix the ark's power systems, and then had the courage to covertly scout the ship, eliminating more Kett and finding the source of a large power drain. Without her help, we would never have been able to restore the Ark's drive core, and being her home," I continued. I noticed Vederia almost open her mouth to argue, but stopped herself, knowing this wasn't the time. And I tried to hide a smirk as she simply didn't know what to make of the
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

After the small welcoming ceremony, I took some time to talk with Vederia, give her a few pointers. Her SAM was integrating nicely, and my own had transferred over files of his understanding with the Remnant. There wasn't really much I could teach her combat wise, but I was able to help her understand the Heleus situation, what she can expect out there, and ways to deal with them. Additionally, advice for working with the team she'll eventually have. Listening to them, being open with them, spending time with them. In that time, I had received a message from Kandros. Nothing important, just informing me that Sarissa had requested a small ship, and had gone out into Heleus. When asked of her intent, her answer was short and simple. Fight Kett. Honestly, if the truth, that's both stupid and arrogant. She'll be killed or captured for sure without a team. Well, won't be any skin off my back. I left Vederia with a grin, wishing her luck. I'd take this chance to go see Sara. Well, I was about to do that straight away, but a familiar face stopped me. Keri.

"Scott! Wait, please!" she called out as she tried to catch up. The sight left me chuckling. That woman likes her stories.


"Thanks. Before I begin, thanks for saving the Ark. I had friends on board, and have been worried sick about them. Now, I would ask about the Ark, but I know Davis Qar is going to have that story," Keri explained.

"No need to thank me. So, what are you going to ask?" I responded. Keri turned on her recording equipment, running the small test.

"What I want to know, is the Exiles. Quite a controversial topic for leadership. You've met the 'treacherous mutineers,,' she began, using her fingers for air quotes, as those were clearly Tann's words. "Over at Kadara Port. Some think the exiles are a menace meant to be eradicated. What does your experience there tell you?" she questioned.

"A good question. So, before I begin, here are some facts. There are two factions on Kadara. The Outcasts, led by Sloane Kelly, and the Collective, led by the Charlatan. A mysterious figure with an unknown identity. Or Identities. There are plenty of people there who belong to neither group. And there are those who live in the badlands. It's also worth noting that previously, Kadara was an Angaran port, taken over by Kett. Sloane fought off the Kett, and assumed power. As for what's actually going on there? Kadara port itself is a ceasefire zone. There's not supposed to be any fighting there. At least not lethal fighting. There are 'protection fees,' to live in the port, and if you can't pay, you get kicked out to the badlands. The water is poison, and in the badlands, the cease fire doesn't apply. Raiders, pirates, gangs. But, fortunately, there are some settlements trying to keep going that are safe havens. The society Sloane Kelly built is one of Social Darwinism. It's also a perfect example of everything wrong with Social Darwinism. But, only Sloane and her Outcasts like it that way. When I was there, I saw the slums. The last bastion of safety and the badlands. People were starving, whoring, diseased, all manner of unpleasant things. But then, in the slums, there was a kitchen set up. Completely free, handing out meals. And a free clinic. There's good people on Kadara. If you don't believe that, well, let me tell you that guilty by association is bullshit. The Collective is supplying those free kitchens and clinics, generally helping the downtrodden. They don't want Sloane in power, and they'd be happy working with us so long as they also benefit. Kadara has
potential. It just needs a regime change,” I answered.

"Bold, ambitious, and fair. And almost heretical to hear that the exiles are anything but filthy… er, exiles," Keri chuckled.

"Of course they aren't. In fact, my team and I rescued one, and instead of taking her back to Kadara Port, we decided that she'd be better off back here on the Nexus. And if Tann wants her off this station, well then, he can come and have a chat with me, and I'll explain all the reasons why she's staying, and why he's an idiot," I explained.

"I'll be keeping that in the final cut," Keri murmured as she turned off her equipment. "Thanks, Scott. My apologies, but I have a meeting with some colonists who want to talk about the series. Perhaps they'll want to go on camera," Keri theorized, and gave her farewell. With the interview done, I continued on my way to see my sister. But just as I got off the tram outside Hyperion's med-bay, I got a message on my Omni-tool from Vetra.

Sid says she needs to talk. With both of us. She says it's important, but that it's not about her personally. My place, ASAP.

I wasted no time getting back on that tram, but I was quite curious just what Sid could have found. Where does she work again? Monitors comms, right? She hear something weird? I arrived at Vetra's apartment and knocked on the door. Seconds later, it opened, Vetra cocking her head back as a gesture to follow her. She led me to the same kitchen table where we had that first talk with Sid. She was sat in the same spot, but she wasn't sad, more concerned. Confused, perhaps. She waved a hello as I sat down.

"So, tell us, Sid, what did you call us here for?" Vetra asked calmly, gently.

"Two things, actually. The first? I was listening to outpost updates. Caught a message about settlers going missing. If the messages came from Voeld, I would have just marked it as Kett. But there were reports from Eos too," Sid began.

"The Kett do still have some presence on Eos, or at least they did, hang on," I requested. "SAM, what's the militia reports on Kett presence on Eos?" I asked the AI. Given there was no armor to use as speakers, I let his voice play through my Omni-tool.

"Thanks to your own efforts, and the map of locations provided by Bain Massani, Kett activity on Eos has been minimal to none. In the region surrounding Prodromos, none at all," SAM explained. "Additionally, I took the liberty of checking reports on Voeld as well. While the Kett clearly still maintain a presence, their activity in the same valley as Taerve Uni has decreased significantly. The Kett are still there, yes, but have adopted more defensive tactics."

"Yeah, something's off. Even if it was Kett taking people, that doesn't mean we'd just sit by and let it happen, but now this changes the field," I remarked.

"And I think I figured out what happened to them. I got a lead. They were kidnapped. I thought it was weird too, but did some digging. Followed signals around. I think I know where they were taken," Sid explained. "A cave on a moon in the Remav system. I think it was originally an Angaran mine, but it was abandoned."

"That's specific," I murmured.

"Wait, the Remav system? That's where the Turian golden world should be," Vetra muttered.

"I don't believe the planet you're talking about is a moon," SAM informed.
"Well, it's a big rock in an asteroid belt that orbits a gas giant, but that's beside the point," Sid responded. Vetra sighed.

"Sid, we'll go take a look, you may be onto something, but... I told you to not get involved in things," Vetra asked gently, grabbing a hold of Sid's hand.

"I couldn't just do nothing," Sid retorted. Vetra sighed again, looking her sister deep in the eyes. They were filled with worry.


"That wouldn't have kept it from happening, V," Sid argued gently, almost reassuringly. It would be impossible to not figure out what Sid was alluding to, and the atmosphere of the whole room changed for a minute.

"Scott?" Vetra asked, looking for confirmation.

"I trust her. And this intel is too specific to be nothing. Besides, what's the harm in investigating? If it's where the Turian golden should be, maybe Natanus is there," I shrugged. Vetra nodded in reply.

"Thanks, Scott," Sid lightly smiled.

"Go ahead and give us everything you have on this," Vetra requested. Sid nodded and typed away at her Omni-tool, selecting all the relevant files and forwarding them.


"You know the answer," Vetra responded gently.

"Right, stay away from bad people. Guns. Krogan beer, all that," Sid chuckled. "But-

"Sid, it's ok. You've already helped. We didn't even know about these disappearing colonists. You found out about them, looked into it, found them, and told us. We can handle it from here," I reassured.

"You did good, Sid. You did. I just want you to be safe, okay?" Vetra comforted, rubbing her 'thumb' against the back of Sid's hand.

"Yeah," Sid muttered, glancing down. "So, the other thing. It's something else I found monitoring comms. Multiple attacks from a group called 'The Three Sabers.' They're hitting outposts and supply vessels. But here's the weird part. They seem aware of our operations. Like they're getting intel," she suggested.

"Shit, we can't tolerate a leak like that," I murmured.

"Agreed. And I've reported it, several times! They say they'll investigate it, but then they forget, or they deliberately don't!" Sid exclaimed.

"How do you know?" Vetra questioned.

"I monitor comms. Nothing changes. Nothing new happening on any channels, no new channels, not even any new 'don't listen in on these ones,' channels. But I also know that they haven't deployed anyone anywhere to investigate," Sid explained. Vetra hummed quietly in thought. "If someone is betraying the Nexus, someone has to do something about it. And your team are the
only people I trust right now," Sid continued.

"We'll get to the bottom of this. I don't like the sound of exiles having secure data on our shit. Imagine if they tap into Militia traffic!" I remarked.


"Hey, what about me?" Vetra chuckled.

"Like you haven't heard me call you a great sister enough," Sid smirked. Vetra simply laughed lightly in reply.

"So, leads?" I asked.

"Right. I don't know where they hide, but I have nav-points for their most recent raids. I was hoping the Tempest's scanners could figure it out from there."

"Alright, we'll get on this. Thanks, Sid," I stood, and put my arm around her shoulders in a half hug.

"Want us to stay overnight?" Vetra asked softly.

"No, it's ok. I'm fine living with Kesh right now," Sid reassured. "Go help those people."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We had stayed only a little longer, just small talk, mostly, seeing how she was doing. Vetra said she'd go see about a few other supplies and such, and I still wanted to talk to Sara. Along the way, Drack had forwarded me a message. Seemed some of Kesh's workers wanted to surprise her. They heard that Kadara has plenty of weird, strong booze that Kesh should enjoy. I'd be happy to help with that. I arrived in the Med-bay, to one of the rooms for individual patients that had been set aside for Sara. Harry was in there, doing another check.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Brain activity is still slowly on the rise. She's getting there. And all her vitals are still stable," he answered. "You're clear for another talk. No guest?"

"Not this time," I shrugged. No one new I really wanted Sara to speak with. I could have invited Cora, but that bombshell from earlier still just has me uneasy. Not distrustful, just uneasy. It needs to settle. Harry let us be and SAM formed the connection. Sara jerked slightly as the connection was formed.

"Gah, every time I'm awake when that happens it feels like my entire body gets a shock all at once," Sara groaned.

"Sorry, but it's a price you'll have to pay for a connection back to the waking world," I retorted.

"Would be better if goddamn Thor didn't have to smite me every time," Sara muttered.

"If I remember you when we watched those old Avenger movies, you'd let Thor 'smite' you anytime," I teased.

"And you wouldn't mind a… sparring match with Black Widow, yeah yeah shut up," Sara
chuckled. "So, what have you been up to?"

"Well, let's see, we've been to Kadara. Met up with the exiles. The leading group, the Outcasts, are a right group of bastards, but the others seem to be mostly regular people. We also met a roguish Hispanic smuggler, who no, I am not going to ever introduce you to," I smirked.

"Then I guess I'll just have to meet him myself," Sara teased.

"Uh huh. So, we also found and rescued Ark Leusinia," I continued.

"You did? So now there's two Pathfinders running about?" Sara questioned.

"Yep. Vederia Damali. Not their original Pathfinder, and also not the Pathfinder's second. She's young, fresh, even. I'm helping her along where I can, know what to expect out there, that kind of thing.

"Well, I hope this means the other arks could still be out there," Sara murmured.

"If they are, we'll find them. So, what else can I tell you about…? Oh, Jaal and Peebee hooked up," I chuckled.

"Peebee is the Asari, right? How'd that happen?"

"Well, she told me early on she was interested in him. She'd been flirting with him here and there all over, think he even flirted back sometimes. Anyways, she was really stressed out and I helped her figure out she could turn the escape pod into a thing she'd normally use when that happened back home, a zero-g chamber. She invited me in, and I did, because I hadn't been in zero-g for a while anyway. She then invited me in again, if you catch my drift, but I turned it down, and upon leaving, gave Jaal the nudge to go check up on her. I didn't see either of them for hours," I laughed.

"Wow, you had balls bluer than an Asari, 600 odd years in the making, and still you turned it down? Must have been killing you. Impressive," Sara teased. "And it confirms something else I suspected…" she trailed off.

"I'm not even going to bother asking. Others have begun to catch on," I groaned.

"And has she?" Sara asked teasingly.

"No, least I don't think so," I murmured.

"I'm telling you this, as a girl, Scott, you better ask. Because if she asks first, she will hold it over the rest of your lives," Sara warned.

"She doesn't-" I began to argue quietly.

"Has she explicitly said so?" Sara asked, not believing it.

"No, but-" I continued. Sara cut me off.

"Uh huh. So, you better remember what I said. I'm doing you a favor," Sara reinforced. I shook my head, smirking.

"Whatever you say, Sis. So, I should probably get going. We have an embassy on Aya now and I want to see how they're doing before a few other things," I explained.

"Ever the busy Pathfinder. Any chance one of those other things to do is her? At least asking her?"
Sara asked with a laugh.

"You know how bad I am at asking," I laughed in reply.

"All too well. Too many times I had to stand there, screaming internally, as all the advice I gave you, all that I helped you set up by being your wing woman was completely tossed aside by you just stuttering along," Sara sighed.

"Like you were any better! Remember my Alliance buddies?" I retorted.

"Shut up! I could only wait for so long before I got tired of it and did his job for him!" Sara defended.

"And you did it exactly like I did," I reminded.

"Just go already," Sara groaned with a laugh. My own laughter subsided and I wrapped her body in a hug, and gave her yet another farewell. Really hope you wake up soon, sis.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest was departing the Nexus, with the destination of Aya. One of the attacked shuttles was along the way, and would give us all we'd need to know. I had gotten two messages that caught my interest. One from Avitus Rix. He says he heard rumors of Natanus wreckage on Elaaden. The other message was from Knight, the leader of the hackers who believe they cut my SAM connection. Their HQ was on Kadara, and were inviting me there. I had just closed my private terminal when Jaal knocked, and entered.

"I'd like your advice, on something, Scott," he began. I gestured for him to continue. "I'm making gifts, for everyone. I have a list," he explained, and held out the list for me to see. Written on paper.

"Gifts?" I smirked questioningly.

"Do Turians like poetry? For Vetra. I'm writing a poem and engraving it on… I'm not sure yet…" Jaal mused.

"Who doesn't like a personalized poem, eh?" I shrugged. Oh, this could be good.

"Great. Maybe I could just recite it for her," Jaal stammered through yet another sentence.

"My one request is that you make sure I'm there for that." Jaal nodded, not suspecting a thing.

"Liam seems to like my Rofjinn. I might sew him one," Jaal wondered.

"I'm sure he'd like that."

"And do Krogan like knives? I could craft a ceremonial Angaran dagger for Drack," Jaal continued.

"Jaal, asking if a Krogan likes knives is like asking if Angara like feelings. Or if they like breathing. Jaal would like it," I reassured. "This is a lot of work though, why?" I asked. Jaal bowed his head slightly.

"Well, I'm sure that I seem confident and skilled to you, but… I'm not. Or I don't feel like I am," Jaal answered.
"I feel like that a lot, Jaal," I reassured.

"You do?" Jaal responded, surprised.

"Damn right I do. You know why I wear my father's armor? With the N7 commendation even though I'm not N7 myself?" I asked rhetorically. "When I first became Pathfinder, I was doubting myself a lot. I was also being doubted by plenty of others. When I saw that my dad, who had chosen me to become Pathfinder, had also left behind his armor to me, it reminded me that if nothing else, that he believed in me. And that felt like enough. Not to say I don't feel that doubt anymore, but it's helped. You know what might help you? Take a look at that necklace you're wearing around your neck, from Andraknar," I suggested. Jaal looked down, and held the medallion attached to the necklace in his hands.

"My family is well known. Our lineage is respected. Many of my kin have achieved great things. I've… never been one of them. So many older siblings and cousins who succeeded at everything. I… stopped trying to keep up," Jaal explained sadly. He sighed. "Thanks for listening," he smiled.

"You're not in anyone's shadow here, Jaal. We believe in you. The Heskaarl believe in you. You don't give yourself enough credit," I argued, standing up and clasping his shoulder.

"Thank you, Scott," Jaal replied. "Oh, and you may like to know, The Moshae has arranged that meeting with Akksul. It should begin later today, sometime after we arrive," Jaal warned.

"Well, I'll be ready for that," I murmured. "Thanks, Jaal." He nodded and left. Hm, should probably see how Gil is doing with that transponder. I left my room and entered the engine room, Gil was hard at work on the console. He heard me enter, and turned.

"Certainly gave me a low-pressure job with that one," Gil muttered. "So, it's charged, and luckily, no matter where you go in the universe, physics still apply. Only so many ways of communicating across space. Even in FTL," Gil remarked, taking hold of the transponder and removing a power cord from it. "Here, give it a shot," he suggested. I raised a brow and pressed the button he gestured to.

"Nutok sho-lun ka!" a Kett voice questioned. Ah shit.

"Turn it off!" Gil exclaimed. I pressed the button again.

"Good thing we were in FTL doing that. Otherwise we'd have just lit a flare telling the people who want to murder everyone on this ship where we are," Gil remarked.

"Fortunately, I do have the coordinates. The signal points to the Tafeno system," SAM informed.

"We sure we want to do this?" Gil asked nervously.

"Well, it's not like we have a choice. Let's just hope it's still there when we're ready," I remarked.

"Heh, I knew running off to Andromeda would be dangerous, but shit… this is dangerous," Gil murmured.

"Oh, only if we die," I joked.

"Yeah, so very comforting. Thanks," Gil chuckled. I left the engine room when I heard a gruff Krogan voice call out.

"Hey kid," Drack called out. "I keep finding crumbs on the counter."
"Forget it Drack. It's still your turn to clean the galley," I called back.

"No not that. I think something's nibbling our stores. Something that doesn't belong. Maybe, something tasty..." Drack suggested, more than likely licking his lips.

"Yeah yeah, I'll keep an eye out for anything," I replied. Just as I was on my way down the lower levels, I heard a crunch beneath my foot. I looked down, and there were crumbs. Upon a scan, whatever got to it was something with hair. Curious, I went to the fabricator in the tech lab and ordered a small trap to be made. Negligible supplies, really. When done, I placed it by the crumbs. Now, just to wait. I returned to the bridge, mostly just to see what was going on, personally see the scans of those attacks Sid pointed out, when Peebee stepped out, pleasantly surprised to see me.

"There you are! Just want you to know, Zap is all ready to go! Come on Zap!" Peebee exclaimed, beaming. A small Remnant Observer decloaked beside her. It was smaller than Poc, and also painted white, to help distinguish him.

"Hey there little fella," I spoke to the bot in a baby voice.

"Who's a good whittle boy, you are! Yes, you are!" Peebee did the same, petting Zap. "Now, this is Scott, you'll be going out with him now, ok?" Peebee told the bot. The bot seemed to actually recognize the orders, and jerked, it's body shifting slightly to the new orders. "He's all yours now, Scott, enjoy!" she smiled, and returned to her room.

Chapter End Notes

I know that convo with Cora is a bit ambitious, but, Cora Harper? TIM is Jack Harper? Really friggin weird connection that I just can't shake.
We were just now entering Aya's atmosphere, heading towards the same landing pad the Angara have granted us. We had found the site of attack Sid told us about, and scans detected both traces of dirt and mineral similar to what's on Kadara, and it seemed that their drive core was also leaking. It only gave us a general vector, but it was towards Kadara. It adds up to me. Besides, I could always call Reyes for some Intel on them, I'd bet.

My little trap in the cargo bay hasn't caught anything yet, but maybe after this. As for Zap? It seems as if he can respond to simple commands. He had begun to follow me outside my quarters as I was about to exit the ship, but didn't think an Observer following me around in cloak would be a great idea.

"Zap, stay," I ordered, speaking to it like he was a dog. He made a few beeps, and shook in the air, then stayed. Still glancing back to make sure it worked, I left. Though even then, I can't be sure. He can cloak after all. The others must have already left, as no one else was in the hold. I strolled across the city, my destination being the embassy within Governor Shie's office. It seems the diplomats and scientists who came with them were making themselves right at home. Scanning plants, talking with locals, or just gazing out across the landscape. I'd imagine there were plenty around the vault right now. I entered the Governor's offices, waving a greeting at the two Angara working behind the desk to Shie's actual office, and entered the Nexus embassy. To the right side was a small kitchen set up, to the back, a sitting area, and the right, terminals. In the center of the room was a holo comm, and an Asari speaking with Tann through it. Seemed like nothing more than a mere update, and sounded like so far, so good.

"I've never lied to a Director before," the Asari mused as the call ended. That led me to laugh slightly, and that gained her attention. "Ah, Pathfinder, it's a pleasure. I'm Ambassador Rialla, chief diplomat here on Aya," she introduced, holding out her hand.

"Good to meet you, Rialla. And the only reason I haven't lied to Tann yet is that I'm not afraid to give him a dose of reality every now and then," I joked.

"I get the feeling I may wish I could do the same," she chuckled. "I was removed from cryo specifically for this. Quite the wake-up call."

"I know what that's like. Getting right out of cryo and thrust into the fire. For me, it just involved gunfire," I remarked.

"Yes, you've had it far worse. My condolences," Rialla offered. I quietly nodded my thanks, looking down a bit. "I hear you're to thank for our new ties with Aya. This is our best shot at an alliance. Now, all we need is to keep our people from wrecking it. No matter how hard they try," Rialla muttered.

"Alright, who needs a good ol fashioned dick kicking? Or, if they don't have one, a good ol' cunt punt?" I asked with a smirk. With a chuckle herself, Rialla rolled her eyes at my language.

"In all honesty I've felt like giving them the same. A Salarian botanist, Sorvis Lenn is here, learning how to improve our crops. He sent an urgent comm, saying a member of the Resistance
threatened him," Rialla explained.

"Out of the blue? Or…?" I questioned.

"Not sure. Sorvis is an excellent scientist but he's… not the best communicator," Rialla answered. "I'm concerned this could escalate if someone doesn't look into it, but I can't spare the staff, currently."

"Done deal. I'll have this solved soon," I grinned.

"That would be helpful. With any luck, we can prevent this from getting worse."

"Before I go, any other problems?" I asked.

"Yes, actually. The Director gave me a project. He wants more Aya natives to live on the Nexus. He believes it will deepen our partnership, which it could. A few Angara expressed interest, but… they all want to speak to you before deciding," Rialla revealed.

"Me? Specifically?"

"Yes. You seem to have quite a reputation among them," Rialla remarked. "I didn't want to bother you with it, but… you asked."

"It's not a bother at all. How do I find the candidates?" I asked.

"No need. I'll simply ask that they all come to express their concerns to you sometime today. I'll let you know when we have a time scheduled," Rialla answered.

"All right, I'll go speak with Sorvis Lenn then. Where can I find him?"

"He's outside the Repository of History, scanning and researching some of the plants."

"Thanks, I'll come back to let you know how it settles." I exited the other side of the offices, near the Tavetaan, and overheard a conversation between two Angara.

"Think we'll see more of them?" A man asked the woman he was speaking with.

"Humans? Hope not. Wouldn't mind seeing more Asari though," she remarked.

"What's the difference?" the man questioned, confused. Just with that, I began grinning.

"I… like the color blue, is all," the woman stuttered her reply.

"Don't be embarrassed, back home, every species likes the Asari," I called out, chuckling. That just seemed to leave the woman stuttering more, while I just kept on walking.

I found Sorvis right where Rialla said he'd be. A Salarian with purple skin, and an outfit both light blue and black. Odd color scheme. He was typing away at his Omni-tool and muttering to himself.

"Sorvis?" I called out. He threw his hands into the air.

"I can't work under these conditions! What does it take to be left alone!" he exclaimed.

"Hey, settle, I'm here to help Sorvis," I replied, my tone hardening. "You reported that someone in the Resistance threatened you. Tell me exactly what happened."
"I didn't know Rialla was sending the Pathfinder. I deserve no less, of course," he remarked. Oh, so he's one of those assholes. The, 'I'm not being treated like a god, so I'm going to demand to speak to your manager and throw a tantrum until I get my way,' kind of people. "I was measuring the photonic dispersal from the canopies when some random brute interrupted me. I asked him to move, and he got nasty. Said it was my fault his friend was dead. Ridiculous!" Sorvis exclaimed.

"And just how did he threaten you," I questioned.

"Oh, I don't know… maybe it was the big gun he was carrying," Sorvis scoffed. You know, maybe kicking the shit out of this asshat would be therapeutic for all the times I've had to resist kicking the shit out of Tann. They act the same goddamn way after all. "He got right up in my face and compared me to a Kett. He wanted to kill me, I could see it in his eyes. The whole conversation made no sense. I think he was inebriated."

"Alright, two things. First, I'm not going to claim you're in the wrong here, not yet. Two, you need to calm down, ease up, use some manners. We're guests here, and trying to build bridges, not burn them," I reminded.

"And as guests, we shouldn't have to put up with this!" Sorvis exclaimed.

"And as hosts, the Angara shouldn't have to tolerate rudeness," I retorted. "Look, how do I find him?"

"I tagged him with infrared dye. Invisible to the naked eye, not to a scanner," Sorvis grumbled. Before he could even continue, I walked away, towards the Resistance HQ. I entered, and discreetly ran minor scans for the infrared. I found the Angara watching over the training room. I approached him, but he saw me coming and met me halfway.

"I know why you're here. The botanist. You want an apology for what I said to him," he muttered.

"Before I ask for an apology, I only have one side of the story. Why don't you tell me yours? Maybe he doesn't deserve an apology," I replied.

"It's… hard to explain," the man warned.

"Try me," I encouraged.

"Well, Aya isn't big enough to give everyone a home. We each live here a short time and then move on. For someone to come, another must go. The exchanges are chosen at random. We call this, the Vesaal. Time of change. It worked well, until now," he explained. Shit, sounds like because of us.

"You lost someone you cared about, didn't you? Was it because of us? The Vesaal?" I asked.

"That's one way to see it. When our leaders agreed to make a place for your people here, it came with a cost. My friend won a place on Aya, but he sold that slot so one of you could stay here, instead," the man answered.

"Sold it? What he'd get?" I asked curiously.

"Comforts for his family, resources to improve their home on Havarl. He always put others before himself. That's how he died, fighting Kett on Voeld. When I found out, I was angry. Said things to your botanist I shouldn't have. But I'd never hurt your people," the man defended.

"I believe you. And I'm sorry for your loss. There's absolutely no apology necessary, that botanist
was a jackass," I reassured.

"Heh, he didn't fear my anger. I respect that, at least," the man remarked.

"I'll talk with our ambassador. See if we can minimize our impact on your Vesaal," I reassured.

"We don't expect things to be easy. Only that you understand nothing is free for us," the man clarified.

"We do, but we'll do everything we can to minimize those costs," I argued. The man shrugged, and with that, I left. Making a beeline back for the embassy. Rialla was there waiting.

"Rialla, do you know about the Vesaal? The Angaran lottery that decides who lives on Aya?" I asked.

"I've heard of it. Why?" she replied.

"Angara are selling their slots to come here, so our people can stay in their place," I explained. "The one who threatened Sorvis? A member of the Resistance. He explained that his buddy, another Resistance fighter, sold his ticket and died on Voeld. Wouldn't have happened if he was here."

"Goddess, no one told me of this arrangement. We have to do something," she exclaimed. A lightbulb went off in my head.

"Tann says he wants natives living on the Nexus, right? Those who give up their Aya slot get a home on the Nexus," I suggested.

"Exactly what I was thinking," Rialla nodded. "No one should suffer on our behalf. Thank you, Pathfinder. I'll forward this proposal to Director Tann immediately," Rialla confirmed.

"Oh, and while you're at it, tell him that I'm giving my absolute recommendation that Sorvis Lenn leave Aya immediately. He'll only hurt relations," I suggested. Rialla raised a brow, likely already knowing why.

"Can't say I'm surprised, but simply for the record, why?" she asked, ready to make any mental note she needs.

"Rude, self-important dickwad. When I showed up, he said that he deserved nothing less than the Pathfinder's aid. Additionally, just completely demeaning to everyone else," I explained, resisting the urge to sneer at the thought of him.

"Well, that sounds like him," Rialla murmured. "I'll include your recommendation as well. However, it would still be appreciated if you could come later and speak with the candidates I mentioned before." I was about to respond when my Omni-tool pinged with a message.

He's here. Come to my office. - Moshae Sjefa.

"Sure. Got another meeting first though…" I trailed off, leaving the room. I ventured towards the Repository of History, knowing that the Moshae's office is in the lower levels. I was pleasantly surprised to see two additional exhibits. One, a Hologram of the Tempest. The other? Milky Way. A helmet, some Initiative Tech, containers, drink bottles, a soccer ball, and even a box of Blast-oh's. I wiped the smirk off my face, changing it to a stern, confident one, and opened the door towards the lower levels. I stepped down the stairs and through the halls where they kept artifacts not yet ready for display and living quarters for those that work here. At the end of the hall was the
Moshae's office. I opened the door.

"Evfra should have come to me," an Angaran man stated.

"Shh, Akksul. I'm all right," the Moshae reassured. Resting a hand on his shoulder.

"You almost died," he sighed.

"Fortunately, my team, my SAM, and I helped rescue her," I remarked, announcing my presence. The large Angaran man turned, first his brow was raised in confusion, but then lowered, set into a cold fury. Fire was in his eyes. The outfit he wore was black on the upper arms and abdomen, while orange on the shoulders, forearm, and legs. On his head was a design painted similar to the Governor, but in a gold color.

"What's he doing here?" Akksul growled.

"Relax, Akksul. I was invited. I want to speak with you," I answered.

"I didn't dare believe when I first heard that you were being welcomed within this city. Let alone this… 'embassy.' When I saw the exhibits upstairs, I was tempted to tear it all down personally. What have our people become?" Akksul scoffed. The Moshae placed her hand on his shoulder again.

"Ryder rescued me from the Kett. And all our people trapped inside. He risked his life to-" she argued.

"Sloane Kelly saved Kadara. Look how that went," Akksul cut her off with a stern retort.

"And Sloane is a complete and utter bitch who won't be in power much longer. Unlike her, for one, I want to be equal allies," I defended.

"You don't even treat your own equally," Akksul chuckled mockingly. "Isn't that why the Krogan left?"

"Alright so you interrogated or stole data that wasn't even kept secret. So, the Krogan left because of this lying brat named Spender, and the racist idiotic prick who's only in charge because everyone above him died thanks to the Scourge. I aim to fix their mistakes, and all those on my crew, Jaal, Drack, everyone, are treated equal," I retorted.


"Is that a threat?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

"You'll see soon enough," Akksul murmured, and stormed out.

"Akksul…" The Moshae tried to keep him from leaving. He shrugged her off and was gone. She sighed. "He didn't used to be like this. He was… curious. Brilliant," the Moshae remembered sadly. "But the Kett…" her features changed from sadness to fury. "Even without exaltation, they change us."

"While I can't ignore the threat he blatantly gave me, and that he clearly has something planned against the Initiative, there is still time to bring him around. I doubt he'll be a part of that plan personally," I reassured.

"I want to believe that he can come back, but… his hatred towards aliens is intense. I don't know
what it could make him do," the Moshae murmured sadly.

"I'll find a way to prove it to him," I placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I hope so..." she sighed. "I am aware that Vehn has returned within our custody. I've convinced Evfra to set him out on community service. Did you find the Archon's ship?" she questioned, changing the topic.

"We have. A Kett transponder. We have a lead for them being in the Tafeno system. But we have several other matters that need to be dealt with first. Just in case..." I trailed off, the suggestion clear.

"I understand needing to prepare. The less ready you feel, the more distractions, the lower the odds of success there. I may not have seen much, but that ship is a place of pain and misery. Be strong," the Moshae advised. "And, you said that Sloane Kelly won't be in power much longer. Care to explain?"

"That's one of the pressing matters that need to be taken care of before the Archon. Not sure how yet, exactly, but Kadara needs a regime change, and I plan to be involved with that little change. And I hope the Angara have someone in mind to fill that gap," I answered.

"Hmph. And when I first heard you seeming to accept the Cardinal's deal, I did not expect us to be getting along that greatly. I'm glad to say that I appear to have been wrong," she smiled.

"I surprise even myself sometimes," I smirked. "So, there is one thing I do want to ask. I know you were Jaal's teacher once, close, in fact. Anything you can tell me about him? Anything that might help me out with him on board," I questioned. A grin formed on her face and for a fraction of a second there was a humorous light in her eyes.

"He talks in his sleep..." she trailed off.

"Uh... That's..." I struggled to form the right response. Jaal told me they didn't love each other intimately, was it... casual then?

"Worth it for the look on your face," the Moshae laughed, a shit-eating grin on her face.

"Credit where it's due, you got me," I joined the laughter. Her laughter subsided, and continued.

"He's a dear, and hopeless, former student. He has a good spirit. Lacks confidence, despite plenty evidence that should give him some. You're lucky to have him. That's all I can really say," she answered.

"Thanks, Moshae, good to see you're feeling better," I grinned, ending the conversation.

"Isharay," the Moshae smiled, returning to her desk. The conversation with Akksul may have made her sad, but at least she was cheered up a bit before. I left the Repository, and Peebee was there sitting on a bench, appeared to be people watching. I sat beside her for a moment.

"It's fun watching our Milky Way peeps interacting with the Angara. It's early in our interspecies relationship, but I hope we can build on the momentum," Peebee mused.

"Are we still talking about the diplomats, or you and Jaal?" I teased. Chuckling, Peebee punched me in the shoulder. "Heh. Still, bit nerve racking. Anything could happen and then the Neighbors hate us," I remarked.
"Aw, does that mean no Nomad joyrides? Obey the street signs?" Peebee groaned playfully. I raised a brow with a grin. "You're doing a great job, really." Her head turned and I followed her gaze. Jaal was walking through the crowd, having left the Resistance HQ. "Speaking of doing a great job," Peebee purred. I raised my hand in the air to gain Jaal's attention. He did a double take seeing the hand in the air, and who it belonged two, and came over, grinning, sitting down beside Peebee.

"Well, now it's a Peanut Butter sandwich," I joked. Peebee laughed, and Jaal clearly didn't understand. He began to ask, when Peebee sat up and onto his leg. Jaal blushed.

"I'll explain it to you later," Peebee remarked, wrapping her arm around Jaal's shoulders. Subconsciously, Jaal wrapped his arm around the small of her back, then hesitated, moving it back. Peebee simply moved it back with her other hand. Jaal's blush got brighter.

"So," Jaal coughed awkwardly. Turning his head to look behind him and out to the landscape. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Jaal tried to make conversation. I was about to comment on the landscape, but Peebee had other plans.


"You know what, I'm leaving before I see something I don't want to. Have fun, and try to make it to the Tempest before the clothes come off," I warned teasingly, standing up from the bench and leaving. I didn't need to see that my comment and Peebee's laughter made his blush, somehow, get even brighter.

I wanted to speak to Evfra, so I made my way to his office in the Resistance HQ. It was busy and bustling as always, including his office. He was sat at his desk, reading reports. He no doubt saw me enter.

"Evfra, can we talk?" I asked. He looked up from his reports and set them down, jerking his head back towards the window. We stood, both looking out. "Who on Kadara, does the Resistance have on stand-by ready to assume control? Just in case the Outcasts are ever tossed out?" I questioned. Evfra turned his head, looking at me questioningly.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because Soane Kelly needs to go. The Outcasts need to go. She's shitting all over both your people and mine. And when she goes, there can't be a power vacuum. I plan on being involved in removing her," I explained.

"Not anyone specifically within the Resistance. Rather, someone who's willing to work with us and better the conditions, restore them to what they were before the Kett took the port. An Angara, of course," Evfra answered. "You understand my reluctance to share their name. The fewer who know," Evfra shrugged.

"That answer works for me. Just want to make sure I don't make anything worse. One more thing, I just had a lovely chat with Akksul," I revealed. "He threatened me, I think he has something big planned against the Initiative in the near future. Mind keeping an eye out for anything like that around our Outposts?" I requested.

"Did you now? Hmph. At the request of the Moshae no doubt. And, Pathfinder, do you really think that I don't already have people watching everything that goes on in and around your Outposts?" Evfra asked rhetorically, and with a chuckle.
"Heh, of course not. Merely asking that you tell us anything interesting they find. Maybe shift their gazes outward a bit," I replied.

"If we see any kind of Roekaar activity, you'll know," Evfra nodded.


"Voeld has been going well, ever since that base was neutralized. We've set up more Daars, rebuilt and reclaimed others, we've even improved fortifications for our capital. The only way we're losing it again is if the Kett bring in multiple Warships, and fast. Do Xeel has begun asking less for forces from Taerve Uni to reinforce Angara positions and attacks, and more for them to engage in their own operations on Kett facilities. We won't be kicking them off the world entirely any time soon, but very soon we can claim that Voeld is our planet again, not disputed," Evfra explained. "And those tanks... Those help a lot."

"It hurts knowing that we have them yet the Tempest doesn't. It's great, isn't it?" I laughed.

"If I wasn't held up here, I might visit for a test drive," Evfra smirked. "Though now that may be less risky since I don't need to worry about the Decimation seeing their chance. Good work with that, by the way."

"Got to save an Ark, and blow up a Kett warship. It was a good day," I remarked.

"This war is starting to look up. Good work," Evfra nodded, a genuine compliment.

"Just happy to help. I'll leave you to it," I ended, letting him be. I got a message from Rialla, there would be the meeting at the end of the hour. Didn't have anything else to do in the meantime. As I walked by the bench Peebee, Jaal, and I were at earlier, I noticed that both were no longer there. Little doubt what's going on with that...

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

I was sat in the meeting room with Rialla, just waiting for the candidates. Rialla told me she had spoken with Tann, and that he liked the proposal. What he liked less, but grudgingly, allowed, was the removal of Sorvis Lenn, who was currently, angrily, packing his bags.

Three Angara entered. Two men and a woman. I raised a hand in greeting, and Rialla suggested they take a seat. They did.

"Pathfinder Scott Ryder, allow me to introduce Saarlo, Helruul, and Yuraalt," Rialla introduced, pointing at the two men and the woman respectively.

"Pleasure to meet you all. So, I'm told that, while curious, you all have concerns about living on the Nexus?" I asked with a grin. They all nodded. "Then let's address them. Yuraalt, would you like to begin?" She leaned forward, clasping her hands on the table.

"This is the opportunity of a lifetime. I'm an anthropologist, but I've only ever studied my own people. I've heard the Nexus is home to multiple species and cultures. It will be fascinating... and possibly dangerous. Bacteria, viruses, other contaminants. My family worries. Are you sure I'll be safe?" she questioned.

"We'll take every precaution, I promise you. But entering an alien environment, or allowing aliens into your environment, is always a biological risk. Additionally, we also have highly advanced medical facilities," I answered. She nodded understanding.
"I appreciate your honesty. I believe my family will as well. I'll go. Thank you."

"That's what I'm here for. So, Helruul? I believe? What are your concerns?"

"To the point. Good. I've lived my whole life wanting to meet aliens who didn't want me dead, but my family is here. How can I stay in touch with them from the Nexus?" he questioned.

"You'll be there as our guest. We have plenty of ways to send messages, speak with them over comms. Also, I see absolutely no reason why we couldn't arrange for them to visit you. How you stay in touch? That's completely up to you. We'll get it done," I reassured.

"You get it. All right, I'm in," he grinned.

"Glad to hear it. So, this is going by quickly. Saalro?" I remarked.

"While I'm honored to even be considered for the transfer, I won't be happy as just an observer. I want… need to work. I engineer power systems. Will I be allowed employment alongside your people?" he requested.

"That's the whole point of this exchange. Exchanging knowledge and experience. Kesh would love to add you to her engineers," I smiled.

"All right, I'm in. Thank you, Pathfinder," he sighed with relief.

"Thank you. I may have helped lay the foundation for this alliance, but it's people like you who are solidifying it. I'm sure you'll all enjoy your time with us," I reassured.

"I thank you as well, Ryder. Tann will be pleased to hear that all candidates are willing," Rialla informed. "Thank you all for coming, and accepting. I'll contact you when a shuttle should arrive to bring you there. But that will be a few days from now. Still, I suggest you go prepare." The candidates gave their thanks once more, and left.

"Wow, so I actually did something Tann will approve of. I almost feel like going back and telling them not to go just to spite him," I joked.

"Please, do not make my job any harder than it needs to be," Rialla groaned with a smirk.

"Just be glad I said almost," I chuckled. I'm genuinely not sure that I wouldn't have done it, too.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

"Scott! Come here! My room! Quick!" Peebee exclaimed. It wasn't any kind of panic, just excitement. I was in my quarters on the Tempest, and she had used the intercom.

"If you and Jaal are in there naked, I'm gonna be pissed," I teased.

"No, no, would you really think I'd make a breakthrough while having sex? No, get up here, so that I can tell you what I've learned, shoo you away, and THEN I can have some fun with Jaal," she urged.

"Alright, fine, I'll be there in a minute," I laughed. Shaking my head, I climbed the ladder and entered Peebee's room.

"Poc, Poc, Poc, you're gonna be the gateway to so many great things, my friend," Peebee beamed at her Observer.
"Gateway to what?" I asked, stepping in.

"So, while that storage box from the Eos vault was the key to… well… everything, our little Observer friends are just the beginning! I'm working on something even bigger!" Peebee revealed.

"Look, Peebee, I really don't want to know just how big Jaal is, you can keep that to yourself," I teased.

"Damn right I'm keeping that all to myself," Peebee laughed. "Doesn't mean I won't talk about it. Which I will, if you don't shut up," she threatened playfully.

"Alright, fine," I shrugged.

"Good. So, get this. We can only scan for Remnant signatures we've already encountered, right? My scanner's doing that around the clock," she began. It was really tempting to add a comment about how she's been around the clock, but to take away the L from that word in my statement. "But, if I integrate the right rem-tech, we could scour the cluster for any Remnant signature! Even what we don't have!" She exclaimed, nearly bursting with excitement. "My scanner would literally become a Remnant mystery detector!"

"Damn, this enthusiasm is infectious," I chuckled, almost ready to start bouncing on my heels like she was.

"Don't tell Lexi, she'll look for a cure," Peebee joked. "I came to Andromeda to touch the unknown. To find the never-before-found…" she trailed off. "Once I perfect the scanner, it'll do exactly that. All I need are three specific pieces of Rem-tech," she revealed.

"Course we can do that," I nodded. Peebee launched forward and wrapped her arms around me.

"You. Rock." she exclaimed. "Poc and Zap think so too. And get this! I've already detected two pieces. The first, is the piece of Rem-tech we found in that cave on Havarl! We already have one part! The other is on Eos. I'll upload the coordinates," she beamed. "Now shoo, Jaal should be coming," Peebee waved off.

"I'll bet he is. Shouldn't you go help with that?" I asked teasingly.

"Gah, not that way, not yet at least. Soon, though. JUST GO!" Peebee laughed, practically pushing me out. It occurred to me that I should check the trap in the cargo bay, so that's where I decided to go next. As Jaal passed by me on my way there, I patted him on the shoulder knowingly. Chuckling to myself. I got down into the cargo bay, and sure enough, there was something in the trap. I got closer, and there was a ball of brown fur nibbling on the bait inside. A rat? I got closer. No, it's a… hamster?

"Hi there. You must be the one eating all our cereal," I mused quietly. It looked up and saw me, skittering back into a corner of the trap. "Aw, come on, I won't hurt you. And I won't even let the big mean Krogan eat you," I spoke in a baby voice. At the lack of me doing anything, it seemed to relax a bit. "I should find you somewhere safer than our cargo bay, little guy," I chuckled. "You know what? Fuck it, I already have a Pyjak. I can put a Hamster cage in my quarters. With plenty of food," I muttered to myself. I grabbed the cage and placed it on a table in my quarters, then went to the fabricator to make a cage. Two levels, tubes for it to run around in, and a wheel. Not to mention the dishes. I fabricated some bedding, poured some cereal into the dish, and brought it back to my room. I swapped it out with the cage, and gently took the hamster out. It was skittish with my hand at first, but allowed itself to be carried and placed inside.
Guess everybody around here needs a home.
I stood on the bridge, leaning onto the nav console linked to my implant in the center of the bridge, and watched as the void of FTL faded away, replaced with the light of Remav's sun. We had exited just outside the system, so we could get a full scan of the system and what planets were there. A gas giant orbited by an Asteroid field, that's where Sid said the colonists should be. Additionally, there were three rock worlds. Maybe one of them would be the Turian golden, but… the scans on them didn't make sense. One world was absolutely covered in volcanic activity, we would never be able to go vault hunting there, the surface temperature was simply too much. One had three times Earth's atmospheric pressure and high winds, and the other one was just a small moon without any atmosphere to speak of. Where the hell did the golden world go?

"Jaal, what intel do the Angara have about the Remav system? Anything about a planet with a vault or could support life?" I questioned over the intercom.

"The Remav system? No, nothing at all. Barren moons, a gas giant, and an asteroid field," Jaal confirmed. Vetra entered the bridge, hoping to see the Turian Golden world for herself, I'd assume.

"But, Jaal, that doesn't make any sense," Suvi muttered. "Our scans from the Milky Way distinctly show a total of five planets and no asteroid belt whatsoever. A gas giant, three, uninhabitable planets, and a golden world for Turians and Quarians. What happened?" Vetra stood a bit straighter.

"Well… there is one thing… We have very old, pre-scourge records, that suggest, when cross-referenced with later texts, that there was a habitable world there of another protein chain. But… destroyed by the Scourge. Your golden world may very well be that asteroid belt now," Jaal revealed sadly. Motherfucker. How could the Scourge even do that?! Vetra froze, her mouth agape, mandibles twitching to the side. The entire bridge was silent.

"That world… that world would have been perfect for her… I'd never have to worry about food for her there. But… what now? What the fuck do I do now?" Vetra exclaimed. I placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We still have Eos and Voeld, Vetra. And when we find Meridian, even though those may not be Dextro planets, we can still grow Dextro food," I tried to reassure.

"But what about the Turians, Scott? I may not have any real sense of duty or loyalty to them, but they're still my spirits damned people! If we don't have a golden world, if we don't find the Natanus, it becomes that much closer for us to survive. If the Turians don't survive, Sid won't!" Vetra argued, clearly anxious. I placed my other hand on her other shoulder, and shook her slightly.

"Vetra, look at me," I requested gently. She gulped, and turned her head down to look me in the eyes. It pained me to see the fear and sadness that lurked. "Vetra, I promise you, Sid, the Turians, they will survive. I don't care if that means I need to fly to the goddamn Kett home world and take it single handedly just to find a Dextro world and Natanus. I'd do it in a heartbeat. No matter what, you and Sid will both live long happy lives. I promise," I gently whispered. Vetra sighed, closed her eyes, and let out a deep breath.

"Thank you," she wrapped her arms around me in a hug, her cheek against mine. I returned the hug and enjoyed the sensation of just feeling her breathe and relax. I wouldn't have minded doing this
for a while. A few moments later, Vetra seemed to be fully relaxed, and released me. She silently
nodded her thanks, with one last deep breath. I turned to face Kallo.

"Take us into those coordinates," I ordered. The ship returned to FTL, and Vetra remained on the
bridge. Only a minute later, we exited again, just outside the asteroid belt surrounding the gas
giant.

"The coordinates point to the largest one. It's the size of a small moon. It's stable, but there are
plenty of deep ravines. We won't be able to get you out if you fall into one. And even with low
gravity, without an atmosphere it won't be a gently fall," Kallo warned. "Also, you won't be able to
step foot outside without being shredded apart atom by atom by radiation. The Nomad, however,
will protect you."

"Then how could anyone be-oh, right. Shields. We can make shield domes with airlocks so people
can go back and forth safely," I remarked.

"Sensors detecting several such shield domes. One of them is over a Remnant site. Same region as
all the others, and the coordinates," Suvi informed.

"Funny that Andromeda seems to kick our asses yet provide so many convenient coincidences
when we try and fix shit," I murmured. We'll investigate everything before we leave. Got a landing
zone?"

"We do. Beginning our descent," Kallo answered.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest had landed safely, Drack, Vetra, Jaal and I were all in the cargo bay, fully suited up,
weapons holstered. Gil ran a final test on the Nomad, just to ensure that it would protect us from
the cosmic radiation, and then gave us his all clear. We got in, and the cargo bay was evacuated,
and then vented. Without any atmosphere inside the cargo bay, Kallo opened the cargo bay doors,
clearing us for travel along the landscape. The ground was covered in a white/grey dust, the same
kind you'd see on Earth's moon. Craters littered the landscape, and it rose, mountains in the
distance. Closer, the region we were in appeared to have a large crevice straight down the middle.
Not eager to figure out just how deep it goes.

The blue sun of Remav was shining in the sky, quite a ways away, but no less bright. The sky was
littered with massive rocks, leaving me slightly paranoid about one starting to fall towards us. And,
of course, there was the gas giant we were in orbit around, taking up another large portion of the
sky. It was… eerie, driving along. Just outside the walls of our vehicle was a vacuum. We couldn't
hear the engine as we drove, as it was made so that just in case the engine compartment of the
Nomad suffers a hull breach, the cabin won't be decompressed either. So instead, all we could hear
was my foot pressing down a pedal, our breathing, and I swear, if you listened close enough,
heartbeats. I drove up and over the crest of a crater, and it sent us flying in the air in the low
gravity. Certainly not enough to break free of the gravity, but enough for some significant air time.
I think we were all still getting used to the quiet and low grav, so the reactions were more of the
others stabilizing themselves. With the lack of atmosphere, our return led us to continuously drop
faster and faster, but the ground was close enough so that it was hardly noticeable. Now we were
driving straight down towards a shield dome. Sid's coordinates may have the exact location of the
old Angaran mine, but investigating this could give us a good lay of the land. Whether these exiles
are malevolent or not, and just what the Initiative could gain from a foothold here. I turned towards
the dome and the protrusion at its side, the airlock. It was large enough to fit the Nomad, and open
for visitors. Empty as well, oddly enough. I parked the Nomad, and the door automatically closed.
When sealed, atmosphere flooded back into the room, and we exited the Nomad. True, we could have done so before atmosphere was restored thanks to our helmets, but call it a safety measure. I led my team through the door and into the dome. The dome painting everything within in an orange glow.

"Who the hell are you?!!" a man exclaimed, raising a rifle.

"Scott Ryder. Pathfinder," I began, raising my hands in the air to reassure him. "We're just-"

"Pathfinder? NEXUS SCUM!" he cried out. I have little doubt that gained the attention of the others. He tightened his hold on the rifle, no doubt about to pull the trigger, but the round would have simply bounced off my shields and I'd retaliate. Instead, Drack grabbed the barrel of his Avenger rifle and pulled it towards him. As the man stumbled forward, Drack slammed his fist into the Man's face, likely breaking his nose. It didn't matter though, as Drack curb stomped him, leaving his head as a bloody pulp.

"So much for diplomacy," I murmured, pulling out my rifle. An alarm began blaring in the base, and there were footsteps rushing towards us. We took cover along some supply crates ahead, just at the top of the hill the rest of the exiles here would be needing to climb up to reach us, and we formed a nice firing lane, and the row of heads that appeared found themselves with bullets. Turian, Human, an Asari, even. Now the footsteps were running the other way.

"Holy fuck!" a woman exclaimed.

"Push forward!" I ordered. In a line, that's exactly what we did. We shot the retreating woman and the Turian before they could take cover and shoot back. I think that was all of them. In this dome, at least. There was a small building within the dome. Maybe in there we could find out what the Exiles are up to. Might just be mining, might not. There wasn't exactly a lot of places to look. A desk with a data pad on it, and a few other crates. "So, Helium-3 eh? That's valuable. Passcode too, but mostly corrupted," I would be scratching my chin in thought, if my helmet was off. I exited out of this file and searched for a map of the area, and other mining sites. Fortunately, I found just that. Two more sites to the south, and their main site was to the west. Hopefully, the two other sites can get us the rest of that passcode. And if hostile exiles have a monopoly on Helium-3 here, I'd rather them not, so that the Initiative can have a good source of fuel.

"You do know that Helium-3 can also make some big explosives, right?" Vetra reminded.

"Ah shit, yeah. Right now, I'm just going to go along with hoping these hostile exiles are mining for fuel right now, though. Not happy with the thought of a separate faction targeting us specifically," I grumbled. "Doubt there's anything else for us in here. Let's get to those other sites, and then we'll find those colonists."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

We arrived at the main complex with the full security code. The other two domes offered relatively light resistance, but this one was larger. Two domes combined. Along the way, we had also seen the dome encompassing the Remnant site. We'd stop there before Sid's coordinates. We'd adjust our path in order to reach our destination. We'd stopped there before Sid's coordinates. We had also had some fun crossing craters with the speed boosts and vertical thrusters, giving us more significant airtime. And now we had adjusted so we could have some fun with it. We entered the airlock, and once more it restored the atmosphere, allowing us to leave our vehicle. Weapons hot. Adhi began charging our position by the door, but those were taken down with ease. And idiomatically, the exiles were placing themselves in cover below us and at a distance. That may not give the advantage to Drack or Vetra, but Jaal and I both can shine. We took cover against the
rocks, snipers out, with Vetra and Drack covering us. The Exiles had some snipers themselves, but were no match for combined fire. There were Asari trying to use their biotics to get close, but still, focused fire would take them down without much hassle.

When those hostiles were neutralized, we moved towards the next door to the next dome. I turned the corner and—ah shit.

"Get back!" I ordered, jumping back and avoiding the missile that shot past me. A turret. These fuckers have a turret. "Cloaking, I'll take care of the damn thing." I cloaked, got close, then got down onto a knee and opened a housing on the side of the turret's stand. Then I just began pulling wires. The turret shorted out, and then bent down, offline, and I de-cloaked. "It's clear, let's go," I informed, and led my team to the next dome. It was smaller, and housed little more than their base of operations. A Krogan was standing at the edge.

"Damn Nexus, do you know how much you've cost me? You'll repay it all with your damn blood!" He roared, and jumped down, charging towards us.

"Take care of his lackey's, I'll take down this idiot," Drack grumbled, gripping his Ruzad with anticipation. The Krogan seemed to recognize the challenge and ignored us as the other exiles opened fire. We had the lower ground this time. While it was tempting to end this with a single singularity, I remember my promise. Only the Remnant and Kett will taste that fury. I helped the team eliminate those amateurs via more conventional means, occasionally glancing back to see how Drack was doing. I think he was toying with him. As the last of the other exiles fell, Drack lifted his boot into the Krogan's quad, and then followed it up with a headbutt, staggering him. Drack readied his Ruzad, but instead of shooting, lunged forward and stabbed him right in the stomach, then pulled it back. The other Krogan struggled, attempting to wrestle the Ruzad away, but Drack pulling it back towards him, stumbling the Krogan, and Drack plunged the bayonet deep within his chest, and then pulled the trigger. The blood rage wouldn't help him there.

"Having fun there, Drack?" I remarked.

"Heh, with this guy? No, not the best fighter," Drack chuckled. We searched around the outpost for anything else. We did find one thing. An audio log.

"I don't want excuses, Krex. The dust on the surface isn't enough. If I want to take these Initiative colonies out, we'll need a helluva lot more Helium-3. I know that Remnant tiller in the conservatory will work. Get it running. Elora out." Alright, so this Elora cunt is targeting our colonies. Not on my fucking watch. I made a mental note of a name, I'm gonna run it by Reyes, so he can lead us in her direction.

"What the fuck is wrong with people?" Vetra muttered.

"What would even be the point? Senseless death, for what?" Jaal exclaimed.

"We'll put an end to her. But first, SAM, Remnant tiller?" I questioned the AI.

"I believe it's the site nearby. This planetoid is full of Element Zero, but it is deep within the surface. I believe that when activated, this Tiller will bring it to the surface, and could fuel Nexus ships for approximately three-hundred-sixty-eight years," SAM explained.

"Shit, we need that. Who the hell knows what we could discover with so much," I mused.

"SAM, send a message to Kandros. Let him know that exiles are out here trying to mine enough Helium-3 to bomb colonies, but a group here has been neutralized. Add in that we should soon
have a mountain of Helium-3 here," I ordered. "Same numbers you gave me."


Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We descended down the gravity well, and the entry room was heavily similar to that of the vaults. So that's likely what we can expect here, more or less. There was a console to the side that I tested, after we eliminated a pair of Observers who didn't approve of our entry, and it spawned yet another Observer. Yet this one was passive.

"It's programming is limited, but will perform simple tasks as commanded. I can transmit said commands," SAM informed.

"Couldn't I just use Zap?" I asked, as the bot came out of cloak beside me. Wait a second, he could have helped a lot with those exiles, how come I only just now remembered him?

"No, sorry Scott, you won't. I had to take out its Remnant decryption protocols to make it friendly," Peebee explained over the comms.

"Worth a shot," I shrugged. "Alright SAM, have him open the door. That console, I'm guessing," I pointed to a console that simply wouldn't interact with me. The Observer floated over and released a stream of data, and the door opened. The observer slowly leading us along. It was a large, mostly empty room ahead of us, and I'd bet that I could see the controls down at the far end. The Observer was leading us off to the right, past some other Remnant bots who weren't as friendly. But it was simply a few Assemblers and provided no Resistance. An Observer and Nullifier almost gave us pause, but a handful of tech attacks, and Zap melting down the Nullifier's armor were of rather significant boons in our fight. There was another console to the side in the room, that I ordered the Observer to activate, and it opened two smaller rooms with consoles. One was accompanied by a single light as I got close, and the other, two. I've seen this puzzle before. I activated the two consoles in order, and continued following the Observer down another hallway.

"Really? To open the door, we have to make the thing in front of it fry our shields? Why?" Vetra muttered.

"I'll cloak and jump over, then make a barrier. You all just join once I give the signal," I ordered, and did just what I said I would. There was a pair of Assemblers, a Nullifier, and an Observer. None of them could see me or the barrier I formed. "Now!" I ordered, and three bodies soared to my side, landing with thuds and opened fire on the machines. And on my word, Zap got to work on the Nullifier as well. The Assemblers were all taken down by Vetra sweeping her Cyclone left and right, and Jaal and Drack both neutralized the Observer. While I simply pulled out my shotgun and finished off the Nullifier. Another console, another set of doors, another piece of the puzzle. Done. We continued through the structure, solving a few more puzzles, scanning a few glyphs, and fighting off more Remnant. All the while following the Observer. We reached the area outside the main console, but there was a Destroyer present and it flared red, as it moved to engage.

"Focus fire! Focus fire! Tech attacks! All that shit!" I exclaimed as we dug into cover and it slowly moved forward, but this Destroyer was different. It wasn't shooting dual machine guns at us. Rather short-range explosive rounds!

"Don't let that shit get close!" Drack called out. It stopped and entered siege mode, and while it charged, it launched out two balls to the side. Two balls that formed into Observers.
"And it's making friends!" Vetra exclaimed, focusing her fire on the new threats. Fortunately, before the siege mode completed its charge, Jaal and I brought down a turret, staggering the destroyer. Vetra and Drack focusing on the Observers whenever more spawned from the machine. It got closer, and forced us to push back, staying out of range of its explosive rounds. We got to work on the other turret, but the destroyer was moving faster. And more Assemblers kept appearing. Not to mention it kept making goddamn Observers! It kept pushing us back. Even faster when we got the second turret down. And it's shields just didn't seem to be budging.

"Alright, fuck this," Vetra murmured, and raised her arm. Her Omni-tool flared and a shot struck the Destroyer in the center of its armored, shielded head and exploded violently. The head of the Destroyer was blown to smithereens, as well as any Observers and Assemblers close. The rest were easy to mop up.

"Fucking hell Vetra, what was that," I remarked, holstering my weapon.

"Cobra missile launcher. Very valuable, and not many of those missiles around. So, use them sparingly, Vetra explained.

"I'd ask for one, but then again, you said they're used sparingly, so," I chuckled. She shrugged, and I moved to the console. More Remdoku. The machinery hummed to life. The tiller was activated.

"I predict that within the next few years, Helium-3 production will increase dramatically," SAM informed.

"And what about immediate effects?" I questioned.

"Slowly rising, though at the moment, a hardly noticeable increase. In a week, however, that may be different. In a month? Dramatically." SAM answered.

"Then let Kandros and Tann both know these numbers. Our fuel concerns should be solved. Now, let's go get those colonists home."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Something was off. There was no one inside this dome, and SAM wasn't detecting any life signs. We entered the structure inside the dome cautiously. Weapons ready. No one was there. Anywhere. Just crates off to the side.

"Think we got here while they were out? Maybe moving the captives?" I suggested. Vetra sighed.

"I didn't want to say it to her with everything that's happened, but I had my doubts. I was really hoping she had a solid lead for us this time…” We kept searching, moving forward. Then I heard mechanisms firing. I looked down, and it was a laser tripwire. Well shit.

"Move!" I yelled out. Before either of us could even act the floor was pulled out from under us, sending us tumbling down. We landed hard in a lower level.

"I think the lead WAS solid," I groaned, standing myself up. I looked up to see Vetra rolling off Drack's chest.

"Sorry old man, wasn't trying to land on you," she muttered. And the door above us closed.

"Well sh-" Vetra began,
"Ah Nyx. So good to finally meet you. And you brought friends!" A woman's voice mocked over an intercom system. "That's even the Pathfinder, if I'm not mistaken. My bait worked better than expected." What?

"The settlers, eh?" I muttered.

"Who the hell are you anyway? Why are you kidnapping innocents?" Vetra questioned aloud.

"Innocents? They're criminals," the woman retorted. "You helped them get away from me. You think I'm gonna let that go? Get comfortable. You'll be here a while." Vetra appeared absolutely stunned. Confused. Her mandibles twitching.

"So, she get her names wrong?" I asked.

"I'm just as lost as you are," she managed to say. A door opened.

"It's ok, Vetra. You don't have to cover for us," A man reassured. I turned to see a large collection of colonists. Human, Turian, Asari, Salarian. The one who spoke was a human man, leading the group. He focused on me. "That was Meriweather. She runs a smuggling ring on Kadara. We worked for her. Vetra helped us get out of it. New lives, hiding in the outposts. Though not without the permission of those there," the man explained. I smiled, and turned to Vetra, who was still completely confused.

"Vetra, you're helping people. You've seen me get exiles back into the Initiative, you don't need to hide it from me." She threw her hands out to the sides.

"I know! And if I was doing that I wouldn't hide it! I didn't help these people!" Vetra exclaimed.

"Alright alright, I believe you. Guess someone was posing as you," I raised my hands to reassure her.

"I'm getting out of here," Vetra muttered, looking around for… something.

"We've tried. There's a door, but locked and unpowered. No other way out," the man called out.

"Then we power up and hack the door. There's always a way out," Vetra retorted. She sighed, and leaned back against the wall. "Scott, you have to believe me, I-" she began.

"Hey, don't worry about it. I trust you. And I know we'll get answers one way or another," I stated calmly. I turned to face the leader of the captives. "Who are you?"

"Name's Galloway," he answered.

"And did you ever meet Vetra face to face?" I asked, simply looking for that shred of proof I needed to help figure out who was posing as Vetra.

"No. We wanted off Kadara, and weren't quiet. She must have heard about it through contacts. She contacted us, made up assignments, got us free," he explained.

"So now we just get out of here and figure out who was posing," I confirmed. Show us the door," I requested. Galloway nodded and led us down a flight of stairs. The door was unpowered, and locked. Controls on the other side.

"So, how to power you up," I murmured to myself. A voice patched itself into our comms.

"I can open the doors from my end, but they're powered down. We need to get them going again,"
"That sounded like you, Vetra," Jaal remarked, confused.

"Who is this?" I asked. No answer.

"Who the hell… No, it couldn't be…" Vetra muttered. I looked at her, and she nodded her head to the side. I shrugged.

"Here, this is a generator. Appears intact," Jaal pointed to a large machine down here by the door. I tested it, it turned on, the light green.

"You guys have a power cable up there?" I called out.

"Yeah, hang on, bringing it down," A Turian called out. A moment later, he appeared, with the wire wrapped around and held on his shoulder. He handed it off and I connected it to the generator and then through a panel at the door.

"Door's online, and… there ya go!" the mysterious woman exclaimed. My team took out our weapons and led the colonists through the door and into the once abandoned mines. There was a catwalk between here and the next door, with a storage room to the side.

"Ah crud, hacking the door tripped a silent alarm. If the guards see Galloway and the others, they're dead, hide them!" she exclaimed. Crud? I don't think that's a Turian word.

"Get em in the storage room!" I ordered. The colonists rushed by and we led them safely inside. "Stay put! The rest of you, positions by the other door. Drack, take cover at the crate just outside. Jaal, trip mine at the door the guards are coming from, then re-join us," I ordered. Everyone nodded and did what they were told. Jaal rejoined us, and seconds, later the door opened, followed immediately by an explosion.

"God fucking damn it!" a merc exclaimed, he rushed out, followed by a Turian, both covered in blood. And then were riddled with bullets. I led the others back to the colonists, and opened the door.

"Is everyone okay?" the mysterious voice asked. Vetra keyed her comms.

"Sidera Nyx, you've been pretending to be me, haven't you?" Vetra questioned sternly. Well fuck me sideways, I didn't expect that. Galloway just appeared incredibly confused. A brow raised. Guess it would be weird having heard two Vetras talking to each other.

"Er, how did you-" she asked awkwardly.

"Think I don't recognize my own tricks? And stop using my voice!" Vetra ordered.

"Sorry, Vetra. It was just easier to get things done when people thought I was you. Gave me your credibility of contacts and everything," she answered meekly.

"Sid!" Vetra sighed, rubbing her forehead.


"Yeah, it was my kid sister," Vetra answered.

"Credit where it's due. This wasn't exactly easy to pull off," I remarked. "And it's good work." Vetra sighed again.
"It was good, yes, but incredibly dangerous, and the confusion has disrupted my contacts. Explains a few odd favors here and there. But more importantly, Sid, I know you're in the facility somewhere. Get back in your shuttle, and return to the Nexus! Let us handle this," Vetra ordered her sister. Yet finished more gently than she began.

"Vetra, I can help you all get out of here. And I'm not in the facility, I'm in my shuttle outside another entrance," Sid argued.

"You hacked a door without checking for safeguards. Look, we need experienced, careful, methodical help," Vetra retorted, still struggling to keep a gentler tone. I imagine Vetra would be fuming if what happened during the mutiny never happened at all.

"Teach me, then!" Sid pushed. Vetra sighed, and looked at me.

"If she can get us eyes on next rooms, then she can do that. Anything else is a bridge we cross when we get to it. But Sid, you need to stay ready to go at the drop of a hat. Push comes to shove, we can fight our way out normally," I stated.

"Alright, alright, just… listen closely, and carefully. Ok, Sid?" Vetra relented.

"Yes, V, I can do that," Sid answered.

"We'll stay put and follow when rooms are cleared. Rather not get caught in the crossfire," Galloway informed.

"Good. Seems like we only had one way to go. The same the guards came from. Sid?" I asked for clarification.

"Yep. Down the hall, through the mess hall," she confirmed.

"Weapons ready people, move," I ordered.

"Sid, while I'm glad you're trying to help, you should have told us," Jaal spoke over the comms.

"Jaal, I didn't because I knew Vetra wouldn't want me to. And I knew if I told any of you that I was helping these guys out, you'd tell her. Not trying to stop me, but she would," Sid defended.

"She may have been more receptive of the idea if you didn't hide it, kid," Drack retorted.

"We'll talk about this later," Vetra stated, a bit stern, but also, I think just stressed. I led the others up and through the same door the guards came from. And saw exactly what that trip mine did. Two other corpses, blown apart by the explosion. Through that small room was another hallway with a door at the end that was accompanied by a security camera panel. Sid could get us eyes on the next room.

"Just testing. Sid, see the colonists?" I asked.

"Yeah, they're keeping to the corners behind you. I'll keep an eye on them while you're moving ahead. Looks like you're just outside the mess hall. Giving you camera access," she informed. The console lit up with the next room. The guards, while armed, were just mulling around. Not taking anything that serious. There was a generator, and a door to the side. "Looks like I could overload that generator, take a few out. Or open that door for a… workshop. Has a few other security though." Sid warned.

"No, we can take these guys down easily. If you go messing around in there they'll track you
“down,” Vetra argued.

"Agreed. We'll only have you cause disruptions if we have to. Just go ahead and open the door," I supported Vetra.


"Care to do the honors, Drack?" I offered. He grinned. I opened the door and let him charge in. He fired a flak round into the middle of the mess, shredding apart several exiles, and then getting up close and personal with a few others who barely survived. Vetra, Jaal, and I easily put down those out of the round's range before they could get to Drack.

"Spirits… did you really have to kill them all?" Sid muttered. Vetra sighed.

"Yeah. They weren't surrendering, and they would have gone after the colonists," she explained.

"Yeah… Just… Never mind…" Sid muttered. "Take that passageway. It'll lead you through to… a room with cages?" she stated, confused by that. We continued along the path she pointed out.

"What the hell is happening? Who's messing with our security? Why are the feeds down?" Meriweather questioned.

"Sid, can you get those cameras to loop? Just keep playing back something?" I suggested.

"Trying, hard to keep their eyes off the colonists and you while still doing that," Sid answered.

"Then let them see us while you get it started. There seems to be only one way for us anyway," I argued.

"Alright, I'll try. But check what's on the other side of the door first," Sid suggested. "Woah, Galloway, stay where you are, guards in the corridor right by you! Aaaaaaaaand, clear. Go."

"Thanks," Galloway sighed, releasing a nervous breath. "That was a close one. I could hear animal noises in the next room. I checked Sid's footage. Plenty of cages, Adhi and other animals. Even a fiend at the back corner. And turrets, great.

"I can access the cages of the little animals, but not the big one. That runs on a closed network. As for the turrets, I could turn them off or re-write their protocols," Sid offered. I thought for a moment. I didn't like that those turrets were aimed right at the door.

"Turn off the turrets. Should be easier to hide than them going haywire and shooting everything. Then just keep cams off Galloway. Us? You can just let them see," I ordered.


"Good. Drack, take care of the pair right outside the door. Jaal, there's one at a catwalk at the upper back of the room. Take him down. Vetra, work with me to take down anyone else," I explained. With everyone ready, I opened the door. Drack charged in to take down the two surprised exiles, and Jaal snapped his rifle up and put an energy round right through an exile's skull.

"Ugh, do they not know how to ventilate?" Jaal muttered. This part of the room was clear, but I could hear shouting further in. And then the Fiend cage opened. Unfortunately for those idiot exiles, it wasn't exactly on anyone's side. It grabbed the Turian who opened the cage, and while he was screaming, chomped down, taking the entire upper half of the Turian into its mouth. It pulled its legs away, ripping them off and swallowing, blue blood covering its maw and dripping to the
floor then devouring what was left of the poor sod. Unfortunately for the fiend, it's Levo, and Turians are Dextro. For the moment, it didn't care. Simply lumbering along as the exiles turned to shoot at it and us at the same time.

"Fucking hell," Vetra muttered.

"Open fire on the exiles, we can take care of the fiend without those bastards shooting us," I ordered. We wiped them up as they were split between two foes, and now the fiend's attention was on us. We started opening fire on it, but then it roared out in pain, and lowered its head. It began vomiting. Turian limbs fell onto the floor, covered in bile and blood, as did the torso of the poor bastard. He was dead, no doubt, but still disgusting. The fiend was dry heaving still, and through its legs I could see rancid, putrid, liquid shit spewing out as the beast reacted badly to the large quantity of Dextro proteins. This whole time, it couldn't react to our bullets, or out movements. It gave one last vomit, this time, nothing but bile, and I lobbed a grenade into its mouth. It exploded, killing the fiend.

"Well, that was… messy," Jaal murmured.

"That thing was massive… and what it did… spirits. Uh, through the workshop. I think I need to vomit," Sid gulped.

"Really glad our helmets can filter the air," I remarked.

"Thank you for reminding me that exists," Jaal sighed. We continued on the route Sid gave us into a cave leading up.

"There's a fucking rat in the system. I want it caught. Double rations for the one that does it!" Meriweather exclaimed over the intercom.

"Sid, you better keep that shuttle warmed up," Vetra warned.

"Yeah, doing that," Sid stated, recovering from the very vomit she mentioned.

"Galloway, any trouble?" I questioned.

"No, you've cleared the place out well. Just following along," he confirmed.

"Good. Just plug your nose for the next room," I warned. We got to the next security console. Sid gave us a visual.

"Hydra pilot to the side working on his mech, guards walking around, mostly the lower levels, and more generators and barrels," I called out.

"The Hydra is in the network for maintenance. I can lock it down, blow up the generator, or knock over those barrels," Sid suggested.

"No, they're already looking for you, let's not give them leads," I answered. "I'll run straight towards the pilot, pull him away from the mech with my biotics, maybe hop inside myself. If that doesn't work, I should be in a good spot to light up that fuel tank. Everyone else just cover me," I ordered. We got in positions, I gave a countdown, opened the door and sprinted as the room's alarm went off. I could see the Hydra pilot around the corner jumping up in surprise before keying the Hydra to open its doors. He was just climbing inside when I turned the corner, but I reached out with my biotics and pulled him back. He lost his grip, crying out, as he flew towards me, but I released my grip and stepped to the side, letting him slam into the wall before putting a bullet in his head. With the opportunity, I jumped into the Hydra's cockpit, and gave SAM access so that I
could control it. Bullets were already pinging off the mech, when I stood it up and turned. This is gonna be fun. I could hear Drack laughing as I set the mech's laser sights to target several other exiles, and then a barrage of missiles was shot out, killing several. The rest were easily taken out by us and the mech's high explosive cannon.

"Spirits… this is awful… I mean, I know you guys do stuff like this, I know you need to, but… seeing it? Helping you do it? That's… different…" Sid murmured.

"I know, kid," Vetra sighed. "It's why I never wanted you getting involved in the things we do. The things I did. You can't have excitement and adventure if you can't handle the pain and blood…"

"...It's straight through the next door," Sid sighed.

"Got a visual?" I asked, having departed the mech and through the next door.

"Uh, looks like… shit." she whispered.

"Sid?" Vetra asked. Fear setting into both her tone and voice.

"I think… I think someone found my shuttle," she answered.

"GO! GET OUT OF THERE! NOW" Vetra exclaimed.

"Getting to the seat no-! Shit!" she replied, I heard a shuttle door open.

"NO NO NO NO NO! THEY FOUND HER! THEY'RE GOING TO KILL HER!" Vetra near panicked. "Why'd you have to go be the hero, Sid? Stupid! So, so stupid!" Vetra was about to cry.

"Vetra, it's better to try and be a hero than do nothing. And there's still time. Each and every one of these fucking assholes is going to fucking pay," I growled.

"If trying gets her killed… I'll kill her!" Vetra exclaimed, just nothing but fear for her sister. "You know what I mean! Try to trace her signal, it should take us right to her! Go!" Vetra continued, keying her omni-tool. This shit just got real fucking personal. "Just be careful. They have my sister," Vetra pleaded. Shit, turrets, Adhi, and exiles.

"Cloaking! I'll take the turrets down, get in cover!" I ordered, keying my cloak. I ran, and jumped over a crate.

"Pathfinder, there's a console. I can deactivate the turrets," SAM informed. I changed course immediately and interacted with the console over the sounds of gunfire. The turrets stopped firing and lowered. I uncloaked and helped finish off the exiles in the room.

"So, you're the one that's been killing my people!" Meriweather accused on the intercom.

"I didn't! I don't know how to shoot a gun! I just messed with security!" Sid defended, scared, nearly panicking herself.

"You want your fucking rat, Nyx? Come to me," Meriweather growled.

"Vetra!" Sid exclaimed through the intercom, and then it went silent.

"Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit," Vetra was repeating to herself, over and over again. I'll admit, I was a bit panicked myself. If they even lay a finger on her… We hurried into the next room, checking our corners but not wasting any time. Then the next room and… shit. Meriweather was at the far end of the room, Sid standing in front of her, arms in the air. Panicked, breathing hard. I
have little doubt what connection she's making here. A captive once more. And they weren’t alone. There was a shuttle behind them, likely Sid's, and a bunch of exiles with their weapons ready. Meriweather, with fire in her eyes, walked Sid forward, Meriweather was holding a grenade in her hand, thumbing the pin.

"Think very, very carefully about your next move Pathfinder," she warned.

"Let the kid go," Drack snarled.

"That explodes, it takes you out too," Jaal pointed out.

"You won't let that happen," she scoffed.

"Vetra..." Sid gasped, still struggling to keep her breathing relatively steady.

"It's going to be okay Sid. We'll get you out of this," Vetra reassured, her voice weak, and she almost lowered her gun.

"That's a goddamn kid you have there. She's not a threat, let her go," I warned.

"She hacked my security. And she's as tall as you are," Meriweather retorted.

"So, she knows tech, the hell does that matter? Besides, she may be tall but it doesn't matter if you don't know how to goddamn fight!" I argued.

"Guns on the ground!" she ordered. Alright, yeah... sure. I raised my hands into the air, holding my rifle barrel up, and the others followed suit. I squatted, and subtly aimed the barrel of my Sweeper towards Meriweather, my finger still on the trigger. More exiles came out to reinforce by the shuttle. I pulled the trigger, the bullet striking Meriweather in the arm and she dropped the grenade, but without the pin. Sid stumbled forward out of Meriweather's reach and ran towards us, the exiles began firing, and Meriweather began running back. With pure, unadulterated fury in my eyes, I picked up the grenade biotically and threw it towards the group of exiles, Drack rushed forward to soak up any bullets for Sid as Vetra pulled her back. Drack's shields appeared to take enough, but a few rounds were striking him. Benefits of a Krogan. Then I did something that I didn't expect. With the fury I felt that these motherfuckers were threatening to kill Sid, to kill Vetra, to kill us all, my sympathy for Sid with everything she's been through, with how much I care for both of them.

I formed a singularity, pouring all my biotics into making one in the center, above this mass of hostiles, all those motherfuckers, that cunt Meriweather. It formed, and it was large. All those exiles lost their footing, slowly being lifted into it. They were screaming, panicking even. They deserved every bit of it. At least that's how I felt in my complete rage. I watched as each exile floated into oblivion. Fittingly, the last was Meriweather. She let out a final scream as her foot crossed the threshold, and then she was gone. Absolutely gone. The singularity must have destabilized the platforms, as the two holding shuttles collapsed, both them, and the shuttles falling deep within the mines.

"Sid? You ok?" Vetra asked, still trying to get herself to relax.

"I... I'm, fine, I think..." Sid breathed.

"Guess we won't be getting you to your shuttle then," Vetra remarked, trying to find some humor.

"I think I might need a ride," Sid struggled to chuckle.
"We can squeeze you in," I added.

"I… I didn't mean for any of this. I'm sorry, ok?" Sid cried, sliding down against the crate she was behind, holding her head in her hands.

"Shhhhhhhhh, it's ok, they can't hurt you anymore," Vetra reassured, gently rubbing her sister's back, kneeling beside her. "You can't mess with people on Kadara. They're dangerous."

"THE NEXUS ISN'T SAFE EITHER, VETRA! IF IT WAS, THAT MONSTER WOULDN'T HAVE TRIED TO RAPE AND KILL ME!" Sid yelled out, tears streaming down her face. This shocked Vetra, and she reeled back. Hell, it shocked all of us. "NO WHERE IS SAFE DAMNIT!" Sid cried. "The most I can do, is help make places safe. So that nothing like what happened to me happens to anyone ever again. These guys… they wanted to start over. To not be exiles anymore. No one else was giving them a chance. I could. I can help. Do you know how much I wish I could start over? Just… go back to that day, and never leave ops? Never leave home? So that it never would have happened?" Sid cried. "If I can't start over, the next best thing is help other people start over," Sid finished quietly. Vetra was still in shock, struggling to reply. All she could do, was lean down and wrap her sister in a hug. And I think she was starting to cry herself. I got down on Sid's other side, resting my hand on her shoulder.

"These are good people who made bad choices. You did the right thing Sid. Be proud of that. You did the right thing. And I hope you know, that if any one of us could help you start over, we would do it in a heartbeat," I reassured.

"You still should have talked to me, Sid. I would have helped those people, kept you safe. You've already seen so much… you shouldn't have to add on the ugly stuff I deal with," Vetra continued.

"You started out younger than I am. You managed alright. Vetra, this helps make it better," Sid argued.

"But- you saw what we did here," Vetra continued.

"Yeah, I was shocked at first. But… I understand now. If it still helps people, I can handle it. Please Vetra," Sid pleaded.

"Sid… I don't want you to have to. You are the one thing in life I care for the most. Above all else, you are the most important. If something happened to you… if you…" Vetra sighed. "Everything I've ever done, every little thing, has been me trying to give you the greatest, happiest, safest life you could ever have. That's all I want in life. For you to be safe and happy," Vetra explained sadly.

"Then let me do something that makes me happy. Teach me so that I can be safe doing it," Sid finished. Vetra looked at me, tears still stained her face, her normally emerald green eyes marked by blue, thanks to the blood vessels within flaring.

I nodded my head.

"Ok. When all this settles down, when we're done, I'll teach you," Vetra relented.

"Thank you," Sid murmured, hugging her sister.

__________________________________________________________

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Back on the ship, Vetra had immediately taken Sid to Lexi to have her checked out, just in case, then her quarters. On the ride back, Jaal had been almost mother-henning Sid the whole way, while
Drack remained the quiet yet comforting grandpa that he is. Currently, I was sitting in my quarters, letting the sisters have their time.

Vetra entered my quarters, stressed.

"Hey, sorry, Sid's in my room and I need to rant without her feeling guilty or angry," Vetra apologized.

"Hey, don't worry, with today, you need it," I reassured, turning around in my chair. She began pacing around the room.

"Yeah, thanks. I get influence with major power players only to have her squander it by using my name. You know she had the genome for… what? Cats? I think? Pulled from storage?" Vetra explained, exasperated. "One, there's no room to grow anything right now. Two, apparently, they aren't even food. Why?" It would be rude, and bad of me to laugh right now. She came to me needing to vent.

I laughed.

"What's so funny?" she questioned, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Sorry, sorry, that's just precious that she did that, and amazing that you're confused with it not being food. Species barrier," I chuckled. "Cats are fluffy little animals, lots of people love them, and make them happy. I prefer dogs though."

"Are we really in a position to put amusement over necessity?" Vetra questioned rhetorically. "Tries to help everyone, damn the consequences."

"Remind you of yourself?" I smirked. She gave me a hard glare.

"...yes." she answered reluctantly, looking down sheepishly. "She thinks what we do is so exciting, but doesn't understand what it takes," Vetra continued.

"Vetra, what we do is exciting. We make people's lives better," I argued. Her eyes widened and she stopped to think.

"You make it sound so wonderful. We see some real shit," Vetra murmured.

"But we don't quit. Because what we do matters," I pushed. She nodded slowly.

"It does, doesn't it? Even on the worst days, knowing we make a difference…"

"To make a difference is all Sid wants," I reminded gently.

"And if she gets herself into another mess? What if she gets hurt?" Vetra recited her fears.

"Whatever happens," I stood, placing a hand on her shoulder, looking her straight in the eye. "I'm here for the both of you. I care about Sid, I care about you. I'll always be here," I stated gently. Felt really, really tempting to just kiss her, right here, right now.

"Scott… I… I don't know what to say," Vetra lowered her gaze, mandibles flaring in a blush.

"You don't have to say anything, Vetra," I stated, hugging her lightly. Yeah, I wussed out.
I was sitting back on my couch, head in my hands, chastising myself for not telling her. I had a chance there, and I didn't take it. The ship was on its way to Kadara, and Sid was fine staying on board until our next Nexus stop. Fortunately, she didn't need much convincing to stay on the ship while on Kadara. I was shaken out of my little stupor when my Omni-tool was ringing from a call. Reyes? Must have something good for us. And hey, I wanted to talk with him anyway. I answered.

"Hey Reyes, what's going on?" I greeted.

"Well I just saw an Initiative shuttle speed into Kadara's atmosphere and then crash land somewhere up north. Thought you might like to know. Air traffic control says it was leaking radiation too. Weird," he informed.

"Might be nothing special," I shrugged. But we'll check it out. Anyways, while we're talking, I meant to run a few names by you," I remarked.

"I'll tell you what I can about them. So?"

"Two names. One is a person, one is a group. The person is Elora. We heard her name out in the Remav system, a group of exiles mining Helium-3 to bomb Initiative outposts," I explained.

"Sounds like her," Reyes scoffed. "I know who she is. She's very vocal about her hate for the Initiative, seems to stay around Kadara's wind farm. Honestly, I didn't even know she had an operation like this going on. Just another disgruntled exile bitching."

"Then I'll be sure to pay her a visit. So, the other name is for a group called the Three Sabers. They've been raiding Initiative transports, and they seem to have a mole."

"Hm, yeah, I know the name, they are based here, and I can give you the specific coordinates, but I can't say I know anything of this mole. Sorry," Reyes answered.

"Well here's hoping they have something around there. Thanks Reyes, we'll take a look at that stuff, then get that vault online."

"Good, maybe then the water, even filtered, will stop tasting like a Krogan's asshole," Reyes chuckled.

"And thank you for that wondrous image. Talk to you later," I ended. I got an alert of another email and was about to go open it, when I got another call. Captain Dunn? Haven't spoken to her in a while. Curious as to what she wanted, I answered.

"Hey Dunn, haven't spoken in a while. How's Hyperion?" I greeted.

"Scott, I know this is rude, and I'm sorry for ignoring the pleasantries, but we need to talk, now. Are you somewhere private?" she questioned, her tone entirely serious. I went into business mode myself.

"Yeah, I'm in my quarters. What's wrong?"

"Short version? One of Harry's medtechs snuck a relative on board. Woke them up, cut them loose.
The problem is that she has a rare illness. It's not contagious in the early stages, but in the later ones… I already had someone discreetly ask around for her, but then we reported an un-approved shuttle take off, hijacked by the very woman in a fit of Hysteria. One of the symptoms of the later stages. To make things worse, it's deadly, and has crossed the species barrier. Even Turians. No cure, no vaccine," Dunn explained.

"Fucking hell, this idiot exposed the entire Initiative to what could potentially start a goddamn plague?" I exclaimed.

"I've handled it. It's been kept quiet on this end, but it needs to be completely solved quiet and fast. You're the only one who can discreetly track her. Her shuttle is leaking radiation thanks to a tech, and her name is Ruth Bekker. If this gets out to the Angara, or spreads among the exiles, or if it even gets to one of our colonies, it's bad news," Dunn warned. She was right, this did need to be handled quickly. The panic caused by a potential plague would make containing anything that much more difficult.

"Wait, you said it was leaking a radiation trail?" I asked her to confirm.

"Yes, we were hoping you could use that to track her," Dunn answered.

"I just got word from a contact on Kadara that an Initiative shuttle, leaking radiation, crash landed there. Shit, I'll see what he can do about getting people to keep away, but at least we're already on our way," I explained.

"Kadara? Shit. Angara, exiles, poor living conditions… That'll be a problem We might, MIGHT, be able to contain an outbreak there, but only if Sloane plays ball," Dunn warned.

"We'll take care of it before that happens," I reassured.

"I certainly hope you do. Dunn out," she ended. I immediately called Reyes back.

"Well that was fast, some-" Reyes began.

"Reyes, I need you to do EVERYTHING you can to keep people away from that shuttle. It was hijacked by a woman with an extremely deadly disease. It infects both Dextros and Levos, if this gets out, it's a goddamn plague, and if it gets to the Angara?" I asked rhetorically.

"Shit, I'll see what I can do, but me telling people to not go will only encourage it," Reyes warned.

"Then… well, Sloane doesn't trust me, she wouldn't but… maybe the Collective. Can you pass it along to them, get them to set up guards keeping them away? Fully sealed off?" I suggested. Reyes was silent for a moment.

"I'll try. I can't make any promises, but I'll try," Reyes answered. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's all I need. We'll be there shortly. Scott out." I crashed down onto the sofa, having stood up to nervously pace the room. Shit. A plague. Just about anything else, I can shoot, break, blow up, any number of things. But a fucking plague? One without a cure or vaccine? You can get infected and not even know until you're already dying a slow, painful death. And for this disease in particular, losing control of parts of your mind. That is… just… fuck no. Right now, I feel something that I don't normally feel. Not on almost every mission we've had so far.

I wasn't just afraid, that's normal. I was terrified.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We pulled the Nomad up alongside the crashed shuttle. Vetra, Drack, Peebee, and I were both fully suited up, completely sealed off from the environment. At the very least, the virus wouldn't infect any of us. But things just seemed to be piling up, just on our way here. We got an S.O.S, which, hell, could probably be something with the virus, and an Angaran town with corpses all over. At least we know that can't be related to the plague, they wouldn't be dead yet. I did have at least one re-assurance, though. The pass into this valley was blocked off by a Collective checkpoint, and upon seeing our vehicle approaching, they wordlessly moved out of the way, allowing us to pass through.

The shuttle was mostly intact, but the thrusters were still entirely destroyed, and the shuttle door was open. We found an audio log on the ground.

"This is Ruth Bekker," she groaned, then coughed. "Shuttle's crashed. I think I'm in stage three of TH-314. The virus was dormant. I don't understand," she coughed again. "I can't let anyone near me. I'm going to set the warning buoys, and rig the shuttle to blow." I paused the recording.

"Shit, get back, now!" I ordered, and we ran into the Nomad, bringing it and us back to avoid the explosion. The shuttle blew up, burning, all traces of the virus there, hopefully dead. I pressed play on the recording.

"I'm scared. I'm alone but-I can't take the risk. I'm so sorry," the woman cried. "I- who's there? No! No, wait! Stay away from me, you can't," she panicked, and the log ended. Shit shit shit shit shit. I got out and hurriedly scanned for tracks. This is bad. Angaran tracks. I ran back into the Nomad, following the path.

"Angara found her, took her looks like, they have no idea…" I murmured aloud. I could feel beads of sweat forming on my forehead. There was a structure ahead, and Angara around. That must be where-shit. The building was flying the Roekaar banner. That's not good at all. I drove the Nomad behind some supply crates and got out of cover, the Roekaar were already shooting the Nomad. The resistance here was light, as it seems this was merely an outpost, and even then, the Roekaar don't usually put up a great fight anyway. Being Resistance rejects, mostly, or just hotheads.

"They don't seem to be sick. First symptoms are heavy coughs and what-not, right?" Peebee asked.

"Could just be that the virus hasn't taken hold yet, or simply not exposed yet," I retorted. We killed the Roekaar outside and entered the first level. There was an Angara without armor, in a kind of lab coat and mask working, but upon seeing us grabbed a gun and began shooting. The rounds only bounced off our shields before we put him down too. I glanced at his notes.

"Says here the Angara are immune, but that they're also looking to kidnap more Milky Way to spread the disease. Seems like we may be able to end this right here, right now," I called out, breathing another sigh of relief. We made our way to the upper level, and put down another two Roekaar. There was only one part of the outpost left. Where they were keeping Ruth, and any other sick. "Check your suits, one more time," I whispered the order, we were all still fully sealed off. Gun raised, I entered, we hadn't seen anyone who might have been a leader, after all. Ruth, looking incredibly pale, was standing in front of a Roekaar, her hands raised in the air. And with the barrel of a gun behind her.

"Stay back, or I kill it!" he threatened.

"No, no, no! I have TH-314, I'm contagious! Don't come near me!" Ruth panicked.
"Quiet," the Roekaar growled. "Human, let me go, or this one dies." Inside my helmet, I raised a brow, his only exit, is the same door I'm standing in. He can't possibly get out of here alive.

"I see an Angara, but all I hear is Kett. They must have worked more on their exaltation," I retorted, rifle still raised.

"Quiet! You know nothing!" the Roekaar growled. "Your people and the Kett are all invaders. The Roekaar will kill you all!"

"You can't let him go. I think he has a sample of the virus," Ruth warned.

"You have a choice, human. Save this woman, or try to stop me." I will admit, it was tempting to just let Ruth die. End the threat of this plague. But there was another way. Even though SAM informed that scans confirmed the virus sample, yet it was heavily degraded, we're not letting him walk out of here. I focused my biotics, and subtle moved my hand to project a small barrier behind Ruth, just ahead of the barrel of the gun. With the small size, it should be able to withstand the blast. Meanwhile, my own rifle was still trained on the Roekaar's forehead.

"Peebee, give me a hand with those biotics, would you? Barrier behind Ruth," I whispered over the comms. In our suits, not like the Roekaar would hear me, after all. I could feel the strength to the barrier increase.

I pulled the trigger. As did he. My round went straight into his head, frying his brains, and Ruth shrieked, stumbling to the side, but unharmed.

"How..." Ruth murmured.

"Biotics. Wait right in that corner, don't move, we'll find a way to transport you safely," I reassured.

"A stasis pod. They have a stasis pod in here. It's where they keep me unless they're getting samples," Ruth coughed. I went to the pod in the other end of the room, scanned it. It would do. I opened it for her, and she meekly got inside. "Thank you," she whispered, before it closed. I ran another scan, the exterior of the pod was clean of the virus, so there's that, and I brought it outside, then called Dunn. She answered a moment later.

"What's the status?" she questioned.

"Ruth was found by Roekaar who tried to weaponize the virus. We stopped them, and learned that at least the Angara are immune. Ruth is alive and in a stasis pod. Can you arrange a shuttle transport?" I requested.

"That's a relief. I'll requisition a shuttle, but I'm unsure of its safety on Kadara," Dunn trailed off.

"I have doubts that Sloane would shoot down an Initiative shuttle, but I have an idea to ensure your safety," I reassured.

"Then the shuttle is on its way. Coordinates?"

"Sent. Just glad this is over," I ended. Dunn chuckled, and ended the call. As for my idea? We immediately returned to the Collective checkpoint. They had expected us to just move along, but I parked, and got out.

"Who's in charge here?" I questioned. A woman walked over, and removed her helmet. Red hair, blue eyes, a confident smirk. The same one as before.
"Fancy meeting you here. Virus contained?" the woman asked.

"It is. The infected woman is alive and in a stasis pod. A Nexus shuttle is on its way to bring her back, and keep her in stasis until a cure is found. Think the Collective can ensure its safety?" I requested. The woman nodded.

"We'll make sure they don't have any trouble. Oh, and by the way, I'd bet you want to investigate that S.O.S? Yeah, we checked that out. Couple of potheads with a dying UV light for their little farm. We were about to just leave, but hey, they paid us," she shrugged.

"Why am I not surprised that a couple of guys smuggled weed onto the Initiative?" I chuckled.

"Believe it or not, it wasn't cannabis. It was just some shit that grows here and is almost exactly the same," she shook her head, smirking.

"Almost?"

"Different because you can say it's medicinal, and it's genuinely curing you of quite a few diseases. Sure as hell not a cure all, but a good commodity to have here," the woman remarked.

"I suppose you'll be seeing them again sometime soon," I mused.

"Of course. We'll send it off to the doc," she remarked. "Now, if that's all, Pathfinder, we need to ensure that your shuttle is protected. But the Charlatan sends their regards."

"Oh, there is one thing. I'd like to be able to contact The Collective. Whether that's you, or someone else, just in case I find something, looking for intel, et cetera, et cetera," I remarked. The woman nodded, and typed in her Omni-tool, a message to me, establishing a means of context. She gave a mock salute, the Collective got into their vehicles, and left. Simple as that.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

I had called Reyes and told him everything was clear, much to his relief. After that, we had investigated the Angaran town. Apparently, they all died from the water. This wouldn't, shouldn't have happened, but we learned their filters had been destroyed or stolen. Notes there mentioned how they were making money off those living in the badlands who just wanted clean water. Can't say I approve of it, as some Angara were troubled by what they felt to be extortion, but it is also them competing in an environment like Kadara. Other notes also hinted that it may have been Charybdis point that was responsible, as soon after they started getting sick, Charybdis point was made. Curious, we snuck over there and its filters? The missing Angaran ones. The Turian running the place found us down there, and apparently didn't exactly want anyone knowing that secret. He ordered his men to kill us, but we put them down. Felt bad that we put an end to a safe place here on Kadara, but… there's an idea. I contacted the Collective woman.

"Miss me already? A girl might get suspicious," she teased. "So?"

"Hey, if you didn't want me calling," I retorted with a chuckle. "Anyways, that town of dead Angara just by the valley pass? Had their filters stolen by the guys at Charybdis point. We confirmed, and confronted them, they pulled out weapons. Now, I don't like taking away a safe haven in the badlands, and was wondering if maybe, just maybe, this could become a Collective Operation. Or a front. One or the other," I suggested.

"And could gather more support for us. I'm sold. I'll pass it along to my superiors. Thanks, Pathfinder," she ended the call. Well, next up, the Monolith. On our way there, however, there was
an open, short range broadcast. Kadara's infamous homebrewed ale.

"Hey, Kesh's people were asking for something like that. Check it out?" Drack requested. I turned, and found a shuttle resting on the shore of the lake that I hope could be the location of a future outpost. A Turian man was leaning against some crates of the booze. He cocked his head back as a gesture to approach.

"Bottle of your hardest stuff," I requested. The man's mandibles flared slightly, a grin.

"Uh, Scott, this is for my granddaughter, remember?" Drack reminded.

"Riiiiiight, make that six," I replied.

"Seven. I'll have one too," I groaned slightly, as I raised my Omni-tool. But Drack lowered my arm, and activated his own, transferring the credits. "Think you could drop this off at our ship?" Drack asked.

"I may not be allowed to do business in the port anymore, but I could get it there…” the Turian trailed off.

"We're getting seven bottles. We could just walk away and find someone else," Drack warned. The Turian huffed.

"It'll be there." Drack nodded his reply to the Turian, and we got back into the Nomad, then took a swig of his drink.

"Hard stuff. A dozen of these and I might feel a buzz," Drack chuckled.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The third Monolith was online, and the Nomad was parked outside the vault entrance. And we had just reached the bottom of the gravity well. There was nothing right away to suggest what we needed to do, simply one, lone console online, at the back of the room. The emergency power one. The vault hummed with power and three shield domes, ones that would collapse our shields, formed around three consoles that had just risen from the ground. There didn't seem to be any pattern. I went to the left most one first, and when activated, the console descended, and the shield barrier strengthened my shields rather than depleted them. I repeated the process for the other two. With the last console, the door opened. Another large, spacious cavern, with a few Remnant here and there on patrol. We continued. Below the platforms we were walking on, was a lake of that Omni-gel like fluid. Not one you want to step in. There was a console keeping one set of pillars up, allowing access to the right, but could be changed to access the left. As it hardly seemed like a return to this console would be difficult, we followed the path already set up, eliminating the pair of Assemblers patrolling above. There was nothing valuable up there for us, other than a bridge that led us to the other side of the cavern. Perhaps the long way to the vault controls. We passed a shield barrier protecting a container, which we would keep in mind for later, and there was more Remnant patrolling on the far side of the 'lake.' We put them down so they wouldn't trouble us later. On the rest of our side of the cavern, however, was a large Remnant door, protected by two Assemblers, an Observer, and a Nullifier.

"Hold here for a moment, I'll take down the Nullifier, and sic Zap on the Observer," I explained, and entered my cloak. Carefully, I moved behind the Nullifier, and gently attached a grenade to the back of its core. Then I ordered Zap to begin firing on the Observer in ten seconds. It decloaked, and shadowed the Observer, charging its weapons, unnoticed by the other Remnant. I returned to
the team and de-cloaked, just as Zap began firing, then detonated my grenade. Peebee and Vetra finished off the Assemblers as Zap's beam broke through the Observer's shields, and melted its core. The Remnant here were neutralized.

"Hey, Scott, there's another door to the side," Peebee called out. I looked to my right, where Peebee had called from, and she was right. A slightly smaller door on that side. Worth investigating both. We started with the one we saw first, climbing up to the door itself, using a console to give the door, power, then opening said door. It was a large open hallway, leading to an open, high-ceiling room. A shield bubble that would drain our shields ahead. We approached cautiously, and then a Destroyer formed just in front of us.

"Shit!" I exclaimed, and we dove back into cover. Peebee and I both unleashed Tech attacks on those Turrets as Zap got to work as well. Drack and Vetra were both just shooting, Vetra's disruptor rounds helping our tech attacks. We managed to neutralize both turrets and it entered siege mode. We gave everything we had to its core, and managed to break through the shields, causing its core to blow up with the few extra rounds that struck there. With the Destroyer dead, we could investigate the room. It appeared empty, but Peebee found a console up atop the structure at the center of the room. I wonder what the purposes of these square, rectangular structures were. Decoration? The console gave us more Remdoku, but with Peebee's aid, was solved rather quickly. Given experience, the flood of data was hardly a surprise. But the room had nothing else to offer, and so we investigated the other.

This one was a small hallway that turned hard to the left. And Assemblers within. We let Vetra mow them down with ease. Around the bend, a door with a flickering display of six glyphs. Around the rest of the room, six consoles, with a flickering display of a single glyph for each. This wouldn't be hard to figure out. I matched the order the glyphs appeared to the door to the console, and it opened. Peebee gasped and ran inside, her scanner running wild. Machines housing data, displays of data on the walls, and best of all, a data core. She quite happily and eagerly pocketed it.

"So much… I might be able to give Zap a few new toys," she mused.

"Wouldn't turn that down," I remarked. We backtracked, and were confuse by the lack of a console that would bridge the gap between the sides of the lake. I didn't want to tempt fate by trying to jump across. We returned to the first console in this cavern to see if it may give us the solution, and it did. A collection of low platforms leading straight across.

"This will make our escape a lot easier. We'll clear out the rest, then Peebee, we'll bring you back so you can stay by the shielded door, loot, and move," I explained. We crossed, and had to activate another console to open the door leading to the vault's heart. This removed the platform closest to ours, but we could likely manage. Inside, five shield domes, five consoles. No bots. Yet. There didn't appear to be an order, so we simply repeated the process of the Vault's entrance. The second console caused the creation of an Observer and an Assembler, but that was hardly a concern for us. We quickly put them down and continued. The third console called for an Observer and two Assemblers.

"Wow, are they even trying to stop us?" I chuckled. The fourth console apparently only called for a completely identical response.

"This is more of an annoyance than anything," Drack grumbled. The fifth and final console? A Nullifier, an Observer, and an Assembler.

"Well, at least it's actually a slight step up now," Vetra remarked, as the last of the bots fell.

"Alright, activation console is ready. Let's get Peebee back to that door, then come back. They
followed, but turns out we didn't even need to follow that path. Off to the side, was a console that formed larger pillars that carried Peebee across, and she was waiting at the shield, ready to nab whatever she could. Vetra and Drack decided to just stay by her, leaving me to return to the activation console and begin my sprint. I turned, started keying my omni-tool, then activated the console. Running for my life. I ran, I jumped, I dashed to cross the gap. As I passed, I called for the others to move, but kept running, trusting them. I ran to the console, the death bubble was close, but not enough for major concern. And the others were right there, I activated the console, and the field was pulled back. Peebee, Vetra, Drack, now at my side.

"Still gives me a rush," Peebee chuckled.

"Think it's impossible to not get one. Let's go check the water," I suggested, and up the grav lift we went. Outside, we approached one of the small pools that were surrounding the vault entrance, some of which had been on fire, yet were no longer. A good sign. I got onto the shoreline, and ran a scan. The water had cooled down significantly, cool enough to drink, though it wouldn't be too refreshing. Granted, that's not to say it's no longer cooling down. As for the content, the sulfur had also diminished drastically, with a pH of seven. It's safe.

"SAM, does Kadara have a local broadcast, or intercom network or… something, that you can tap into?" I asked.

"A moment… yes, it does." SAM answered.

"Can you change the feed?"

"I can."

"Wonderful. Vetra, stand in front of me and let SAM use her helmet's cam, would you?" I requested. Vetra nodded, and stood, though also appeared confused. I pulled out my canteen, and took off my helmet, clipping it to my belt. "Do it SAM."

"Feed is now live. All of Kadara can see and hear you," SAM confirmed.

"Gooooooood moooorniiiiiiing Kadara! Or evening, whatever it is here. Anyways, I am Pathfinder Scott Ryder, and boy do I have some great news for you. My team and I just activated the Remnant Vault here. Don't know what the Remnant are, or what a vault is? Well, I could go and explain it, but why don't I show you?" I suggested, grinning with dramatic flair. I dumped my canteen, and made a show of it. I bent down, Vetra still watching, and filled the canteen with water from the pool. "Now, I know what you're thinking. This idiot is about to poison himself. Thing is, I just ran scans that confirmed it is safe to drink. Why? The vault. Now, I don't expect you to take my word for this, so, maybe you'll accept this." I took a big swig of my canteen, removed it from my lips, and clearly swallowed. "Still tastes like ass, but here I am, not poisoned. Now, some of you won't believe me, and some of you will think that I'm going to demand a kind of payment for our work here. For the latter, I'm not asking for anything. I'm just letting you know that the water is now safe. For the former? What would I achieve? One person would test, he'd die, and then you'd all be after my ass. I'd have gained nothing. With that, this is Pathfinder Ryder, signing off," I ended, a grin and a salute, as SAM cut the feed. I dumped my canteen again.

"That'll draw some attention," Vetra mused.

"It will. Right now, though, I'm more concerned with getting this horrendous taste out of my mouth," I groaned. Vetra chuckled, and handed her canteen over. Normally, I'd probably be concerned with saliva. Especially from a dextro, making anything weird. But… I both really want this taste out of my mouth, and hey, maybe it'll get my body slightly used to it ahead of time. If
"Thanks," I replied as I handed the canteen back to her. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Vetra
removed her own helmet, hesitated a moment, then took a drink herself. She had been looking at
me when she went for a swig, but I must have turned my head slightly as we both immediately
looked away. Drack just let out a huff of air, shaking his head with a grin. I knew exactly what he
was thinking. I turned the Nomad towards the south east, the location Reyes had given us for the
Three Sabers. On our way, Reyes had leaked to us that a group related to Elora had a stockpile of
weapons just near the Sabers, and I also got a message from people I had nearly forgotten about.
The Hacktivists that tried to kill SAM. They were allowing me to visit them. Their base was on
Kadara. But right now, they could wait. We destroyed the stockpile, easily neutralizing the few
exiles that were there, and doing so, we had a rather nice view over the Saber's hideout.

They had a shuttle pad and a main structure, but we couldn't see anyone on the outside. We got
close, and then the Pirates left the building, guns blazing. We parked and took cover behind an
exile vehicle. Though they started strong with the surprise, the pirates, ranging from each Initiative
species, lacked the same kind of combat training we had. Then a shuttle landed, dropping off more
Sabers, likely from another raid. Drack led us in a charge so that we could get both ground and
cover at the building. We had already mopped up most on the lower level, so the charge
succeeded, and we set up a kill zone along the bridge to the shuttle pad, mowing down the pirates
trying to cross. The door behind us opened, but before I could shoot, Zap melted a hole through the
Turian pirate's forehead. Finally, the shooting stopped. We searched through their armory. They
had stockpiled weapons and armor. Even an Anti-air rocket launcher.

"The hell? This is top end gear. We don't trade this stuff, and it was never marked stolen," Vetra
stated, confused. "Wait, is that? Yeah, a lot of meds, rations, survival supplies. Some of these are
marked stolen, some of them not. Someone on the Nexus had to have given them this."

"I'll mark this place for Kandros to confiscate. We need this back," I agreed.

"Hey, found a data pad," Peebee tossed it to me. I read it aloud.

"I don't want to hear about it. You all knew ousting Yale would make the break with the Nexus
final. No loss; that teat was running dry. Going independent isn't just the smart move, it's the only
move. Now we've got the gear and the freedom to take over this place. Angara? Not a problem.
Hear Yale's on Eos. Forget him. He won't talk. Anything he brings up will expose his involvement,
and the Nexus' involvement. He's not going to put himself in that position. - Cochrane." Nexus
involvement? What does that mean?

"I think we need to pay this Yale a visit," Vetra murmured.

"What I don't like is 'Nexus involvement,'" Drack remarked.

"Yeah, Eos is gonna have to be a stop sooner or later. In the meantime, we still have more to do
here.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

SAM had narrowed down the location of the security vid on the Nexus that Spender was in. The
one on Kadara. To the south west of the port. We were almost there, when I got a call from Reyes.

"Hey there, showman. You know, the whole, Jesus turning water into wine thing is impressive, but
I think I much prefer turning sulfuric acid into water," he remarked.
"Please, do not start worshipping me," I chuckled.

"I'll try. So, surprisingly, I'm calling because I need a little help," he began.

"You're a needy guy," I replied.

"Stop being useful and I'll stop asking," Reyes retorted. "So, business rival. Zia Cordier. She lifted cargo I was moving for a client," he explained.

"And you need a bit of help getting it back."

"Well, we worked so well together on the Roekaar job, I thought you'd be willing," Reyes trailed off.

"Should I bother asking what the cargo is?"

"Don't even know myself. Paid extra," he answered.

"And how was it stolen?"

"Pulled her classic move. Got the middleman drunk, stole the ship."

"50/50." I stated. Reyes chuckled.

"60/40? You're not exactly in need of credits," Reyes argued.

"Yeah sure. Taking care of a few other things, though," I warned.

"I figured as much. When you're done, come back to the port, and to Kralla's song. Zia normally drinks there, might pick something up."

"Sounds like a plan. See you then," I confirmed. We began approaching the complex, when there were detonations all in front of the Nomad. Land mines.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!" Vetra exclaimed as I pulled the Nomad over. We got out, and carefully began walking. I could see a form look out over, then turn, yell at others, then run off. We quickened our pace. A shuttle flew away. Damn. Ah but then, then we saw bullets flying out towards the shuttle, heard yelling, more exiles running to the edge of the landing pad, flipping off the shuttle.

"It left without them?" I remarked questioningly.

"Ha, beautiful," Drack rumbled with laughter. It seemed like we were out of the minefield now, and moved up the stairs of the complex, weapons ready. We got inside the one building there before anyone joined us, and it seemed like before any of them made it to this area again either. I began lobbing grenades, farther away first, then closer, trapping them along and pushing them into our line of fire, while Drack got plenty of enjoyment shooting out flak rounds, and Vetra worked on mowing down others. Peebee just launched a few shockwaves. The fall would likely incapacitate anyone who falls off, at best.

"DAMN IT, WHY THE FUCK COULDN'T SPENDER KEEP HIS MOUTH SHUT?" one of the exiles exclaimed. Drack's eyes widened.

"They fucking confirmed it," he murmured, then returned to blasting apart the exiles. Only when they all were dead did we begin looking around. A data pad. Perfect. It was a message to Spender. He had been giving supplies to these guys to pressure the Krogan. But he hasn't been able to
completely follow through. And, a scrambler in his quarters, huh? That, I'm keeping in mind. The message was from a man named Aroane.

"Wait, so is this why that idiot has been trying to redirect or stop my shipments? He takes my shit, gives it to these jackasses, so they can use it on Krogan?" Vetra exclaimed. "Drack, I know you want to have a go with him, but please, let me introduce my talons to his eyes."


"When we get back to the Nexus, I'll search through his quarters," I stated. "Alright, why don't we pay that Elora a visit, hm?" I suggested.

We were about halfway there when Suvi called.

"Scott, Prodromos has gone dark. But just before they did, we received a distress call. I'm not sure what to make of it. Playing it for you now," she informed. We all listened attentively.

"This is the Initiative outpost Prodromos on Eos. We're in need of assistance. Tempest, this one is 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 are not giving up Eos again. Out." Bradley finished his message.

"That's vague…" Peebee murmured.

"Maybe Bradley is thinking it's more than just an attack," Vetra mused.

"If they're trying to attack our first outpost, maybe they're trying to make a point," I theorized.

"Do we have anything else?" I asked Suvi.

"Nothing. Not even alarms. The orbital buoy isn't showing any major traffic. I think it's a brown-out. Presenting less of a threat," Suvi answered.

"Bradley is military, it makes sense," I remarked. "Prep the Tempest, we're on our way now."

"Think it's the Kett?" Peebee questioned.

"If it was, why not Voeld? The Kett are stronger there," Drack argued. Wait…

"You'll know soon enough…" I almost whispered.

"What?" Vetra asked.

"You'll know soon enough," I repeated louder. "It's the last thing Akksul said to me when I spoke with him on Aya. I think this might be what he was talking about. SAM, get me Evfra," I requested. A moment passed as the call connected. He answered.

"Pathfinder," he greeted.

"Evfra, have your scouts around Eos seen anything?" I asked.

"Haven't had any reports, why do you- hold on," he turned from the comm, speaking with someone. "Yes, actually. Just received word of unmarked Angaran shuttles spotted in the system," he answered. "It's them, isn't it?"
"Fraid so. Just got a distress call from Prodromos, they've gone dark, an attack hadn't started by the time we got it, but doesn't mean it hasn't started by now or sometime soon. We're on our way now, just wanted confirmation," I explained.

"I'll put extra watches over Taerve Uni in the meantime. Good luck," he stated, and ended the call. With that call done, I dialed for Reyes.

"Reyes, Scott. Your little favor is going to need to wait. Distress call from Prodromos. Roekaar inbound," I explained.

"I understand. I'll see if Umi has anything, and keep the trail warm for you when you get back. Oh, and Scott?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

"Make them pay."
Turf War

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest was speeding away towards Eos. Still, I was afraid of not being there in time. For all I know, Eos is under attack right now. It would be a good idea for me to nap and get energy. But tough shit, can't sleep not knowing if those people are even alive or not. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes.

Damn it, think, Scott! Eos has plenty of armed guards, and you know those colonists will take up arms themselves if need be. There are gun emplacements, including AA guns. We've only seen the Roekaar use mediocre tactics, and it doesn't seem like their equipment is the best. And I doubt they have the armed shuttles like the one that saved our asses at the Exaltation facility. Push comes to shove, Prodromos can hold them off long enough for us to arrive.

Fortunately, that seemed to calm me down a bit. I grabbed a beer from my mini-fridge, and took a swig. There was a knock on my door.

"Come in," I stated, as I slowed down, just taking a sip. Sid entered. "Hey Sid, you ok? Need something?" I asked, a warm, friendly smile on my face. Sid smiled slightly, and raised her hand a bit in greeting.

"Hi Scott, I'm alright, thanks. And no, I don't need anything," she answered. I gestured for her to take a seat.

"I'd offer you a drink, but, it's all… alcoholic. And Levo… probably says something about me," I trailed off with a chuckle. Sid giggled, sitting down at the couch.

"It's fine, Vetra let me have some pieces from her stash of sweets," Sid reassured. "Anyways, Scott, I came here to thank you," she began quietly.

"Sid," I smiled again, leaning forward. "You don't need to thank me. I would never have just let those colonists remain kidnapped, let alone not do anything when they captured you."

"No, not just that," Sid continued. I raised a brow inquisitively. "Thanks for being there for Vetra. That helps her be there for me, and helps her feel better. That means a lot to me. Even more, thanks for being there for me. That helps Vetra a lot, means a lot to both of us. Lightens her load," Sid explained.

"Sid, you're a great kid with a great, giant heart, and your sister is a great woman with a great, giant heart. What kind of jackass would I be if I didn't care for or help out either of you?" I argued with a grin. Sid chuckled for a moment.

"Scott, you know it's more than that. You keep going the extra mile. I'm thanking you for that," Sid pushed. I shrugged as I began my response.

"Well, I think of you like a sister to me, Sid. And Vetra as," I caught myself mid-sentence, but couldn't just stop now, had to say something that wasn't what I was about to say. "A, uh, really good friend," I stuttered. Great recovery there Scott. Smooth as ice. You fucking idiot. Sid raised her brow plate in confusion, then her eyes widened and she formed a sly grin. Not again…

"Scott, are you into my sister," she grinned teasingly. I think I began sweating, my eyes unblinking.
"Uh…" I began. Sid began squealing, kicking her legs in the air and shaking a fist in the air as well.

"YES! THE PATHFINDER IS INTO MY SISTER!" I lowered my face into my hands, I know I probably looked like a goddamn tomato.

"Why am I so bad at this?" I groaned.

"Well, you can't be that bad, Vetra doesn't know yet, she would have told me," Sid smirked, a teasing tone.

"Please for the love of god don't tell her…" I pleaded, keeping my head in my hands.

"Oh, don't you worry, there's no way in HELL I'm telling her. I wanna watch this all play out like a fairy tale," Sid giggled.

"Or crash and burn like a burning pile of dog shit…" I argued.

"I wouldn't think so," Sid whistled nonchalantly. She decided to let me off the hook. "Well, wouldn't be a good idea to have you trying to save Prodromos while being a bright red, stuttering mess," she giggled. "I'll let you go. And, for the record, I've been thinking of you as a big brother," she stood and hugged me on her way out. I swear, it seems everyone is onto me now.

Vetra Nyx

Spirits am I glad no one's onto me. I think. After rescuing Sid, in his quarters, our talk? How he reassured me, told me he'd always be there? I was already a bit of an emotional mess thanks to my sister being in danger, and thanks to that, I nearly just let everything, out. I almost jumped him right then and there. Spirits, he'd never go for that. Him, attracted to a Turian? I still don't understand how the hell I'm attracted to a Human!

Damn it, I wish he would be though. Finally, for once in my life, I'm not alone when it comes to Sid. Sure, Drack, Kesh, even Jaal, they help when they can, but none of them are as involved as Scott. Plus, I swear, sometimes he says things that are flirty. I say things that are flirty. But it has to just be our jokes, right? Well, at least on his end. *It is a nice end, by the way…* I shook that thought out of my head. Not the time, Vetra. While Sid's on board you won't have anywhere or time for the privacy to… calm yourself down. While my mind seemed to relent on more… explicit thoughts, they didn't drift away from him. I chuckled slightly as I remembered what I pulled with the canteen earlier. I had had a sip out of it almost just before Scott mentioned how bad Kadara's water tasted. I don't think he noticed that though. Hopefully that just helps ensure, if anything were to actually happen, that our bodies would be used to each other. Then after he had his sip, I struggled to keep myself from blushing as I took another sip I didn't even need. Fucking hell what's wrong with me? It's a spirits damned canteen! I placed my hand onto my forehead and sighed. One way or another, this shit needs to be solved before we hit the Archon's ship. I don't know if we'll be able to make it back from that. I'd rather know before.

Huh, there's an idea. Back during Liam's fuck up with those pirates on the Kett warship, I offered to take Scott mountain climbing. Kadara? They have a lot of mountains. When that place is settled, I'll ask if he wants to go, and… I don't know, do something.

Sid returned to my quarters, her mandibles flared slightly, grinning. She looked at me, grinned even wider, and giggled. I raised a brow plate. She just… giggled. I know she left to go thank Scott, but seriously, what the hell has her laughing like this? Did they talk about weird old human shit? Did he just make one joke that set her off?
"So, you gonna tell me, or not?" I questioned.

"Promised not to. Besides," Sid giggled. "It'll be a lot more fun for you, Scott, and anyone watching, like myself, to figure it out yourselves." My eyes widened. I hadn't told my sister anything, but I know she can read me.

"Sid, if you said anything…" I warned. She raised her hands defensively, still grinning.

"I knew it. And no, I didn't say anything," she giggled more.

"If you want me to teach you anything, you forget about it," I warned again.

"Or if you don't I tell," she teased. Damn, she's right. Classic, easy tricks. Already learning. I wouldn't tell her, not so soon, but I feel a bit proud of her. "Though, you'd probably thank me for it," Sid mused, shrugging, her eyes off to the side, still grinning. I sighed. This is gonna be a long trip to Eos.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We finally arrived in orbit around Eos. Just as we dropped out of FTL, however, we were pinged by a satellite, and the Tempest's software automatically responded. We investigated the satellite, running scans, and then it self-destructed. Weird. We checked just what it took from us. Credits? But not even close to all of them. Sure, credits we'd rather have, could help with trading, but after all, right now the Pathfinder teams have close to a blank check. We'll need to ask around about those satellites later. But we couldn't waste any more time, and we made a beeline for Prodromos. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that not only was it not on fire or destroyed, but our systems received proper Initiative landing clearance and greeting. Prodromos stands. But where are the Roekaar? I returned to the cargo bay, ready to disembark and speak with Bradley. Everyone was suited up and ready for combat at my request. Additionally, to try and keep our presence a surprise, the Tempest will return to orbit until the Roekaar are dealt with. I got in the Nomad and drove it down the cargo ramp when the door opened, the crew following me out. It was… eerie. No one was walking the streets, the doors were all locked, as shown by the red glow of their interfaces, and the glass windows that made up the walls of parts of several buildings were blackened, hiding what lies within. The colony itself had clearly expanded, however. More buildings, more plots of crops growing. I wonder if they've started to make larger collections of farmland beyond the borders of Prodromos itself.

I'll admit, the quiet was leaving me itching to pull out my rifle, and search the town for anyone. Anything. Fortunately, Bradley stepped around the corner of the nearest prefab building.

"Pathfinder, good to see you," he greeted as he approached, raising his hand for a shake. I clasped his forearm, gave a light shake, as I returned the greeting.

"We came as soon as we got the message, Bradley." I released his arm.

"You all doing alright, Augie? The Colony doesn't look like it's been attacked," Liam spoke up.

"Because it hasn't, not yet. Sorry to keep you in the dark so long, but we have eyes on this planet. We know it's coming. Just before we went dark, we intercepted this message," Bradley explained. He keyed his Omni-tool.

"Four, five, repeat. Stockpile complete, waiting for beacon. Launch on detection. Repeat, one, two, three…" Bradley cut off the message. The voice was Angaran. I could hear Jaal growling slightly.
"We've had raids before. With all the tech and other supplies here, we've expected it. Fought them off each and every time. At first it was exiles or pirates of both exiles and Angara. Our latest stream of raids had been against purely Angaran groups. Figured it was just another band of pirates. With this message, I've been wondering if those were just decoys, so someone could do a slow, tactical buildup back out in the Blackrock," Bradley theorized.

"Roekaar…" Jaal growled. "Scott spoke with Evfra, we came here knowing that unidentified Angaran ships had been spotted," he explained for Bradley.

"Not to mention that I spoke with the Roekaar leader on Aya and he threatened me, saying that something was coming soon," I added on.

"A full-scale attack on our first outpost? Can you imagine how the Nexus would react?" Bradley pointed out.


"We've already lost two outposts on Eos. To the weather, and then the Kett. We won't lose one to goddamnt terrorists," I nodded.

"Knew we could count on you. Hope I'm wrong, though. Not the kind of thinking I wanted to bring to Andromeda," Bradley muttered. "Anyways, Blackrock Tande. Practically in the middle of where the Kett used to have their wind farm. Here's the navpoint for the signal source." Bradley keyed his omni-tool, sending the coordinates.

"We'll check it out. How's your security situation in the meantime?" I asked.

"Turrets are online, just waiting for a sign of something without an Initiative IFF to start shooting. I have scouts hidden along the ridgelines, and cameras watching the ground approaches. Our security personnel and anyone ex-military are in the buildings, armed and armored, waiting for contact," Bradley explained.

"Good. I'll leave what squad mates I can't take with me in the Nomad here, just in case. I doubt this is going to be their base anyway," I offered. I turned to pick out the team. "Vetra, Jaal, Peebee, with me. The rest of you, stay frosty," I ordered. "Bradley, any chance you still have that Nomad we borrowed?"

"We do," he answered.

"Good. Can you keep it warmed up? Just in case we need the others for reinforcements?" I requested.

"Can do. It'll be ready and waiting." With that, I left Liam, Cora, and Drack to have locations for them selected by Bradley, and the rest of us returned to the Nomad for our relatively long drive.

"Still need to ask him about that Yale guy, with the Three Sabers," Vetra reminded.

"I haven't forgotten. This just needs to be taken care of first," I reassured. "Same goes for your rem-tech, Peebee."

"And just as I was opening my mouth to ask," Peebee remarked. We drove on through the deserts of Eos, making our way over the ridgeline that separated the east that Prodromos was nestled in, and the open, sprawling region that, when we last were here, was covered by the Kett wind farms. Now, though? The spire of the main Kett base was still sticking out of the ground, covered in dust, but plenty had been stripped away for scrap metal. And the wind farms had been demolished.
Rubble from collapsed towers and the small bases beside them collapsed or barely standing.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jaal chuckled.

"Feels good seeing the black eye we've given them," I agreed.

"I think we've given them more than just a black eye," Peebee mused. Hm, putting an end to the Decimation, kicking them off Eos, the exaltation facility, severely weakening their grip on Voeld? She might be right. We could see Blackrock Tande in the distance. A lone, relatively small plateau. Couldn't see anything happening over there, however. After another two or so minutes of driving, we were at the base of the Tande, and began driving the Nomad up a natural slope. Wasn't too hard in our vehicle, but would be a pain in the ass to try and walk up. We slowly began to crest the last hill, the signal both very strong and close now, when we stopped. Ahead was the top of an Angaran troop transport, parked alongside some Remnant ruins, emblazoned with the Roekaar emblem. I looked around for the best way to engage them. Hm, there's an idea…

"Up for a bit of rock-climbing?" I suggested to the team, driving and parking the Nomad behind a ridgeline. We could climb up, sneak around so that we had perfect eyes and sightlines down on the Roekaar encampment, take them all out from above.

"Ah, good, surprise them from above," Jaal nodded.

"Short, plenty of rocks to grab onto, and we have jump-jets. Easiest climb of my life," Vetra remarked.

"So far," Peebee mused, winking at me. Vetra, fortunately, didn't seem to catch on, just moving towards the rock. We holstered our weapons on our backs and began the simple process of using our jump-jets, and grabbing on, until we were at the top. Quietly, keeping our heads down, we moved along the ridge over the Roekaar encampment, then went prone and crawled to the edge. They hadn't spotted us. Looks like about ten troops down there. We unholstered our weapons, Jaal and I snipers, Peebee with her Carnifex, and Vetra with her Cyclone. Vetra wouldn't be able to use her bi-pod effectively when she needs to be looking down while prone, so instead she changed the interface on her visor, as she normally would to help with aiming rather than scans or notes, placed her left hand on top of the barrel, and inched forward just a bit more. We all picked out a target, and on my mark, they fell.

Our attack came as a massive surprise to the Roekaar, little doubt about that, given the way the survivors began scrambling for weapons, and just trying to get out of the line of fire. But none of us needed to reload yet, and Jaal and I took down another pair, Peebee tried, but missed, as she was trying to hit a moving target at long range with a pistol. I saw a red beam streak towards us, though not at me.

"Shit," Vetra murmured, and she rolled out of the way just as the sniper pulled his trigger, a bolt of plasma shooting past. I grunted in pain and discomfort as her back rolled over mine, and she landed on her stomach on my other side. "Sorry." She slapped in a new thermal clip and began firing again.

"It's fine," I grumbled. "Just finish them off." Some Roekaar had taken cover behind the Remnant structures, and I knew already that trying to shoot through that would be pointless. On the bright side at least, they seem hesitant to leave cover.

"We need to move before they call for reinforcements," Jaal stated.

"Together, we'll slide down the slope. Doesn't look steep enough for us to just drop. Peebee, you
and I will make a barrier to protect us on our way down," I ordered. She nodded, standing by my side. I counted down, and we all jumped, a hand on the ridge to stabilize us, our feet slowing us, and for Peebee and I, a hand out protecting us. Two Roekaar, maybe all that were left tried to take this opportunity to finish us, but to no avail. We reached the bottom unscathed and our barrier dissipated. Vetra ran to flank, and Jaal vanished. Likely a cloak. Peebee and I were in cover, and would be able to return any fire. But we didn't need to. To our left, the sound of a Cyclone firing was heard, and a Roekaar fell sideways, bleeding, into the dust, and to our right, another slumped forward onto the ground, blood spurting from his throat.

"We're clear," Jaal called out. "Over here, they should have their plan in this console," he led us over to the one he pointed at, and interacted, searching for the right files. Either he's forgotten about SAM, or the Roekaar are predictable enough that he knows where to find them. "Here, their beacon signal. Standard Roekaar strategy. Have a scout place the beacon at the center of the target," Jaal explained.

"But, they'd know exactly where Prodromos is, right? Why would they need it?" I questioned.

"Often when dealing with Kett, in order to attack one place, you must strike from another, lesser place. It seems they assumed the same would be for you," Jaal shrugged. Guess that's the best answer we'll get. I keyed my comms.

"Bradley, Blackrock was a Roekaar scout group with a homing beacon," I informed.

"I was afraid I'd be right," Bradley murmured. "But it's not over, is it?"

"Damn right it's not. This place is ours," I stated.

"Then what? You can't afford to stay here and wait until they try again," Bradley argued. "We're not risking our first outpost."

"Third," Vetra sighed. "We lost first and second…" Wait… My head rose and my eyes widened, a slight grin forming.

"What are you planning?" Jaal questioned.

"They want our outpost? Then let's give it to them. Just not the successful one," I hinted. The eyes of my comrades widened in understanding.

"Place a decoy at the other two, set a trap," Vetra murmured, nodding her head.

"That could work," Jaal agreed.

"The comm array at site two is still intact. You could broadcast from there," Bradley suggested.

"Then it's settled. Mind grabbing the others, telling them the plan, then sending them off to meet us at site two?" I requested.

"Consider it done. Give those bastards hell."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

My part of the team had arrived at site two first, just waiting at the roof with the communications array for the others to show up. All the Kett bodies from the last time we were here, when we first encountered a Fiend and Liam was wounded by an Anointed had been removed. Guess Prodromos
has them. As we waited for the others, I simply watched the two trees on the lake side of the outpost as their branches and red leaves swayed in the air. I wondered just what state they'd be in after this battle. However, we hadn't just been sitting on our asses this entire time. Jaal had placed trip mines around the landing pad alongside the lake, suspecting that as a location for the Roekaar to drop their troops.

The others finally arrived, the Nomad parked in front of the outpost, and they got out to join us on the roof.

"Good, good. We're all here. Now, before we get started, Cora, help Peebee and I lift some of that cover up here with your biotics. Drack, do what you can by hand. We don't need to put cover around the entire roof, just parts. If we can stand while staying mostly in cover, with a good line of fire, that would be perfect," I ordered. We worked quickly, finishing the job soon. There was a length of cover that would be able to protect about three of us side to side facing the lake, in the middle of the roof, a smaller one in the corner that could protect two, one facing the lake, the other a small storage building, a two-man barricade for the front, and for safety, a two-man facing what, when you face the lake, would be your left. I was content with this. I ordered everyone to one last check as I activated site 2's comm array, and blasted the beacon signal into orbit.

"Pathfinder, I am detecting someone attempting to bypass the firewalls of our comms," SAM informed.

"Redirect it to an open comm channel," I ordered, patching into the same one.

"Human, I told you you'd know soon enough. The beacon is life. You couldn't stop our scouts. You couldn't save your outpost," Akksul rumbled with a dark, humorless laughter. The comm channel went dark, and I returned to our own.

"Shuttles inbound!" Jaal called out.

"They've bought it, stay down until they hit the ground," I ordered. We watched as both shuttles positioned themselves over the landing pad.

"Oh, I can wait for this," Vetra murmured. The shuttle doors opened, and squads of Roekaar jumped out.

"AHHHH! DIE ALIEN SCUM!" The first of the Roekaar eagerly jumping down cried out. I smirked however, I saw his foot land right on top of a small, metal disk on the landing pad. As did several others. They lifted their legs to begin moving, and the trip mines detonated, obliterating both squads and likely torching the bottom of at least one of the shuttles.

"Hell yeah!" I cheered, slapping Jaal on the back. Damn good placement there buddy. Drack was, of course, laughing quite enthusiastically himself. More shuttles appeared, but their destination was the opposite side of the outpost. Quickly, we ran to grab what little cover there was over there, but Drack and I covered the longer barricade over. Now we didn't need to hide ourselves, taking down Roekaar as the shuttle doors opened, as they jumped to the ground, and as they ran for cover. Only a handful of stragglers managed to survive long enough to find cover. But even then, either thanks to biotics, or simply having an angle from above, it helped them little. More shuttles arrived. Goes to show how badly they wanted Prodromos gone. These ones were coming in alongside the landing pad on the open terrain beside it.

"Thought they might try there..." Jaal murmured, seeming awfully unconcerned with the reinforcements. I smirked, as I watched more Roekaar land right on more trip mines Jaal had left behind.
"Intercepting comms, Pathfinder," SAM informed, changing what comm channel we were listening into. I was pleasantly surprised to catch the end of Akksul roaring in fury.

"This site is a damn decoy! Rally at these coordinates!" he ordered his men. The coordinates were intercepted too. I burst into laughter.

"Fucking idiots! Those coordinates are site one!" I continued laughing, as Jaal scoffed at the Roekaar. The others seemed to be getting a kick out of it as well.

"We might have overcharged the power grid over there to draw them in," Bradley explained, didn't even know he was still patched in.

"Akksul won't be pleased with that," Jaal chuckled.

"Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me," I recited the old saying.

"Ha, I like that," Jaal laughed.

"It's a good one, isn't it? Anyways, you heard him, get in the Nomad's, Site One, GO!" I ordered, we ran towards the same Nomads we were in to get here, the second team following right on our tail. The Roekaar had already arrived and dug in. Driving into the center of the outpost would be suicidal, so instead, I drove the Nomad forward, running over a pair of Roekaar beside the water filtration wheel, and that's where both Nomads parked, and offloaded their troops.

"Akksul, the Pathfinder is here!" I could hear a Roekaar troop call out.

"Motherless… Everyone defend yourselves!" another Roekaar woman ordered.

"Anyone else hear that clunking?" Drack asked. I listened closely, and sure enough, that sounded like a Hydra mech.

"Shit, keep the Roekaar at bay, when it gets closer, I have a way to deal with it," I called out. The crew got to work, taking cover alongside the building, shooting anything that moved, as the clunking got closer.

"I see it! Left side!" Liam called out, returning to cover as it began firing.

"Take out the laser sights, the gyroscoping three eyed part, and I'll finish it off," I ordered. Liam nodded, and when the firing stopped, he, Cora, and Jaal were firing again, and I heard the breaking of glass. Perfect. I pulled the out my Black Widow, and entered cloak, running over and behind the Hydra, Roekaar were pushing close behind. With my left hand I pulled a grenade from my belt and rolled it under and through their legs, so that it would be behind them. Should protect me from the blast, they aren't right next to me anyway. But first, I took my Black Widow, and aimed it right at the fuel cell at the back, and as quick as the gun would, shot out three rounds. Felt like my arm was about to fly right off. But I endured the pain. Now it was leaking. The Roekaar had cried out in surprise, but the grenade had detonated before anything happened, and I activated my flamethrower, engulfing the fuel in flames, and it travelled up into the fuel cell as I ran back behind the building the others were using. We dove to the ground as the Hydra exploded. A sizeable hole was left in the pre-fabs walls, but the mech was down.

"How's it going over there?" I called out to Vetra, Peebee, and Drack.

"We're holding, there's just," Vetra grunted. "A lot of them."

"Moving to support," I called out, rushing over to them, lending my own firepower to supplement
theirs, throwing out biotic attacks of my own, or combining them with Peebee. The Roekaar were becoming stupid, their attacks less tactical and more of a furious rush. Well, stupid aside from one fucker. A red laser streaked out towards us, a sniper lining up the shot. I turned on a dime, saw him behind rocks. Without a second thought, I biotically charged him, my hand on the hilt of my sword. As I appeared in front of him, my right arm was already swinging the blade towards the Roekaar's neck. He had begun raising a hand to fight back, or out of surprise, seeing a man transform into a blue glow, vanish, then reappear in your face. The sword sliced through his arm at the wrist, not even slowing down my own arm's momentum as it sliced into his neck. It would have decapitated him, had I been closer. Instead, while the front part of his neck was sliced open, spurting out blue blood now staining my chest piece, the back was intact. The Roekaar crumpled to the ground.

"Scott, I think… I think that was the last of them…" Jaal breathed heavily. Not out of wounds, not quite out of exhaustion, just of the adrenaline wearing off. With that confirmation, and no further gunfire, I began to relax myself. As did all the others, it seemed. It seems SAM had transferred us into that open comm channel from before now, as we heard a familiar voice.

"I'll remember this. We're not finished," Akksul growled.

"You are today. And we'll be ready next time," Bradley warned.

"You came to our Colony ready to slaughter everyone here. Don't blame me for playing defense," I retorted. Akksul let out one more growl as he left the comm channel.

"Looks like we owe you again, Pathfinder. Come on by?" Bradley suggested.

"Yeah, we'll stop. Tempest needs to return there anyway. But we have one quick thing to do in the meantime," I answered.

"Whatever you need. We'll be waiting." With that conversation done, I called for the Tempest's return, and turned to my team.

"Damn fine work today people. Every single one of you. We just showed those terrorists that we won't stand idly by as they try and kill our people. We just sent Akksul a pretty clear message today. We won't go down so easily. We will not allow these cowards to attack our civilians. We will not let these cowards get the jump on us. And we sure as HELL won't go down without a fight!" I feel like my old drill sergeant would be pleased.

"Oohrah," Liam smirked.

"Alright, so, next stop is a Remnant site to the south for some Rem-tech Peebee detected. Anyone want to be dropped off in Prodromos?" I asked. No one spoke or raised their hand. That made me feel proud. I wouldn't have asked more than a regular squad to, and wouldn't have complained or thought less of anyone had they preferred to stay back. But they didn't. I'm grateful for that.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Well, that could be a problem. Well, not really, just a cause for delay, but, still. The Remnant site that housed Peebee's tech? On an island out in a large lake. The Nomad certainly can't swim, and no way are any of us swimming in our armor and weapons. The biotics might, lowering our own mass enough, but still, that would be a pain.

"Scott, console, down on the shoreline!" Peebee called out. Of course, she had been looking around for something that could get us across. She didn't want to wait for a shuttle, she had already been
waiting to get here after all. I followed her voice down to the coast, and sure enough, a Remnant console. I interfaced, and three separate sets of Remnant pillars rose from the lake, a way across. The closest one was accompanied by a series of smaller pillars that we could use to climb up.

"Well, that's convenient. Just, no one fall in on accident, huh? If you're wearing armor, you're gonna sink like a rock," I warned. With that, I led the team up the climb until we got to the highest of the sets of pillars. There was a large gap between this set and the next sets, and I could see an Assembler on the other side. Not willing to waste this opportunity, I pulled out my rifle and shot the Assembler, destroying it with a few shots. Now I began rubbing my chin with my hand, wondering what we'd do to cross this gap. We sure as hell wouldn't be able to jump it and-

"Just forming the bridge right in front of us. Out of thin air," Liam remarked.

"Heh, just like the third Indiana Jones movie. Except, instead of an invisible bridge, this one just forms as you walk," I joked. I knew Liam would be the only one to understand the joke, but still. The others just shrugged, hearing me call it a movie. We made it across the gap, and the path split in two. Sets of pillars on the right and left. But before we could do anything to decide, Remnant formed. To the left, four Breachers. To the right, an Observer. Vetra simply turned to the Breachers and opened fire, sweeping her Cyclone left and right, shredding the Breachers apart while the rest of us very quickly and easily neutralized the Observer. Turns out it didn't matter which path we took, both had a bridge, both led us to the island.

We jumped down from the pillars onto the island, the fall jarring our legs only slightly, and searched the structure for whatever housed Peebee's tech. Turns out, it wasn't hard to find. Peebee must have seen something as she raced off towards the old, powered down console in the center of the structure, then carefully removed a piece of tech from a construct at its base.

"Got it!" she called out, beaming at the knowledge she was one step closer to her scanner.

"We claim this site, Initiative scum!" a voice threatened over comms. An exile shuttle descending from the sky heading straight for us.

"Hey, we found this place first. Don't you guys have some hard-on for the whole, finder's keeper's shit?" I retorted, all of us readying our weapons. Another shuttle had appeared to our left, however, the direction we came from. Drack chuckled quietly when he saw that the first shuttle had dropped off a Krogan. I know what kill he wants. We shifted cover slightly so that we'd all still be protected from the new arrivals, but were still shooting at the other exiles being dropped off by the first shuttle. Including the Krogan, I counted five. To the left, four. Vetra, Jaal, and Peebee focused on the left, while I aided the others in wiping out those in front. Though I left the Krogan untouched for Drack. As the last of the exiles in front fell from a bullet to the head, Drack charged forward at the Krogan, moving like he was going to ram the bayonet of his Ruzad into the Krogan's abdomen, but it was a feint. Drack stopped hard just before reaching the Krogan, who had stepped to the side, Drack followed up with a punch to the gut and a headbutt, stunning him. With the Krogan stunned, Drack lifted his Ruzad, turned it sideways, and sliced it across. It cut through the Krogan's armor and left thick orange blood seeping out of two cuts, one on the lower throat, and one on the upper. The Krogan reached both hands for his throat, grasping it, falling to a knee. Looked up at Drack one more time. Drack shoved the bayonet of his Ruzad into the mouth of the Krogan, then pulled the trigger, absolutely obliterating his head. The exiles were dead.

"Why the hell would they come all the way to Eos for Rem-tech? And that's ignoring the risk of fighting Initiative," Vetra questioned.

"I dunno. Ballsy? Looking for a fight?" Drack theorized.
"Doesn't matter anymore. Got em all," Cora remarked. Fair enough. Now, how to get back? I saw a Remnant console off on the other side of the island alongside a separate structure. When I activated the console, the weird glowing blue ball that seems to be the activation trigger for gravity wells appeared to the side. Everyone gathered around me, and I activated it. We were all lifted into the air as the wall opened, and we were sent forward, flying through across the lake, and through another structure back on the mainland, close to the Nomads. Now, just to find Yale…

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We were back at Prodromos, and the Nomad we had borrowed was returned to the garage it normally waits in. People were walking around the streets again, shuttles that had been idle, waiting for the all clear to take off, were warming up to leave again, and the Tempest was coming back to land. Bradley was waiting for us at the garage, and once we were done dropping off the other Nomad, he spoke.

"Thanks again, Pathfinder. Sorry that all you had going in from that distress signal was an old man's hunch. We'll know what to watch for in the future," he reassured.

"Well, least it's better, on the frontier with hostile alien species, at least, to think something may be going on, but nothing is, rather than to think nothing is going on, and something is," I remarked. Bradley shrugged.

"Special thanks to you though, Jaal. It's one thing to hear of our alliance, it's another to see it in action."

"If your people are aiding us against the Kett and your exiles, the least we can do is help you against our own terrorists," Jaal stated.

"Plus, living like anyone could be an enemy isn't much of a way to live," I remarked. Heh, just look at Little finger, and Cersei. "How're the people?"

"A little shell shocked. We saw those shuttles in the distance after all," Bradley answered.

"Does Prodromos have an intercom system, or a PSA comm or… something?" I asked.

"Got something to say for them? Sure," Bradley nodded, keying me in.

"People of Prodromos, Scott Ryder here. Now, I could go off on a whole little spiel of how you all handled this situation admirably, and how we get knocked down and dust ourselves back off, but, you already know that. You see Site one and two often enough. These lessons are built in for you now. But this is Prodromos. This is our success. This colony marks the day things started to go right. Prodromos is home. And there's no way in hell anyone is ever taking that away from us. Never again. I'm sorry that this happened, and I will do everything in my power to ensure it doesn't happen again. You're colonists. Explorers. You came here to live, to see things no one else had ever seen before. Not to fight. You all deserve a rest, a break, a party, whatever you want to do. Thank you," I spoke. Bradley opened his mouth to speak, but stopped, putting a finger against his ear piece. He laughed. I raised a brow inquisitively.

"That was Hainly, one of my lieutenants. She just asked when we get back to work. Scott, there was no apology asked, or expected. And we want to work. This is our home, just like you said. We're still building it," Bradley smiled. "This wasn't a good day. But it was another day. You gave them that. Your people, Ryder," he gestured towards the colony, people working hard. I smiled. It felt good.
"I'm proud. There is one thing though, Bradley. Is there a man named Yale on Prodromos? Sorry but we don't have a last name."

"Yeah, we do. I know who you're talking about. I'll call for him to meet you over here," Bradley stated. "I get the feeling I may want to know about this…" He keyed his Omni-tool and messaged for Yale to head over to the garage, and I told my team that they should probably disperse. Should make him more willing to talk. A man approached, brown hair, slicked up, and tan skin. He seems a bit cautious.

"You wanted to see me, Bradley?" he asked, glancing at me.

"Actually, the Pathfinder did."

"Tell me about the Three Sabers," I questioned, crossing my arms over my chest. His eyes widened, and then shook his head, placing his hands on his hips.

"Ah shit…"

"Well, that answers that question," I murmured. Bradley was raising a brow himself, suspicious of Yale.

"Look, I just didn't think anyone would find out about it, ok?" he defended. "It's something that ought to be left alone. We made a mistake."

"We?" Bradley asked.

"Explain," I demanded. Yale sighed.

"The new outposts, our supply routes, they needed protection. We couldn't rely on just you. At the time, that was Eos and the trade routes to Aya and Havarl. I proposed we'd save Nexus blood by hiring exiles to fight for us," Yale explained.

"Mercenaries and privateers have always existed. Plenty of times hired on by governments either to protect something or attack it," Bradley nodded.

"That was the hope. Cochrane and I served in the alliance together, I thought I could trust him and the crew. I became their commander. I armed them, shared access to Prodromos operations. Then they took their new toys and went rogue. Attacked people they were supposed to protect," Yale growled.

"Well, the Three Sabers are all dealt with. They won't be attacking anyone anymore," I remarked.

"Damn…” Yale's eyes lowered. "They're gone? Shit. Cochrane was a good man… once…” he murmured. "Addison will be pleased at least. One loose end tied up…"

"Fucking what?!" I exclaimed, my brow furrowing.

"She wasn't sure Ryder would work out as Pathfinder. She was desperate for options," Yale explained. "Doesn't matter anymore. The Sabers are gone. Just let this blow over," he requested.

"No." I stormed off. That fucking stupid bitch. I can understand not trusting me that early on, but god fucking damn it we have a militia for a reason! And then, she doesn't have the fucking balls to own up to her mistake? That explains why whenever Sid reported the Three Sabers, nothing ever fucking happened. I'm fucking pissed.
I stormed back onto the ship, stowed my weapons and returned to my room to get out of my armor, back into regular clothes. After that was done, I stormed towards the armory, Venta's room, where Sid would likely be. I found her in there watching some old show on the vid-screen, munching on some blast-ohs. She saw me enter, and was confused by the fury in my features. She also seemed nervous. She paused her show and set down her bowl.

"So, Sid, wanna know why every time you reported the sabers it got ignored? Fucking Addison," I exclaimed.

"Wait, what?" she responded, not sure she heard me right.

"Yeah, that Yale guy told me he proposed hiring exiles to protect our outposts and trade routes back while Addison wasn't sure I'd work out. I don't feel too pissy about that because it makes some sense but it should have been the damn Militia! To top it all off, they obviously went rogue, and Addison covered it all up!"

"You're kidding…" she murmured, shocked.

"I fucking wish I was."

"So… what now? We have to confront her, get this out there," Sid stated.

"Damn right we do. I really want to go to the Nexus right now and get this sorted, but…” I began calming down.

"I also just really want to get Kadara over with. Coming and going like this when so much still needs to get done there is beginning to annoy me," I muttered. "Plus, if we go now, I might end up just shooting her, and that's something I know I shouldn't do."

"Yeah, that might not go over well," Sid chuckled. I sighed.

"Sorry for coming in here so pissed, just thought you'd want to know, and I needed to yell about this shit," I apologized. Sid smiled.

"Hey, with how much I've cried on your shoulder, I think I owe you." I smiled, and left. As I was walking back to my quarters, Lexi stepped out of the med-bay, and didn't expect to see me right there.

"Oh, hello Scott. I was looking for you, actually," she began.

"What for? Do I need a checkup already?" I joked.

"No, you're fine. I was going to ask Bradley if they have any intact Kett corpses I could use, and wanted your permission," she explained.

"I actually meant to ask him about that for you, sorry I forgot. The Kett bodies from our fight at Site 2 were all gone, so it seems likely they'd have something," I answered.

"Excellent. Hopefully I'll have a good specimen for study," she smiled, and left. I sat down in my room, then got a call. I chuckled, no rest for the wicked. I answered.

"Something up, Jaal?" I asked.

"I got a message from Akksul. Haven't listened to it yet. Meeting room?" He requested.

"Be right there." I made my way to the meeting room, seeing him standing in front of it's console.
Upon seeing my arrival, Jaal keyed his tac-pad and the console. A hologram of Akksul appeared.

"Jaal Ama Darav. You always were a shortsighted fool," he scoffed. "Helping an outsider instead of your own people. You're unfit to bear your family's name." Jackass.

"Except we have been helping Angara… This asshole is starting to piss me off," I growled. I was already in an irritable mood.

"He always was a vehshaanan…" Jaal chuckled to himself.


"Someone pleased with their own shit." I chuckled in response. "We've never gotten along." I let the smirk from my chuckle die.

"So, Jaal, I'm still learning about Angara, but that sounded more personal than a childhood rivalry…"

"He's too smart to attack me directly. Akksul wants us to do something reckless. And that's what he was trying to provoke. We just need to wait for more intel, or his next move," Jaal explained.

"Well, we probably dealt him a serious blow today. For morale if nothing else. Guess it'll be a small while," I mused.
Plans in Motion

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Turns out that while we were on our way back to Kadara, Addison called and asked to speak with me. But no details. I had seen her call me directly first, but I declined the call. I want to speak to her in fucking person. She then tried SAM, getting to me through him. Telling me it was urgent. I told SAM to pass along a message. Fuck off. Then, she tried Suvi. Suvi didn't yet know what happened. I think only Vetra and Sid really knew right now. This time, she was demanding to speak with me. I sighed, and told Suvi to relay a message. That I fully intend on having a nice long chat in person once we're done on Kadara. She can tell me whatever bullshit she needs to say when we get back to the Nexus. Addison didn't try again.

Liam had passed along a message relatively shortly after. At first, I had assumed it was Addison trying again, but this was just him requesting to arrange something on Eos at a later date. A soccer game between Angara and Initiative. Hearing a positive idea like that managed to calm me down, put me in a better mood. I happily gave him my approval, but simply requested that it wait a bit. Let's get some other business taken care of first.

The other good news was that Peebee had narrowed down the location of the next piece of Rem-tech she needed, and it was on Kadara. Finally, after a nap and a meal, we were beginning to enter Kadara's atmosphere. It occurred to me that we hadn't really had a real stop in a while. Sure, there was stopping on Aya and the Nexus, but it was never an overnight stay anywhere for everyone to get a decent night's rest. Should probably do that sooner or later. And hey, we could even make it a movie night. I'm sure Sid would enjoy being there for one.

That train of thought was broken when my Omni-tool was pinged with a message. Huh, from the Collective Leader we've run into a few times. The redhead woman, my means of contacting the Collective. The message contained nothing more than a set of coordinates. I checked them with SAM, it was a location in the badlands not far from the port. A kind of meeting? Heh, given some of the jokes we traded after I called her, after we dealt with Charybdis point, I wouldn't think it's a booty call. Though, I'll admit, I do have a weakness for redheads. Regardless, right now, my weakness for a certain Turian takes precedence. Anyways, after we do that favor for Reyes, see those Hacktivists, and after we talk with that Elora bitch, the one who was trying to mine Helium-3 for explosives on H-037c, we'll investigate.

The Tempest landed, and the team was gathering in the cargo bay. Not all of them would be going out in the Nomad with me, of course, but I think it would be acceptable for the others to wander around the port. So long as they kept a weapon on hand. I got a call from Reyes.

"Welcome back to our illustrious port, Scott," he greeted dramatically. "I assume Eos is safe?"

"Safe and sound, with one pissed off Roekaar leader still out there," I answered.

"Ah. You'll get to him eventually. Anyways, I managed to get some intel on Zia off Umi while you were gone. Cost me a bottle of Elasa too. Umi said she saw her drinking and talking with a 'shifty Salarian,'" Reyes quoted, "She thought it could be the Charlatan," he chuckled. Suppose he was skeptical, "More importantly, they were planning to meet someone at Spirit's ledge."

"So, the plan?"

"You check out the meeting spot, I'll follow up the Collective lead."
"Just one problem. I have no idea where the hell spirit's ledge is," I remarked.

"Forgot you're not a local," Reyes laughed. "I'll give you coordinates for the area. Just to the south east of the port."

"Sounds good. Let you know what we find," I ended the call.

The cargo bays began to open, Vetra and Sid finished the conversation they were having, hugged each other, and Sid remained where she was, watching us walk off. Vetra, Jaal, and I turned back, waving goodbye as we left. We entered the gates to the port, and Cora immediately stopped outside the gate, leaning back against the wall, watching. I raised a brow inquisitively.

"Guarding the Nomad. Got a lot of attention last time we were here. Not about to let any thieving bastards try to hotwire it," Cora answered. "I was even keeping an eye on it last time."

"And?"

"Only three tries to steal it, and one to buy it."


"Didn't even get that far. Negotiations fell apart when he asked if I came with the car," she scoffed. "Weird, must have been something I aimed," she mused sarcastically. I laughed and Vetra, also laughing, slapped her on the shoulder.

"Now that sounds familiar," Vetra snickered.

"Maybe next time, you could use your biotics to toy with them. Dangle them over the cliff edge until they apologize," I suggested.

"I'll keep that in mind," Cora smirked.

Then Liam stopped right in his tracks, an "oh shit" look on his features. Please don't let him have done something…

"It just occurred to me, but this is probably the last place I want to be wandering around…” he murmured.

"And that's because…?" I trailed off. I also noticed that Vetra had nearly immediately stopped paying attention, stating she was going to give the market a quick look before we headed out. I had already told her, Jaal, and Peebee they'd be on my team after all.

"Uh, because I was a cop?" Liam whispered. Well, that fear is understandable.

"Are you one now?" I asked.

"No."

"Are you going to stop and hand out tickets? Ask questions?"

"No…?"

"Then you'll be fine," I reassured. "Feel free to wait on the ship, or wander. It's your choice," I reassured. Curious to see just what had changed, if anything, since I was last here, I looked around inside the port itself. There were signs put up, confirming to the people that the water was now safe, but other than that, not much else had seemed to change. I saw Vetra standing in a line at a
merchant's shop, looking around herself. I wandered over to her.

"Turns out, half the people I knew who left in the uprising ended up here. Good for them, good for the Nexus. But you didn't hear me say that," Vetra remarked.

"Come on, it surely can't be that bad, you trading with old contacts here, benefitting the Nexus, right?" I asked, genuine disbelief.

"It is. For now, at least. Right now, anyone, not including yourself, thanks to authority, best Pathfinder, all that, caught working with the Exiles, will themselves be exiled. Maybe you could pull your own authority to keep that from happening to me, which I know Kesh would help with, and maybe that'll change if we ever get an outpost here, but for now, better off saying nothing," Vetra explained. "Plus, it'll be a lot easier to nail Spender for that if you haven't already gone and defended me for it."

"Shame that you can be doing so much to help the Nexus out like this, but no one knows about it," I remarked.

"You do. Er, Sid, too. Kesh, Drack, most of the crew. I'm fine being an unsung hero, so to speak. That praise isn't important," Vetra answered. "Plus, I'm trying to protect you here too. While I'm sure Leadership KNOWS I'm doing this trading, they don't have proof, and with how well my numbers are benefitting them, they won't touch it. But if it gets out, especially if they know... you know, Tann, Addison, they'll... I dunno. Let's just not give them a reason to meddle, hm?" Vetra suggested.

"You mean give them reasons to try," I chuckled. "And hey, you called me best Pathfinder. How sweet," I teased. Vetra also chuckled, her mandibles flaring slightly. A blush?

"Hey, you don't exactly have a lot of competition right now. All there is, is you and Vederia. And She's a rookie still learning back on the Nexus," she retorted. Finally, she was next in line to deal with the merchant.

"Then maybe I shouldn't find the others. Guarantee that I remain the best around. That no one's ever gonna keep me down," I joked.

She just looked at me, brow-plate raised, not getting the joke, as I expected. "I'll let you be," I snickered, walking away.

Next, I knew I had to see how the slums were doing. I returned to the elevator down, and was… pleased to see water pumps placed at the small springs down here. Once covered by metal sheets, now open. Lines of people with buckets and bottles, getting water. And hope in their eyes. That made me smile.

They obviously saw me walking by, and likely had an idea who I was. They were whispering to each other, glancing at me. There were still people clearly sick, others still hungry, and still plenty of hooking, but I hardly expected that to change anyway. Some of the women, and even some of the men hooking, recognized me and were offering… specials, let's call it, for their services. I simply ignored them all. I was pleased to see that the drug den was closed, a sign on the door. "Closed until further notice."

It was starting to get a bit better down here. On the upper levels of the slums, the free kitchen had seemed to have expanded a bit. More 'cooks' and more people waiting for a meal. It wouldn't fill their belly, or taste good, but it would keep them alive. And that was important, for a start. Doc Ryota was still working in the same crate as before. He glanced up as I passed, nodding his thanks
with a small smile. I feel good about what we've done on Kadara.

I typed a quick message out to the ground team, to meet me in Tartarus when they were ready to go. I also ensured that the Nomad would be ready down in the garage for us. I made my way towards the bar, keeping my eyes of the male dancers down here, just a beeline for the bar.

"Well, well, well, welcome back, Pathfinder. For you, I'm going to do something I've never done for anyone in this bar before. I'm giving you a second drink, on the house," he greeted.

"I'm honored, but I must ask, what's the occasion?"

"As if you don't know," he scoffed with a smirk. "The water, of course! Not only is the goddamn water free and safe now, but now my entire clientele isn't going to die from poison or dehydration. I even have people ASKING that I water down their drinks a little!" the bartender exclaimed.

"You're kidding." I chuckled.

"Of course I am, this is Kadara after all," he laughed. "But I swear, they might as well be. I think the pump outside is getting more business than I am nonetheless. So, the special from last time?"

"Sure," I nodded. He grinned and grabbed the right bottle, pouring me my drink.

"If you need anything else, just flag down one of the serving girls," he handed me my drink.

I thanked him, and made my way upstairs. I sat myself down on a couch behind a table not too far from the strippers. My eyes wandering, as one would expect. During one of the several times I tore my eyes away to see if my crew was joining me, I noticed that on the other end of the couch was a woman, covering herself in a robe, brown, partially shaved hair, and smoking a cigarette. Those were illegal back home, but hardly surprising anyone brought them along. A rather drunk man had stumbled over, trying to get a dance out of her. She, annoyedly, told him she was off her shift. She certainly didn't look pleased with her life.

"Is this really something worth doing here? New galaxy, new planet?" I leaned over, asking my question, though careful to ensure my voice was sympathetic, not judgmental.

"Had to get away from my crazy family in the Milky Way. My brother, Conrad Verner, well, he's a couple quarts short on Eezo, if you know what I mean." Ok, she's saying he has a few screws loose, though what she said isn't how the saying normally goes. "But I'm here, and it's great! That Sloane Kelly," she cooed. "I want to be just like her. That attitude, her accent… She's like, hey you bastard, lick my boots, kiss my ring, and then my bum! I want to work for her. Learn the ropes."

Uh, lady, not the kind of person you should be idolizing. She's the reason you're in the slums after all. "Then I'll call up my brother Conrad and be all, See idiot? You're not the only one in the family hanging out with famous people!" she hissed.

Um, does she not understand?

"Riiiiight… Good luck with that…” I murmured, leaning back, taking a large swig of my drink. Fortunately, my crew arrived, Vetra, Jaal, and Peebee, all together, climbing up the stairs. I stood, and moved towards them. "You guys all ready to go? I know I am," I remarked, finishing my drink.

"What? So, you can hog all the alcohol for yourself?" Peebee teased.

"No, to get one of the weirdest conversations I've ever had out of my mind," I answered.

"Not before you tell us about it. Come on, you can tell us along the way," Vetra suggested, waving
for us to move along.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The others were just as confused as I was when I recounted that conversation to the others. Though I had to stop in the middle of the story telling as when we passed by the large spring in front of the port, there were people swimming around in the water. Relaxing. Having fun. What the fuck has happened to this place?

It wasn't hard to locate the meeting ground once we arrived at Spirit's ledge. There was scrap everywhere. As we had expected, we had missed the meeting, but I don't think anyone was expecting that we'd bump into them. In a relatively small alcove along the rocks, there was a metal grate blocking passage. Not like there was anywhere to go back there, but there was a data pad just out of reach. If we wanted to, we could simply just use breaching charges and break the fucker, but I'd rather save those.

I scanned around, and found that there was a barely buried wire. We followed the wire along to a half-buried console. Out in the middle of fuck-all nowhere, why go through all the trouble for a quick meeting? Even if it's just a dead drop, you keep it subtle. Not light a flare that tells every greedy dickwad in the area that you have something hidden away. I returned to the gate and grabbed the data pad. Coordinates. I called Reyes.

"Got what looks like a data pad," I informed.

"Must be where the cargo is. Suppose she left that for the buyer," he theorized.

"I miss the good ol' days of just going to a store. So much simpler," I joked.

"At least the sales tax wasn't as large a cut as Sloane's. Further encourages people like Zia, and myself, to deal outside her knowledge," Reyes remarked.

"I just want this out on the record, but I have a bad feeling about this. It reeks of a trap," Vetra warned.

"And I'd be hard pressed to bet against you. Still, hoping it's not, and if it is, I think we can handle it. She would be expecting just me, after all," Reyes reassured.

"And what about that Salarian you mentioned?" I asked.

"Just a fence. No direct connections to the Collective. Still, I suppose it's not impossible those connections have been kept hidden too, but… doubtful," Reyes explained. "Makes more sense that he's a fence to find potential buyers, rather than the Charlatan of all things. Besides, if someone like that wanted to hire a smuggler, and the choice was between Zia, myself, and, hell, most other smuggler's on Kadara, she wouldn't be his first choice."

"No personal bias there at all?" I teased.

"If there was, I'd be saying that I was the best choice," Reyes chuckled. "I'll see you there."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We arrived at the coordinates, seeing Reyes shuttle parked outside. On our way, we stopped at the wind-farm to pay Elora a visit. A man named Yuri told us that she had been a bit too loud and
ambitious for her own good.

In his own words, "Sloane caught wind of her plans and made her... disappear."

A surprising action from Sloane, but not one I'm going to complain about. Suppose Sloane prefers a 'leave us the fuck alone and we'll leave you alone,' kind of thing rather than attacking us. During that stop, we were stopped by a... charming Turian merchant. She was clearly trying to sell to me. Raising me on a pedestal, so to speak. I had even noticed Vetra subtly nodding at her methods. She told us that she had a stash of high quality weapons stolen from the Nexus, and sold us the nav-point. We'd get around to that later. Additionally, the Remnant site with Peebee's tech was along the way as well. But the same exiles who tried to interrupt us on Eos got their first. They even left a message, that if we wanted it, we'd have to find them, in the port, and buy it from them. In the port means we won't be able to take down these pirates. Peebee was clearly annoyed, but she wanted that tech. We entered the building, Reyes was already inside.

"There you are. Help me get this open, would you?" he requested. I holstered my weapon, and pulled the other latch with him. Guess it needed a simultaneous attempt. The contents of the crate were surprising.

"It's... empty." he murmured. Vetra immediately turned, got on a knee, and readied her bipod, steadying her Cyclone on the door's entrance. Peebee glowed blue with biotics, and Jaal got into cover as well. "And here I was hoping, that just this once, it wouldn't be a trap. Guess there was never any cargo to start with," he remarked. The door opened.

"Bravo, knew you'd figure it out eventually," a woman strode in. Her hair was red, though it certainly didn't appear to be a natural red. And she didn't sound at all like our Collective contact anyway. The accent, if one was to go with the name, sounds eastern European, but also on the lighter end of the accent. We must Rush B komrades, stay Cheeki Breeki my friends. "You never could resist a big payout," she scoffed at Reyes, glaring at him.

"What can I say? I'm a greedy man," Reyes defended sarcastically.

"That's why you don't have any friends. You're selfish," Zia hissed. Well this sounds personal.

"Make it 50/50 and I'll say you're my friend," I joked. Reyes laughed.

"Deal."

"Hey you bitch! That's my good friend you insulted! You take that back right now young lady, don't make me call your parents!" I threatened, my tone partially serious, but all meaning clearly humor. Pretty sure I heard my crew snicker at that. Zia simply rolled her eyes.

"I remember you being such a smooth talker... right up until you dumped me," Zia scoffed. So, this is personal.

"Don't tell me that's what this is all about?" Reyes sighed, hand to his forehead, shaking his head.

"Of course not," Zia waved her hand dismissively. "You've been taking all the good jobs in Kadara. It's gotten more than my attention."

"So what? The local smuggling union got together and decided to take me down?" Reyes questioned annoyedly.

"Something like that..." Zia murmured, her hand grabbing the handle of her pistol. Ok, what the fuck was she thinking? Vetra immediately opened fire, riddling Zia with bullets as more exiles,
stormed in through the door. Vetra simply kept firing, Peebee and Jaal supporting her as I grabbed cover myself slightly in front of them, beside Zia's crumpled up corpse. The smuggler's union of Kadara must not have had many members, because no one came to join that first wave of exiles, all lying dead on the floor now, largely thanks to Vetra simply mowing them all down.

"I knew I wasn't popular, but I never thought the other smugglers would team up against me," Reyes remarked. "Kind of flattering, actually."

"If there's more, they might try again," I warned.

"Of course they will. But it's much harder to kill a man who knows you're gunning for him," Reyes retorted.

"Or just trying to find him..." Vetra murmured. I suspect that haunts her more than she's willing to let on.

"All that effort and no credits to show for it," Reyes sighed.

"Well, less competition in Kadara now. Call it an investment for a larger share of the market," I joked.

"You and your silver linings," Reyes chuckled. Then he sighed again, bending down over Zia's corpse. He turned her over and closed her eyes. "I should clean up this mess... Zia was a piece of work, but it feels wrong to leave her out in the open. You have more important things to do and... this is personal. Go on," he suggested, waving his hand at the door for us. We let him have the time he needed.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

We crested a hill in the mountains and finally, our climb came to an end. The hideout of the hackers who attacked SAM. I parked the Nomad.

"Hold on, don't get out yet," I stopped my crew. They removed their hands from the door handles. "These hackers think that their virus worked. They think SAM's gone, and they think I'm on their side. SAM will stick to my private channel. Stick to the main area, don't try and debate any of them on AI, and otherwise just act casual. I want to learn what I can about their plans before we act," I explained.

The three heads nodded their understanding, and we exited. No one was outside the door, but there was a camera watching it. I looked at it, then the door unlocked. A human woman, light brown skin, black hair, and a warm smile to greet us was waiting inside, hands on her hips.

"Welcome to our sanctuary. I'm Katherine Nigh. Knight, to my colleagues," the woman introduced. So, we've met the leader. Seems good intentioned, if poorly directed. "I wrote the virus that freed you from SAM." *And nearly killed me.*

"I don't know how to thank you," I smiled, reaching my hand out for a shake. She shook, and then her eyes fell.

"I'm sorry your father did this. The Initiative's use of AI could doom us all, and you were the first to suffer."

"It sounds like you have experience," I questioned.
"I saw the folly of merging humans and AI in the Milky Way. My son and I were hired onto some kind of black-ops project called Overlord that created a monster. Many died, my son was hurt, and the young man used as a host, the autistic brother of the Project lead, was… consumed. Every Pathfinder risks the same fate," Knight explained.

Well, I never heard about this. Still, though, I suspect that there was some kind of fundamental difference in the methods. And, black ops? Why do I have this sick feeling that it might just be named after a certain three headed dog?


"Not surprising. As I said, some black ops group, and my son and I got out and into the Initiative less than a week before the ark's left. It all went bad the day after we left. Now, while I do have work to do, I'd be happy to answer any questions I can before getting started," Knight offered.

"Tell me more about Overlord," I requested.

"Mad scientists trying to merge a human mind with synthetic intelligence. From what I understand, David Archer, the one used as a host, had an outstanding grasp of mathematics. While he was autistic, he had a photographic memory, and it allowed him to communicate with Geth, even," Knight revealed.

"Shit, like Saren?" I exclaimed.

"Perhaps. There was a crashed Geth ship on site, we weren't too far from the Perseus Veil. Gavin Archer, the project lead, believed that merging the intelligence of his brother and a VI, that we would be able to communicate with, or even control the Geth. It didn't work out well..." Knight explained. And there's several key differences. It was with the Geth, it was a VI being merged with a human mind, and it was being used to try and control. She continued, "Their creation was a horror. I paid a heavy price to get my son out."

"And do you by any chance know the name of this organization?"

"No. My son and I used to work with Synthetic Insights, then tried our hand with freelance work. Men in suits came, and offered us a job on this project. Few details on what it would entail until we were committed, but it seemed like a good job," Knight answered, "But for what it's worth, it must have been Alliance. I only ever saw humans, and Archer would often say that Humanity would have control over the Geth, before stuttering to correct himself that all species would." Definitely Cerberus. It has to be. Fucked up shit like this. Though I think I'll believe Knight that she doesn't know.

"Then I won't keep you any longer," I stated, allowing Knight to return to her work.

"Thank you. And don't worry about SAM reconnecting. Our AI detector is always watching," she reassured. Iiiiiiiii'm watching you Wazowskiiiiii. Allllllllwaaaaaays waaaaatchiiiiiiing.

"That's good to know," I grinned.

"The virus was only the beginning. I'm about to make sure the Initiative never repeats its mistake." Well, I have a bad feeling about this. She walked back up the stairs, heading towards a door above.

"Pathfinder, it's unlikely an AI detector could discern our private channel. However, this may not be true for your scanner," SAM warned. It felt like he was speaking inside my head. An unnerving feeling.
"Scott, whatever she's planning can't be good," Vetra whispered.

"She's kinda convincing me though," Peebee argued in a hushed voice.

"There were key differences, explain later. Discreetly find out what she's up to," I ordered. Our features returned to our acting. Jaal glanced around and picked up a data pad with an old news report. He handed it to us. A Citadel Economics board report. So, 2182, the Illium Stock market collapsed because of a rogue VI with modified sentience. Illium. An Asari world that borders Terminus with legal slavery. Oh, sure, they call it Indentured servitude with contracts, but slavery is goddamn slavery. After I set down the data pad, a Turian woman, blue colony markings on her brow and forehead approached, cheerfully raising a hand in greeting.

"Welcome! I'm Laveria. I'm so glad Knight's virus worked," she smiled. "You need anything?"

"Just some curiosity. What brought you here?"

"I know, me? An underground hacker?" she chuckled. "Back home I was a concierge on the Citadel! I coded games for my little sisters. They played together, walked to school together," she trailed off. She began quite cheery, and then her voice fell, her eyes darkened. "And then those Geth… they impaled them on spikes. Together…"

A tear streaked across her face, and I noticed Vetra's own features faltering. Mandibles flaring slightly, brow plate raising in sadness. I remember seeing the reports. Both on Eden Prime and the Citadel. All the people impaled on those spikes, Dragon's Teeth we called them. Then, what those spikes did to people… It changed them. Physically. Their bodies filled with cybernetics, pale flesh barely hanging on, more synthetic than organic. I remember, learning of Laura's death, by seeing a picture of her body on one of those spikes. God, the pain and shock on her face...

When I first learned of these hacktivists, this wasn't what I was expecting. No, this will not be solved by us taking our guns out, forcing them to surrender. No, this problem is going to be solved by convincing them. That won't happen from a debate though, we need evidence, proof. Something that will resonate with them, but what?

"Spirits, I can't imagine…" Vetra murmured.

"That's why I left for Andromeda. And why I joined Knight," Laveria answered solemnly.

"So, it sounds like Knight is about to take this to the next level," I asked, trying to change the topic. Her entire demeanor entirely changed, as if she was pushing the memories and emotions out and away. Not a stranger to that.

"Oh yes! Very soon now," she grinned.

"Has she told you anything?"

"Not much. Her son, Alain, would know more," Laveria suggested. She pointed towards a door down here. "Pleasure meeting you," she returned to her work. I followed Laveria's directions to the door. It was an office. One desk was unoccupied, and the other, had a young man, likely only slightly younger than me, sitting in it. He turned his head upon hearing the door. His skin was light brown, and his hair was dark.

"You must be Ryder. I'm Alain, my mother's in charge round here," he greeted, "But you're a celebrity. Sorry I can't show you around, I'm stuck sitting here for a few more hours," he apologized, moving his leg out from under the desk and showing us that the entire leg had a kind of brace around it, looks like cybernetics.
"You ok?" I asked.

"Just project Overlord still kicking me when I'm down. When mom has-" Alain cut himself off, "Nope, can't talk about that. Do you need anything?"

"Well, if it's alright, can I ask about the cybernetics?"

"I had a serious infection of the nervous system. I use spinal implants to walk and you know, bathroom stuff," he explained awkwardly, "But while I was working on Overlord, my implants got hacked. They still work, but I have to sync them a few hours a day."

"So, I already asked your mom, but, what can you tell me about Overlord?" I requested.

"Black ops guys making Human-VI hybrids. My mother was hired as a programmer, and I as a candidate for the human part. When my implants got hacked, my mom got us out of there. Then it all went downhill," Alain answered.

"Thanks. I'll let you be," I stated, and led the others out of the room. I sighed, and pinched the bridge of my nose in thought.

"Pathfinder, I believe we can fix Alain's implants I have a schematic for an appropriate device," SAM suggested, "It will require some time, but few resources."

"Just how long?"

"Several hours. Shall I begin the process?" SAM asked. This is the perfect way to give these people proof that will resonate with them.

"Do it."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Vetra and Jaal were satisfied with my explanation of the differences between SAM and the whole Overlord fiasco. Peebee was still uneasy, but willing to accept things as they are until SAM gives her reason.

Which, he won't.

We had gone to the weapon's cache the Turian merchant had given us, and were both surprised and pissed to find Exiles arriving right after us, who began shooting. We thought it was a trap, but why would the nav-point be legit? There were the weapons promised stockpiled there. When we stormed back to confront the merchant, her defense was that while she sold it to us, she also sold it to anyone else who wanted it. She just didn't expect anyone to show up at the same time. On a planet like this, I do have to give her credit for ingenuity. Vetra was mildly impressed too. And on our way to our next destination, with Jaal's help, we had even convinced a rather crafty Angaran woman to look into the Resistance. She knew how to use the gas vents to make corrosive bombs, knew how to disable shields and vehicles. She'd be quite a help.

We parked the Nomad outside a cave that the coordinates we got from our Collective liaison led to. There was a comm tower outside the cave. Just what is this place? We entered the cave, and it was... large. The flashlights on our suits illuminated the otherwise dark cavern.

"Careful, it would be easy to get lost in here," Jaal warned.
"Good point. SAM, can you use GPS or nav data to help us navigate? At least retrace our steps?" I asked.

"Of course. I will be able to safely lead you out of the cave should you require it," SAM reassured. With that, we pushed on. We heard a low rumbling that got louder and louder as we went deeper into the cave. It wasn't organic. We turned a corner, and there was a light on. A generator connected to it.

"The hell is that doing down here?" Vetra questioned. I shrugged, not knowing the answer. The next room had a hole in the cavern's ceiling, sunlight pouring in. We had two paths to choose from. One at the far side of the room, a crate nearby, or one closer, with more lights guiding it along. We chose the lit path. The cavern remaining large and spacious. Another generator, more lights. We continued following the lights and came to a door in the cavern. I holstered my rifle cautiously, but kept a hand on my pistol, moved down to the door, and opened. There were a Salarian and Asari on guard duty, the Salarian jumped upon seeing us, and reached for his weapon. The Asari, was calmer, and seemed to recognize us.

"Intruders!" The Salarian exclaimed.

"Stand down," the Asari ordered, lowering the Salarian's weapon. "He was invited." So, this is a, if not THE, base of the Collective.

"Well, I suppose you could call a message containing nothing more than coordinates an invitation. Though normally I'd expect some nice cursive, formal wording. You are cordially invited to visit the dark dank cave that my operation uses as a base," I joked.

"A sense of humor," the Asari mused, "On Kadara, that'll either get you far, or dead."

"And which of those two will it get me while I'm here?" I asked teasingly.

"In here, neither. You aren't a part of us, so you can't use it to help convince a superior you deserve a promotion," the Asari remarked, "Crux is in charge here. You'll want to speak to her, top floor of the main building," she pointed, allowing us to pass.

There were three structures in this cave. At the center, a main building with plenty of comm devices at the roof, all peering towards a hole in the cavern ceiling. Likely the main administrative building. To the left, was another large structure but built into the cave wall. Judging by the amount of people going in and out, a kind of barracks. And to the right, perhaps a warehouse. Vetra studied the size of it. I could see the gears turning in her head. I indulged her, and we took the long way, passing by, letting Vetra get a peek inside.

"Shit, I'm running with the wrong crew," Vetra whistled.

"Don't go getting any ideas now," I joked.

"Joking, of course. But seriously, that is a lot of merch," Vetra defended. We made our way to the top of the central building. Collective glancing at us the whole way there. I opened the door and… why am I not surprised. Crux is our liaison with the Collective.

"Bout bloody time you got here," Crux smirked. "We don't receive many visitors down here, invited or otherwise. Sorry we didn't roll out the red carpet, polish the rocks, a bit."

"Would certainly be fitting for a secret, underground base, wouldn't you say?" I remarked.

"Quite. The Angara call this place Draullir. Translates to death caves," Crux informed.
"Edgy. Should go around blasting some Linkin Park or something," I joked.

"That's honestly a request I get more often than not from some of my more smartassed people," Crux chuckled, "So, I'm sure you're curious why the invitation was extended to you."

"A bit."

"Call it a test. And favor. Someone's been faking the Charlatan's orders. Giving bad intel. It got two of our recruits killed," Crux explained.

"I know firsthand what impersonations can do. And that was just low-risk and low-profile. This? Could do some real damage," Vetra nodded.

"Only the representatives of the Charlatan, like myself, have access to such high-level information. The boss knows it's someone operating out of this base. My job was to find the culprit. I suggested you, discreetly investigating, asking questions as would be expected, could be the solution. The boss agreed. Now, the question is, are you willing?" Crux questioned.

I took a moment, rubbing my chin. If I help them out, this may get me involved to the point where I know what a plan to deal with Sloane is. And, if need be, I can then go and help the Resistance's usurper in waiting to take power, keep the Collective from it. Hell, maybe I'd get lucky and they wouldn't argue.

"I'll do it."

"Excellent. Here's what we know. The drop point was in the sulfur springs. Even with the Vault, the geysers that dot the springs still have plenty of sulfur in them. So, the imposter should have high levels of sulfur in their clothes. Additionally, we found footprints that could be either Human or Asari. But they were too smudged to get a reliable size reading. That's all aside from personal recommendations. Lynx, the Asari who greeted you, and Dorado, the human tending to our Adhi pens," Crux explained.

"SAM's sensors should be able to detect the sulfur. I'll sneak some scans and check for an alibi," I stated.

"Good, just remember, be subtle," Crux reminded. I ran a scan on Lynx first, as she was down at the administrative building's supports. She had slightly higher than normal sulfur readings. I approached, the others having spread out to draw less attention and suspicion. Lynx saw me approach, glancing between me and whatever she was doing.

"Sorry about before," she grunted, pulling a pipe out of the structure before grabbing a replacement from her pack, "Not much traffic down here, recruits are jumpy."

"You didn't shoot, I can be happy with that," I remarked.

"You're awfully good natured about people pointing guns at your face," Lynx chuckled, "Some of us have been down here for months. I haven't seen the sun in weeks."

"Seriously?"

"I'm one of the few people who know how to operate the water filters. Which, while we don't need them for clean water anymore, it helps keep the water from tasting like piss. To an extent," Lynx explained, "I've been trying to train a backup, but most recruits can't stand the smell. Not many volunteers. I'd better get back to work. Thanks for the chat, distracts me from the damn smell," Lynx grumbled.
Alright, that Alibi is believable I made my way over to the Adhi pens, and sneaked a scan of Dorado as she was putting food into an Adhi cage. High sulfur levels, and elevated heart rate. Plus sweat. Could just be the heat, or nerves with the Adhi, but that doesn't explain the sulfur. My appearance behind her made her jump a little when she turned around.

"Need something? Go bother Crux," she stated, not much for conversation.

"Woah, just looking around," I remarked, raising my hands defensively.

"Sorry, haven't slept in 36 hours, thanks to another shit job," Dorado grumbled.

"That can't be healthy," I murmured.

"Defying the Charlatan isn't healthy. I go where I'm told."

"That include the sulfur springs?" I asked, making a show of waving a stench away from my nose.

"Smell that bad huh? Like I said, shit job. Can't talk details. Especially to an outsider," Dorado ended curtly, "See you round." She returned to her work, and I began returning to Crux.

"Dorado's heart rate elevated when you mentioned the sulfur springs, Pathfinder," SAM informed.

"Thought as much. I think we have the culprit," I opened the door to Crux's office, and she looked at me intently.

"Any luck?"

"Dorado's clothes had high levels of sulfur, and she mentioned being at the springs," I answered. "And when I asked about her last job, she was evasive." Crux nodded her head.

"Her mission was at the port. She should have been nowhere near the springs." Crux keyed her Omni-tool, "Aquila, detain Dorado. Quietly," she ordered, closing her Omni-tool. "Thanks for the help. I'll make sure the Charlatan knows both that you solved the matter, and that you did it well. They'll be in contact. Sooner or later…” Crux trailed off, "Now, there is one other thing you may like to know. A mole we have in the Outcasts has learned that Kaetus, Sloane's second in command, is nervous, and has considered contacting you. We suspect it may be related to Kett sightings in the area. Normally, we wouldn't have a care in the world for Outcast concerns, but this is Kadara as a whole. While we aren't offering to be directly involved, passing this along to you, helping him make the decision to ask for your help, is sufficient. You may wish to return to the port and speak with him," Crux suggested.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

We were back at the port, though I warned Peebee to not go looking for the group that took the Rem-tech, as we may well be going back out soon. I entered the Outcast HQ, and the Krogan at the door of Sloane's throne room called ahead.

"Kaetus, Pathfinder's here," one grumbled. A moment went by.

"Kaetus wants to speak with you. But not in there. Wait here," he ordered. Another moment passed, and the Turian I saw at Sloane's side when I first met her walked through.

"Follow," he ordered gruffly. He led me to a side room that housed a staircase, leading me upstairs into a hall of other rooms. He stopped at one and opened. An office, of sorts. "Sit." He ordered,
gesturing to the seat on the other side of the desk he sat.

"So, we gonna talk or keep talking to me like I'm a dog," I remarked casually. Kaetus raised a brow plate, sizing me down.

"You've handled your fair share of Kett, right? Hard to get far in Andromeda without running into them," Kaetus questioned.

"My team and I have been involved in several major operations against those bastards. Assaulted their base on Eos, killed the commander and all the Kett inside. Helped the Angara raid a high security facility, and assaulted their headquarters on Voeld, killed the commander, and all Kett within. Aside from plenty of smaller skirmishes," I answered.

"I'll admit, I'm a bit impressed. I'm sure you heard the story of how when Sloane took over she slaughtered the Kett who were here? Hell, you saw some of the bodies when you first got here," Kaetus continued. I nodded my answer. "There were mass executions. Sending the message that Kadara was Kett-free."

"But…" I trailed off.

"But, there have been rumors. Stragglers in the badlands. If true, they need to go," Kaetus explained.

"And just what kind of rumors are we talking?" I questioned.

"Ambushes, disappearances. Vehicles sabotaged, picked clean for parts. Could just be local wildlife, sinkholes, Roekaar bullshit. But there's enough people saying Kett," I took a moment to mull it over. I honestly have nothing to lose by agreeing to help.

"I'll think about it. Why come to me, though?" I asked.

"Two reasons. One, you aren't one of our people. Less suspicion. Two, call it me doing you a damn favor. We know it was you who broke Vehn out. And don't bother trying to deny it. She's pissed, but won't do anything about it without proof. You do this, you might get back in her good graces," Kaetus growled.

"Fair enough," I shrugged.

"Yeah… I'll give you coordinates of the latest location something was said to have happened. Anything else?" I glanced over Kaetus, and saw a familiar logo on the armor. It can't be…

"A question, and unrelated. That logo on the armor. That armor is Intuitive, but that logo isn't Nexus…"


"I ran into some Natanus survivors on Havarl. Woke up in their pods that had crashed landed. Same with you?"

"Yeah. Was the only one in my group of pods to be alive. You found a whole group? Must be Rix's doing…” he chuckled to himself.

"You know him?" I asked, surprised.

"We've… crossed paths…" he trailed off. Criminal and a Spectre? Surprised he got away. "Look,
that's enough small talk. If you're gonna look into this shit, I'd advise you get going."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We found a crashed shuttle and a dying Angara in the hills west of the port. The Angara confirmed the Kett before he died, and helped set us on the trail to find them. We followed the tracks, having told Kaetus the rumors were true, and waited for his shuttle just outside the cave the tracks ended at. It was taking a bit longer than I liked so I turned and slowly began searching through the cave. Didn't get far when I heard a shuttle begin descending. I hadn't made it back outside by the time a woman I was surprised to see, strode forward, hands on her hips.

"Impatient, are we?" seems Sloane is being a bit friendlier given that I'm helping her out. Kaetus was right behind Sloane, looking a bit uncomfortable.

"Wasn't expecting to see you here, Sloane," I remarked.

"She wouldn't take no for an answer," Kaetus grumbled. She glanced at Kaetus and rolled her eyes, with a smirk.

"I'm not about to let someone else fight my battles. Especially an Initiative lap dog," Sloane glared at me.

"You ask Tann what he thinks I'm like, I guarantee you that 'lap dog' is one of the last things he'd say. Pain in his ass, rebel, disturber of the peace, undermining his authority, are all the kinds of things he'd say first.

"And yet you work for the prick," Sloane argued.

"Oh, trust me, I don't-" I began. Kaetus cut us both off, stepping between us, facing Sloane.

"Enough, let's get this over with."

You're such a grump when you're worried," Sloane smirked, and patted his chest with a hand.

"Every second you're gone from the port is an opportunity for the Collective," Kaetus argued. "The Pathfinder and I can handle-" Kaetus was cut off by the sound of tumbling rocks further in the cave.

I think they know we're here. As Kaetus turned to lead us inside, she very obviously slapped his ass, to which he glared back, and she just chuckled. Guess it's a bit more than just business between them. We moved in, weapons ready, and found ourselves greeted with a defensible position with Kett charging in. We took cover along stolen crates and opened fire on every green bony shape we saw. Some came from a catwalk above, but Peebee and I simply used our biotics to pull them into the air, and into the line of fire. I may have been counting, and my team and I were definitely getting more kills than Sloane and Kaetus combined. Though I think we may have begun growing used to the haphazard, untrained pirates we've been shooting for the last few days, and forgotten what it's like to fight a military force, albeit their training could improve. Soon, the last of the Kett fell to the ground, dead.

"Think that's the last of them," Kaetus murmured.

"Let's get rid of the bodies," Sloane suggested.

"I think I might leave you to it. I have other business that needs doing," I remarked. "And manual
labor isn't my thing."

"Of course it's not," Sloane scoffed, but not without the hint of a smirk.

"I'll have your payment sent to the Tempest," Kaetus stated. Then I got the call from SAM. The implant replacement was done.
Cora had met us in the Kadara slums with the implant replacement, and handed it off to us. Now, the Nomad was once again parked outside Knight's hideout. We entered, most of the hackers there at work, and Laveria was there with a friendly wave as we approached Knight's office, expecting Alain to be inside. And he was, standing, appearing to be testing his legs, making sure he could move them correctly. He must have been focused on that as he didn't hear us enter. "Alain," I caught his attention. He turned, seeing my team and I standing in the office, the door now shut. The others, however, had moved to the side, leaning on the walls or just standing, looking around. "We put together a little something for you." I handed over the box that contained the implant fix/replacement. Curiously, Alain opened the box. Not quite sure what he was looking at. "This should help fix your implants." Alain's eyes widened, and he sat down fiddling with what must be the core of the implants. He carefully opened its casing and removed the old module, and inserted the new one. He turned his implants back on.

"You're kidding… Wait… I can feel my nerves waking up!" Alain stood, beaming. He began walking around the office, smiling, then jogging, then just running back and forth. Jumping, stretching, just… everything, with his legs. "When Mercury goes down, Mom will lose her mind over this! Thank you!" He exclaimed. Mercury, huh? So that's a codename for whatever they're doing. We lingered in the office a moment longer, making sure the implants felt fine, that the bugs weren't there anymore. We then let him be. I knew that now we could search the main terminal in the upper level for specifically anything relating to Mercury. And I shouldn't need SAM, so the AI detector shouldn't go off. The others, however, stayed downstairs. I sat down at the terminal and…

shit, of course. Passwords, firewalls. I'm not smart enough to break through this.

"Pathfinder, I believe I can fool the AI detector, at least once. I should be able to breach the firewalls and take any files relating to Mercury without the detector alerting anyone," SAM explained in our private channel. I took a breath, bit of nerves. "Do it." I linked the Omni-tool to the console.

"Firewalls breached, and files received. Additionally, the detector has been fooled," SAM informed. I let out that breath I was holding, relieved. "Project Mercury. A strike to prevent any future AI by destroying all quantum computers on the Nexus."

"The fuck?! Sure, you could use those to create AI, but right now, and likely forever, those computers run half the goddamn station!" I muttered that exclamation. Seriously Knight, that's fucking stupid. Preventative measures are one thing, but not when those preventative measures make everything worse! I immediately went down stairs and rushed the team out, and back into the Nomad, making a beeline for the port. Once again, Kadara is cut short by an emergency. "What did you find out?" Vetra asked.

"Knight's on her way to the Nexus right now with EMPs. She plans on taking out all our quantum computers just because they COULD be used to make AI," I explained.

"And what's so important about those computers?" Peebee questioned.

"They run over half the damn station! Hydroponics, Ops, engineering, life support, not to mention
if SAM node is in range of any of those EMPs, he's fucked. And you know what that means?” I asked rhetorically. "I'm a fucking dead man."

"Fuck…” Vetra muttered. "So, she's paranoid enough to pretty much shut down the Nexus just because there could be more AI in the future?"

"Fucking wonderful, isn't it? Right now, she's more dangerous than any of those AI would be. Even with the assumption they all went rogue," I remarked. I keyed my comms for the Tempest.

"Kallo, prep for immediate take off. Make sure everyone gets back on board," I ordered. I ended that call because I needed to call Kandros as well. Hell, Kesh should be in on this too. I added her to the call. Both answered, a few moments after the other.

"Scott?” Kandros questioned, no doubt wondering why I was calling both him and Kesh at the same time.

"Believe it or not, I'm not calling for a friendly chat. A woman is on her way to the Nexus with several EMPs. She's trying to take out the Quantum computers on the Nexus because one day, they could be used to create AI," I explained.

"But that would take down all of our systems! We wouldn't be able to get them back online before people started dying!” Kesh exclaimed.

"I'll hold all incoming shuttles for complete inspections, identity checks, everything. But if she's already here…" Kandros trailed off. "I'll have Militia patrolling everywhere we have Quantum computers. Do you know the range of the devices?" he questioned

"No. Just that she has them," I answered.

"That makes it harder. And I don't have a lot of techs on standby for bomb squad," Kandros warned.

"You can have some of mine. I'll have my own people waiting to begin immediate repairs in case anything happens," Kesh reassured.

"Kandros, I need you to just… block access to Hyperion. Block access to SAM node," I stated, nervous.

"To all of Hyperion? Even if an EMP does reach SAM node he should be fine, or at least recoverable. His communication may be stopped for a while but that can be restored," Kandros remarked.

"Guess I didn't tell you. When my dad transferred that SAM connection, the state I was in, that connection went deep. Think it also had something to do with how much my dad modified him. Just… ripping SAM out of my head like that will kill me."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I don't want to die, dammit. I'm nervous. I'm afraid. The only thing keeping me from being terrified is that Kandros agreed to block access to the Hyperion. But again, I don't know if an EMP has already been planted there. Right now, I was in my quarters, nervously knocking back beers. I already had an empty bottle on the table in front of me, and I just finished the second. We hadn't even been in FTL that long. At least Lexi had told me that should anything happen, she has a full life support set up ready to go at a moment's notice. But… what if it renders me brain dead? It
won't matter if my heart is beating if nothing is happening in my head. Or what if I end up in a coma like Sara? She wakes up only to find that I'm in a coma myself? At least the EMP shouldn't be putting her at risk. She's not on life support, just an IV.

I was about to go grab another bottle when there was a knock on the door. I really hope that it's not someone on the crew coming with bad news, or problems of their own. I can't deal with anything else right now, I'm just waiting to either fall to the ground dead, arrive at the Nexus and then fall over dead, arrive at the Nexus and everyone else is falling over dead because life support is off, or arrive at the Nexus and stop Knight in time.

"Come in," I called. The door opened, and it was Sid.

"Hey Scott, I heard about what's going on," she greeted, ending a bit more consolatory.

"Yeah. And at this rate I may fall over dead from alcohol poisoning before the EMPs do that," I murmured. Sure, I had only had two so far, but this is a six-hour trip, and I was about to grab another. And then another... and probably another... you get the idea.

"Hey, don't talk like that. For all we know, she's minutes ahead of us. Hell, the Tempest is probably faster than whatever crappy shuttle Knight has, maybe we're beating her," Sid tried to reassure. "And hey, you probably called Kandros and Kesh before she got there anyway."

"But they haven't called us to tell us they got her. Plus, she's a hacker, who knows what kind of techno-wizard bullshit she can pull to bypass them," I argued.

"Uh, remember me hacking into those exiles back in Remav? Yeah, it wasn't easy. Would have taken me much longer, but their security was trash," Sid pushed. "If you want, I can go get Vetra, pull her away from the work she's doing to distract herself, and she can tell stories of her trying to sneak around Initiative systems," Sid offered.

"Vetra's distraction herself? Why? What's going on?" I questioned, nearly forgetting all my own problems, instead concerned about hers.

"You are! She's worried about you. Everyone is," Sid answered softly. That surprised me, at first, but honestly, it shouldn't have. I'd say that at worst, I'm good friends with everyone on the team, after all. And who wouldn't be concerned for someone they think of as a good friend? I suppose it was just my own nerves getting to me. With my lack of response, Sid just smiled and hugged me. When she released me just a moment later, she turned, looking around the room, and gasped.

"Awwww, how did I not notice that before?" Sid cooed as she stood and ran over to the hamster cage. She bent down staring at him as he was running in his wheel. Or she. I don't know, I didn't check. "Look at it, so small and fluffy! What is it?" she asked excitedly, turning her head to face me. I chuckled and stood, moving beside her.

"A hamster. Found crumbs left by him the other day, got a trap to catch it, then gave it a little home in here," I answered.

"Can I hold it?" Sid requested. I nodded, opening the cage door. Sid gently reached her arm in and held her hand in front of the Hamster. It staggered back a bit, cautious of the large creature with sharp teeth and talons. Slowly, it eased forward. Sid gently and eagerly urging it on with her voice. The Hamster sniffed Sid's fingers and she giggled, before it crawled onto her hand. She giggled more, feeling it's little feet walking on the palm of her had. She pulled her hand out of the cage and held the Hamster close to her chest. It continued sniffing, it's little nose endlessly twitching as she gently pet it's back with her other hand. I wonder if her talons would feel like a light back scratch
for the Hamster. Sid raised her hand holding the hamster higher so that it was level with the top of the front of her carapace. She also leaned her head forward slightly, chuckling to herself at the little furry creature. The Hamster began sniffing her carapace and then climbed on, walking around that, the very top of her chest, and even tried climbing up and around the rest, as the carapace forms a kind of… bowl? I don't really know how to describe it.

"It tickles," Sid giggled. She reached a hand up and with a finger, was stroking the Hamster.

"Really seems to like you," I remarked.

"It does, doesn't it? Boy? Girl?" Sid asked.

" Haven't checked," I shrugged.

"So, does it even have a name?"

"I actually haven't thought of one yet. Hell, it took a while for me to come up with a name for the Pyjak after all. Then I just came up with Shitface because his mouth looks like an ass," I chuckled.

"Why am I not even surprised," Sid shook her head, smirking.

"So, I heard from Vetra you pulled the cat genome out of storage, guess we'll be seeing them around sooner or later. Why cats specifically?"

"I remember watching cat videos on the extranet all the time. Chasing after lasers, trying to jump and just flopping over, or launching face first into a wall, or even being scared by those big green plant things," Sid explained.

"Cucumbers? Right, I remember seeing vids like that. Think it's because the cats think those are snakes or something," I shrugged.

"I'll just assume those are a kind of predator. Anyways, they're just so adorable, and a few friends at ops were talking about how much they missed having cats, so, I wanted to help," Sid continued.

"I'm sure they'll be very appreciative. So, think I could talk about how much I miss dogs, and see them around soon enough?" I joked.

"Sorry, no," Sid laughed. "I don't think I'll be able to pull the 'steal my sister's identity' trick ever again. Though I actually planned to get to that had I not been found out."

"So, why so many human pets, and no Turian ones? Or Asari, Salarian, Krogan pets even," I listed off.

"Krogan pets? Really?" Sid laughed. "Varren. Large reptiles with sharp teeth. Sure, sometimes they aren't bloodthirsty predators, but that's not exactly normal. Anyways, Salarians don't keep pets, just… lab animals. And a lot of Asari actually latched onto cats. Turians? We don't have many animals that are exactly… house friendly. Humans on the other hand, have a lot of adorable little house friendly fur balls," Sid explained.

"Really? So few of the others have animals worth domesticating? We make pets out of members of all animal kingdoms! Mammals, Fish, Reptiles, Amphibians, Avians," I listed.

"Maybe it's just that humans are REALLY determined to domesticate so much," Sid chuckled.

"Good an answer as any I guess," I remarked. I watched as Sid continued playing with the Hamster
crawling around her, giggling and cooing, petting it. "You want to keep him?" Sid's eyes widened.

"You want me to have him?" she gasped. Reminds me of a kid on Christmas, getting that one gift they were hoping for.

"If Vetra says it's ok, sure. I already have the Pyjak, and bigger pets are more my thing anyway. Dogs, like I keep mentioning," I shrugged.

"I'll ask right now! Thanks!" Sid exclaimed. She returned the hamster to the cage and ran off. I sat there on my couch, waiting to see what the results would be. After a while there was another knock on the door, and I called for them to enter. Vetra led her beaming sister inside my quarters.

"Wanted to see just what Sid was asking to keep," Vetra answered my unspoken question. Vetra looked over the cage, getting a good idea as to just what would be needed to care for the fur ball, and Sid eagerly took the hamster back out so Vetra could get a closer look. "You said you found this thing leaving cereal crumbs around, right?" Vetra asked.

"Yeah, found the crumbs, built a trap," I answered.

"But, how the hell is it even here? How is it on board? If these things had stowed away while on transit, they'd be everywhere. We haven't even seen any of these things. I haven't heard of pet animals being pulled out of storage… except cats…" Vetra glanced at her sister, who just giggled and shrugged. "Anyways, even if they were, they'd probably all be accounted for. And none of that is considering how it even got on board."

"Huh. You know I honestly never thought about it. And I have no clue. We haven't seen any of these on Hyperion, so… I don't know…" I trailed off.

"Maybe it's better to just not question it. Well… alright, you can keep it Sid," Vetra relented. Sid nearly squealed with excitement. "BUT, you are the one who feeds it and cleans the cage, alright?"

"Yes mom, I understand," Sid teased. Vetra rolled her eyes, but still there was the ghost of a smirk. I chuckled with that observation.

"You can leave the cage in here and take it when you're going to stay back on the Nexus. But… don't go off with it the moment we land," I warned.

"Scott, you know she can't stay here when…" Vetra trailed off. I know she was implying the Archon. And she's right, Sid wouldn't be on the Tempest for that.

"And I'm not saying she will. What happens next for Sid's living arrangements depends entirely on the reactions of a certain Colonial Affairs director," I explained.

"You're right," Vetra sighed. "I don't know how she's going to react to this. Let alone that we'll be getting word out."

"I'll still tell her to fuck off if she tries to stop either of us, but I'd rather let word go around and spread so that she knows, that everyone knows if she so much lays a finger on Sid, that they will know who's responsible," I shrugged. "Shit, wait. Maybe we should hold off on getting word out." Something just occurred to me.

"What? Why?" Sid questioned incredulously.

"When word gets out, Addison's position is going to be weakened. We don't know exactly how people will react, and we don't know what the fallout will be. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm in full
support of getting word out there. But if we do it now, who's Addison's second in line?" I asked rhetorically. Recognition spawned in Vetra's eyes.

"Spender," she nodded.

"Precisely. Now, you know I'm working an angle to get his ass out too. But it'll be easier if we get him out of the way first. We'll be more likely to get her support if we haven't released the info yet. We won't use it as blackmail, and no matter what it's going out, but she may think if she plays along it will also help her chances," I explained.

"Why don't we tell Davis Qar about it? Have him keep the story in his pocket in case Addison tries anything while we're gone?" Sid suggested.

"Good thinking. It'll be easier for her to strengthen herself while we're away. Davis knows, he can leak it should she get too ballys, hell, throwing accusations at us, even," I agreed.

"The Initiative needs to own up to its mistakes. So long as word gets out, I'll be happy," Sid nodded. The three of us continued talking for a while. Varying topics, from stories of our pasts, to things that interest us, or even trading stories. It didn't even occur to me that my worries were completely forgotten.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

So, good news, we just landed at the Nexus. More good news, was that SAM had dug through more of the Project Mercury files and broken through the firewall of one that contained the planned locations of the EMPs. She planned to detonate them as she left in her shuttle, so that they wouldn't stop her departure, and wouldn't set the Nexus off until it was too late. One device would be at one half of Hydroponics, the other would affect the half that crosses into my docking bay, and fortunately, it was planted within the bounds of mine. Two others would be in ops. I had breathed a heavy sigh of relief when I learned that the Hyperion wasn't a target. I had communicated this intel to Kandros, and he ensured that any departures would be held up, and that they would bullshit them with some other excuse to hold the cover. Keep those EMPs from detonating. We would delegate. Just in case Knight would learn if we were getting to the devices. I would take this half of Hydroponics, and the ones in ops. If worse comes to worse, we can make do with half of Hydroponics functioning and the other being repaired. But we couldn't afford to lose anything in ops. Too vital.

And it goes without saying, the Militia would be tracking Knight down. The unfortunate part of these plans, is that they didn't detail the EXACT location of the EMPs, or what they look like. But I did have general areas. Such as just outside the Vortex. I scanned everywhere, finally finding what looked like a suitcase hidden behind a crate converted into a pot housing a plant. I marked the location and had Kandros send a tech over. If she will indeed know when they're deactivated, we have to play this carefully, yet it will also be risky. I rushed to the tram for ops. One would be somewhere in the lower section of ops. But where could it be so that it wouldn't be spotted? Not in the center, that's bustling. Not by the prison cells, and certainly not in Militia HQ. And not behind the desks of anyone monitoring communication. Hm… the security archives! No one goes over there unless they have old files to look at. I ran over there, and found another suitcase hidden under a desk. I marked it down again, Kandros nodding from over in the Militia HQ and sending over another tech. According to the plans, the last one should be on the other end of ops, by the large viewport.

"Hey, excuse me, I found this weird suitcase next to my terminal. I think someone lost it," a Turian woman spoke aloud, right outside the Militia HQ. I turned on a dime, and sure enough, a suitcase
exactly the same as the others. I walked over.

"Oh, that's mine, sorry, don't know how I forgot that," I remarked casually. She smiled and told me she was just happy it got back to its owner. She turned to return to work and I immediately handed it off to Kandros.

"This makes the last of them. We found the other one in Hydroponics as well," Kandros informed.

"SAM, just to be safe, walk through all the techs what they need to do," I ordered. The order was acknowledged, and after I was about to start biting my teeth in nerves, the AI spoke.

"All devices have been disabled." I breathed a sigh of relief. Then, got another call.

"You son of a bitch! You played me!" Knight growled. "I let you near my son! You're not stopping this!"

"I think I already have, Knight. We saw your plans, you don't have anymore," I retorted.

"The Nexus doesn't need those computers!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, we do. Those computers run half the goddamn Nexus. Hydroponics, ops, even fucking life support! You could have killed everyone on this station!" I accused.

"We won't be safe from another Overlord until they're gone!" Knight argued.

"Knight, slippery slope fallacy. Saying that something shouldn't be done just because it COULD do something else, or COULD create something else is one of the weakest arguments there is. I COULD become a mass murderer if I so chose. Should I be locked up?" I countered. "We have advanced computers to run Nexus systems as efficiently as we can. This isn't the Citadel, we don't have keepers running around maintaining the station in ways we don't even understand."

"I sacrificed everything to stop it. And I'm ready to sacrifice it all to stop it once more," Knight breathed with an air of finality. The call ended. Kandros also got a call, and when it ended, his eyes widened.

"Scott, we found her, but she has another one of those devices," Kandros explained. "We have a sniper watching her, and she's cornered. Hang on," he touched his earpiece once more as more info was relayed. "She wants to speak to you, personally. We might be able to end this peacefully… She's back at your docking bay, on the balcony looking out to the rest of the commons, just outside the science lab and cultural center."

I returned to the tram, slowing my pace down as the largest threats had ended. I walked up a ramp to that catwalk, past a Militia blockade that had been formed to keep citizens out of the line of danger. Militia had their weapons trained on Knight, and she was holding the EMP in one hand, and a detonator in the other. She saw me approaching, her features hardening into a glare. Cautiously, I walked through the first line of Militia troops, to the gap between them and her. She did nothing. I got close, within earshot.

"Kandros reports the sniper is ready," SAM informed on our private channel. Guess this is a good time to confirm for her.

"Understood, SAM," I stated, knowing it was loud enough for her to hear.

"SAM. Such a human name," Knight scoffed. "No one ever listens. Your father built his Human-AI implant. Overlord went on despite my…” she stopped herself. Her what? Did she… did she do
something? She did something at Overlord she feels guilty about, doesn't she? That's her motivation for doing all this. Like it's hiding the past away. It would explain why she was willing to put everyone on the Nexus at risk.

"You're trying to bury something. Is that what this is all about?" I questioned.

"I thought Overlord might help my son. Instead I made him a candidate for their butchery. I sabotaged it. I faked rogue code ripped him out," Knight explained. Her eyes misting with tears, voice choking slightly. "Alain was… hurt. Terribly. But he was alive and himself," she reaffirmed. "Not a…" she shook her head. "First Overlord, then SAM. Horrors forced on children! It has to end, even if I must do the unforgivable."

"Please, I'm not exactly a child. And it was done to save my life anyways. Hell, SAM was made in the first place to help my mother overcome a disease," I argued. Arms crossed over my chest.

"Many terrible things come from good intentions. I should know," Knight retorted.

"SAM fixed your mistake. Is a terrible thing going to come from that good intention?" I questioned.

"What?" Knight asked, confused.

"SAM designed a fix for Alain's implant. We gave it to him before leaving. He was walking and jumping and running. He came up with that all on his own," I revealed.

"You're lying. The code I made… no one could fix-" Knight stuttered.

"Perhaps a person couldn't. But SAM can think quite a lot faster than an organic. SAM did it. You can ask Alain yourself. Stand down and you'll be able to," I delivered Knight the ultimatum. She stood there, in thought. Finally, she handed me the detonator, followed by the device. "You made the right choice." A Militia officer came over and began placing Knight in cuffs, reading off her rights.

"No matter what sentence they give me, I hope Alain will forgive me someday," Knight muttered.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I lingered slightly longer, ensuring Knight was being taken away, more so for my own reassurance than otherwise. She did give me quite the scare after all. But there was more I had to do. I waited for the Militia to depart in a tram, before taking the next one to an apartment block. Kesh confirmed that Spender was indeed out and about, bugging her engineers, so I knew his apartment would be empty. The tram stopped relatively soon, and I walked down the hall to his door. It was clear. SAM hacked the lock, and I stepped inside. It was one large room with a door in the back, likely the bathroom. The kitchen was closest, and the bed the furthest.

"Pathfinder, there is a blank spot in the room," SAM informed.

"What does that mean?"

"I cannot 'see' part of the room."

"Think it's the scrambler?" I suggested.

"That seems like a likely explanation," SAM agreed. I looked on top of a shelf and saw that he had a model of an Alliance fighter.
"Pathfinder, that model ship was declared missing from inventory six months ago," SAM stated. "Are you returning the box?"

"Well, I do like the models I have… SAM, transmit its value in credits to the store it was going to be sold at plus a little extra. Make the transfer anonymous, and that it was found in the house of the thief, and that I wanted it myself," I ordered. Wouldn't want to be a bad role model for my AI after all. I searched through data pads Spender had laying around, as well as his terminal. He seemed obsessed with the Krogan colony. With getting Kesh kicked out of her position. On his terminal, he had sent a message providing advice for "an aspiring community leader." To always stand up for the little guy, and also the one on the little guys neck. So that you'd always be right with someone. That's fucked. And wrong. Plus, he's not really on anyone's good side. He has notes for speaking with both Addison and Tann. Let words or phrases slip to keep Addison unhappy, keep referencing to Tann that Kesh is "inadequate" yet not explaining said inadequacies. Because they don't seem to exist, for starters, I'd say. He had a crate with supplies all reported missing as well. Supplies ones would use to survive on a place like Kadara… I stood from the crate, being next to Spenders bed, and turned. But something behind the television caught my eye. That's not supposed to be there. I picked up the device, inspecting it.

"I cannot scan this device, Pathfinder. It's somehow blocking me, as a scrambler would," the suggestion SAM made was rather clear.

"Well, this sounds like a job for a comm expert," I mused. Hm, the Tempest doesn't have a comm expert. Sid monitors comms, but she's not an expert. "Take a look at Nexus rosters, see if you can find me someone who can discreetly decrypt this for me," I requested.

"Dennis Canham. He works in Nexus ops, the upper level of Colonial Affairs," SAM explained. Well, guess I'll need to make Addison wait a bit longer, and I'll be right there too. I made my way back in that direction, messaging Sid so that she would be waiting to confront Addison with me. As I made my way up the stairs to Colonial Affairs itself, Sid was waiting at the bottom of them. She nodded acknowledgement as I climbed. Addison clearly saw me approaching and gestured for me to come up and speak with her. I simply held up my index finger, signaling that she needs to wait. She threw her hands into the air, exasperated. I approached Dennis, a dark-skinned man with a mostly shaved head, just bits of hair remaining on his head. I stood there for a moment, making it clear to him that I wasn't just passing by. He stopped his work.

"Pathfinder, what can I do for you?" he smiled.

"I'm about to ask something, and I need you to just smile and look casual," I muttered through a grin. "Oh, just a few questions." Spender was just a level below us. I don't want him catching on.

"Smiling and looking casual. Check," Dennis murmured, a fake smile of his own. "I hope I can answer your questions sir." I handed him the device.

"I found this, on the station," I began loudly, ended in a whisper. "Out in my travels. I want to know what it does, exactly. Maybe it has some data you could extract."

"Sure I can," his eyes widened. "Wait, this is a scrambler unit! These things are illegal!" his voice began to raise, and he lost some of the casual look. "Where did you get this?" he whispered.

"Casual. If it has what I think it has on it, you'll all know soon. Proving that a certain someone is a conniving douche hurting the Initiative," I muttered again.

"Or when I hack this scrambler eh?" Dennis smirked. "Right, casual."
"Can you prove who's been using it? Solid proof?" I asked.

"You bet. You could hack through every security wall we have with this thing. There's a reason they're illegal. Should take me a few days to crack through this," Dennis explained.

"Send me a message when you're done. Thanks Dennis," I ended. I leaned over the barricade, looking down at Sid, then waving her up. I approached Addison as Sid made her own way up.

"I suppose it's too much to expect you're here to answer my urgent calls. Yale told me to expect a visit. You blowing me off only confirmed it," Addison crossed her arms over her chest defensively, scowling, leaning back. Sid was certainly within earshot now. "I'd hoped this blunder would never come to light, but Heleus has a habit of dashing our hopes. Have the Three Sabers been eliminated, Pathfinder?" she asked formally.

"Oh, don't you dare suggest that their deaths make this ok. Did anyone ever count just how many good Initiative people lost their lives to the Three Sabers?" I questioned.

"Approximately a total of seventy-eight. With another ten suspected, yet unconfirmed. It is also possible that a number of MIA's could also be the responsibility of the Sabers, though less likely," SAM spoke through my Omni-tool. Addison sighed, and my glare hardened.

"I realize that, Ryder. A bad decision was made. People paid for it. But it's over. As far as everyone's concerned, the Three Sabers acted on their own."

"But they didn't did they?" Sid spoke approaching Addison and I both. "Hi Scott," she greeted.

"Well hello Sid, fancy meeting you here," I remarked.

"And who the hell is this?" Addison questioned incredulously.

"Sideris Nyx. Vetra's sister," Sid answered, her own arms crossed over her chest.

"Oh. You." Addison groaned. "I noticed you tried to get someone to look into the Three Sabers."

"I didn't try. I succeeded," Sid retorted. Smartass. I like that. I chuckled. "And I was right all along. Someone on the Nexus was helping the Three Sabers," Sid continued.

"We hired and supplied them, and then they turned on us. It was a mistake. A course of action that cost lives. But like I said, it's over." Addison continued, stressing the word over.

"The Initiative isn't a dictatorship, we have to tell people if we've made a mistake. Especially one that cost lives! We have to own it, recognize it, show that we're doing better," Sid argued.

"Who does that serve? It could damage relations with the Angara, spark another uprising," Addison countered.

"Evfra would find out," I scoffed. "Helluva lot better that he sees us admit a mistake like this and that we solved it rather than keeping quiet. And spark another uprising? Because one leader made the mistake of using sketchy exiles rather than our own Militia and then didn't own up to it? No, the worst that could happen would be they'd just try and get you fired. And at best? Hell, you may actually get an approval rating that's not in the negative, because the people see you growing as a damn person," I retorted.

"And it would be lying! If you let them hide this, what else will you let them hide?" Sid questioned. Hm, the Initiative already has been hiding things here and there. The Benefactor, for
"We're not taking tips on diplomacy from a teenager," Addison grumbled.

"If the advice is good and sound, you should probably take it regardless. I agree with her. Transparency is important for building trust," I stated. "People need to know they can trust us, even when we screw up."

"Pathfinder, you're making a mistake.," Addison warned.

"Maybe. But at least I'm willing to acknowledge it," I retorted. Addison said nothing. "Expect to hear it on the news soon," and I stormed off with Sid. I'll admit, as I walked away, I had to resist smiling at what I think was a damn good comeback. Sid and I detoured to the small hallway behind the tram for a moment.

"Daaaaaaaaaaaaaamn," Sid exclaimed, raising a hand in the air for a high five. Or, in her case, a high three… Anyways, we laughed for a moment about Addison's reaction to that, before calming ourselves down. I ensured Sid knew she'd be staying on the Tempest a bit longer, then began heading straight to Davis Qar. He worked in ops as well. We told him we wished to speak in private, so he led us back to his apartment, sitting us both down with a drink. But we both just took a water. Sid and I both told him the story, and he agreed that he'd keep an eye out for Addison to try anything. Otherwise, he'd wait for our word.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

I stepped into the Vortex, ready to challenge the King. Gil was here, waiting, poker cards in hand. I had also brought along the hops we had found on Kadara for Dutch and Anan. Wait wait wait wait. Is that Lexi I see in a booth? Drinking alone? And looking rather sad? Why the hell is that? I cautiously sat down beside her. Her face was pale. This was not her first glass, was it?

"Lexi? Looking for the meaning of life?" I remarked, sitting down.

"At the bottom of a bottle?" the doc muttered.

"You wouldn't be the first to try," I answered, keeping it casual on my end, for a moment.

"Alcohol rarely provides answers…"

"Then why are you here?" I asked, my voice holding a more caring tone.

"What? I can't kick back? Have fun?" Lexi questioned angrily.

"Meant no offense Lexi," I held my hands up defensively. "It's just that when people do go drinking to have fun, they look like they're having fun. You look depressed."

"I grew up on Omega," Lexi sighed. "You'd think I'd know how to drink."

"What's this all really about, Lexi?"

"I was trying to talk to Peebee, and she said that she thinks that I don't care about the crew. That you're all just experiments to me. Do you… Is that how you think I see you?" Lexi asked sadly. Well, didn't know Peebee said that. I think I may tell her to ease up on the doc.

"Since when have you cared what Peebee thinks? You've never gotten along," I pointed out.
"It's not the first time someone told me that," Lexi shook her head. "Every one of my exes said something similar. So, taking a break. But, my question?" Lexi explained.

"Doc, would you be moping in this bar if you only saw us as experiments?" I argued with a smirk.

"I don't mope," Lexi retorted. Uh huh… "But you're right." Lexi breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Scott. I should get back…"

"What about your wine?" I smirked.

"I'll save it for another day," Lexi smiled. "Besides, I still have a Kett corpse to investigate." Well, if that's her idea of a good time, I guess. I stood and made my way to the bar, handing the hops off to Anan.

"Interesting… thanks, Pathfinder," Anan grinned.

"I think I've been regular enough that we can do first names. Come on, Scott," I replied.

"Your donations always make Dutch excited. Thanks, Scott," Anan smiled.

"Can't wait to try those out later," Dutch exclaimed.

"So, got any new, special drinks for me this time?" I asked.

"No, been racking my brains to come up with something new but it either doesn't taste good or tastes like something I've had before," Dutch muttered.

"You'll think of something, hun," Anan reassured, rubbing his back and planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Yeah… well, I did just get a few new ingredients," Dutch murmured, a smile starting to form. I simply requested a beer and sat down with Gil.

"Hey Scott, so, big news. I think I've found my purpose in life. Thrashing you at poker," Gil remarked with a cheeky grin. "Shall I deal?"

"Scott, I can read Gil's vitals and give you an advantage during the game. Shall I do so?" SAM asked over the private channel. Tempting, but no, that's cheating.

"No," I muttered, barely above a whisper.

"What was that?" Gil asked, confused.


The match proceeded. Turns came and went. At least we had agreed to a low risk game. While I wasn't getting my ass handed to me on a silver platter, the odds of me winning were low. I had won a few hands, bluffed him out of some others, and even called his own bluff once or twice. But it wouldn't be enough to win.

"Having fun?" Gil smirked.

"Could be better. But, could be like Drack," I joked.

"If only I could convince him to play a high stakes game," Gil chuckled. "Poker has lost me several friends over the years. The only one who still plays me is my buddy Jill. The same I told you about
before."

"She must be a damn masochist," I remarked.

"You'd be surprised. She almost had me a few times. But that's her. I know she'll always be there. She's a fertility expert. Heads the Initiative's CRC. My only real friend from back home. I bet fifty," Gil explained, then tossed out a few poker chips. Hm…

"I'll call. The CRC?" I questioned.

"Colonial Repopulation Committee. She's always teasing that I'm making her job harder," Gil smirked at some memories. "She says that if I'm not making babies I'm part of the problem. We have that kind of relationship." I knew Gil's orientation, so understood the joke he's saying Jill makes. He won't be producing children without a bit of artificial help. And hey, if things go the way I hope they do with the woman I'm after right now, I won't be either.

"Sara and I would make similar kinds of jokes to each other. Just, plenty different context," I stated.

"Yeah, like family. Support one another unconditionally, you just ride each other like that. All good fun," Gil shrugged. "You should meet her someday. You'll see, she's amazing. Another hundred." Not confident with my current hand, and I just have a bad feeling about this hand.

"I fold," I groaned.

"Another one for me then," Gil smirked. More rounds passed, and finally, the game came to a close. The outcome I predicted.

"I've achieved my true purpose in life," Gil chuckled. "What will I do now?"

"Wait for my inevitable vengeance, you'll see," I warned. "Good game, Gil."

"We'll see. Jill predicted you'd be my downfall. Can't wait to tell her she was wrong. Another streak intact," Gil smirked. Alright, Mr. Smug, next time, SAM will help me out.

"Tell you what. Raise the stakes for the next game, and then you tell Jill the results of that one. She may have predicted I'd be your downfall, but she didn't tell you it would be my first game, right?" I suggested.

"Oooh, alright, I'll accept. I shall await word of your challenge."

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Hey, Scott? Have you seen Jaal?" Peebee asked, having bumped into me on board the ship. We were on our way back to Kadara, and I had stopped to see Sara for a quick visit. Just us letting each other know we were both still there, I suppose. Additionally, I told Brecka to wake up a cryo block of Soldiers and Scientists, as per the threshold. The next one would be civilians.

"I haven't. Something up?" I asked.

"We were going to talk for a while-" Peebee cut herself off, seeing the look on my face. "I actually mean it. Talk, we've had a few interesting personal talks lately. I understand he understands that Asari reproduction isn't like the Kett, and I understand that… well… Angara aren't exactly casual. And… well, I'm not as off put as I'd expect," Peebee murmured.
"I haven't seen him. Sorry, Peebee. Check his room?" I suggested.

"I was going to, but he told me he got a message, and that's why he hasn't come to talk. He respects you. A lot. Think you could talk to him? See what happened?" Peebee requested.

"I'll go talk to him," I reassured.

"Thanks, I'm still not all that great with the fluffy, gooey, personal stuff," Peebee defended. I simply shrugged, and made my way to Jaal's quarters. I opened the door, he was seated at the console, holding his forehead in a hand, and a woman was speaking to him.

"You, more than anyone, know how dangerous Akksul is."

"Why were they allowed to speak with him?" Jaal huffed.

"They aren't children anymore. We can't control their every move," another woman explained solemnly. "You remember how you were."

"Please, Jaal!" the first woman pleaded.

"I'll bring them home," Jaal sighed. The call ended.

"You ok, Jaal?" I asked lowly, concerned.

"Two of my brothers, and one of my sisters have joined the Roekaar…" Jaal murmured. Well, shit. "Akksul has poisoned them with his hatred of aliens," Jaal growled.

"And those were your mothers, asking you to bring them back," I nodded.

"Indeed. The Roekaar have made camp at the forge. Many consider it the birthplace of our civilization. Akksul likely believes that this bold move will create more fanatics for his cause," Jaal explained, standing up, then pacing. He lowered his head, stopped, and closed his eyes. As if pained.

"Scott, they have my family, but I don't think I can do this alone," Jaal murmured.

"You don't have to. Just tell me the time and place. This ship, this crew, we'll all be there," I reassured.

"No hesitation. You are a good friend," Jaal smiled. "The Resistance is monitoring the Roekaar, scouting them out. Evfra is willing us to be the team that moves in, but only once they have more intel."

"Time frame?" I asked.

"The wilds of Havarl are thick, and the terrain around the forge is not always agreeable. It may take a few days," Jaal answered.

"So, hopefully we'll have it all said and done, then go settle this," I nodded. "And, Peebee was worried about you, by the way. Whenever you're ready."

"It's good to hear of her concern. Yes, I'll speak with her too. And keep you up to date on the scout reports."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder
"Hey there, Pathfinder. You making your way back to Kadara by any chance?" Reyes questioned when I answered his call.

"That we are. Just a few hours out," I confirmed.

"Sloane's holding a get-together for the locals tonight. I managed to snag an invite. Care to be my plus one?" Reyes suggested.

"Sloane certainly seems like the party type," I remarked sarcastically.

"She sees the events as a necessary evil to keep the people happy," Reyes chuckled.

"Sure, I'll go. Probably wouldn't hurt to get a bit more influence there. Any leads on something that could help the Initiative find a home there, though?" I questioned.

"Not quite, but… go through with this, see what happens. I hear you helped Sloane out with… something or other, if you make a good impression at the party, who knows. Maybe she'll key you in on something. Or maybe the Collective will be nervous seeing you brushing shoulders with her, and they'll make a move. Hard to say, but these events hold more influence than you think," Reyes explained.

"True enough. Just send me the time and I'll see how that links up with ours," I requested.

"Sent. So, what does that little supercomputer tell you?" Reyes remarked.

"The party will begin an hour after landing," SAM informed.

"See? It's perfect," Reyes stated.
The Return of the Movie Night

Chapter Notes

First part of the chapter is still the party and then Sid's there for the movie night if that gives you any interest. Like last movie night I'm just going to ignore perspective stuff. And I'll be leaving you with the next chapter as the last one for this burst of uploads. The moment you've all been waiting for...

Somehow, I managed to answer a call from Addison. It probably helped that it was both marked as urgent, and unrelated to her screw up. Specifically, it was about the satellite that blew itself up over Eos. Long story short, the satellite was a ZK resource tracker. Emergency tech, full of overrides to bypass protocol. An understandable resource to have in worst case scenarios, though clearly we don't need those now. Their designer was Dr. Zoe Jean Kennedy. Hence the name, ZK, her first and last initials. She disappeared with the exiles, so it appeared that she had made more to steal resources from our outposts. The amounts of credits Zoe takes isn't exactly much to concern ourselves with, but the implication that someone could hijack one of those satellites to steal more… What's more, is that Addison revealed that she wants to know what happened to her. I may hate Addison, but I don't hate, don't even know, this Zoe woman. I'm willing to help find her. Addison didn't have any leads for us, but we did get some nav data from the Eos one. It's likely there is now a satellite over Voeld that would give us more. And more would likely appear at any outposts I set up.

We arrived at Kadara with an hour still to spare before the party, Reyes would meet me outside a bit after it gets started. Fashionably late, I suppose. Vetra found someone selling popcorn and Graxen, so we were all very pleased to hear we'd be getting plenty more of that. The crew spent some time relaxing in the bar. Or as close to relaxing as we could. Drack and Umi certainly seem to get along, she must find him as a kind of challenge, just trying to find something that isn't regular Ryncol that could stagger even him. This may go without saying, but, she didn't succeed. Jaal was just completely uncomfortable here. He felt on edge. The Milky Way exiles, many were criminals. The Angara here, mostly traitors who've abandoned the Resistance. Peebee was doing what she could to reassure him, but was still on edge herself, some angry looks from some exiles. Eventually, I got a message from Reyes. He was waiting outside the Outcast HQ for me now.

"Try not to piss them off too much," Vetra warned with a chuckle as I stood to leave.

"Ah but they make it so easy," I remarked, leaving Kralla's song. I found Reyes right where he said he'd be, just outside the Outcast HQ.

"Time to introduce you to the Kadara royalty, hm?" Reyes greeted.

"I suppose that's one way to describe it," I shrugged, and he led me outside. An outcast guard stopped us at the door to Sloane's throne room.

"Hold it, this is a private event. You have an invite?" he questioned.

"Reyes Vidal. He's with me," Reyes answered. The guard checked the list.

"Go ahead," he stated, obviously very bored. The door opened, and we entered. Kaetus was leaning
back against the wall, sizing up anyone who enters, I suppose. His eyes widened in slight surprise to see me here, but nodded. Still, I have little doubt he'll be keeping a close eye on me. Each table was full, and where there weren't tables, there was likely a group of people talking to one another. Sloane herself, was seated in her throne, making passing comments to a pair of bodyguards at her side. Reyes led me in a beeline towards one particular group. An Angaran woman, a Krogan, and a human talking to one another. The Angaran woman, glanced behind her and saw us, a flash of recognition in her eyes as she saw Reyes. She smiled, and broke off with her group, approaching us.

"Reyes Vidal. I was beginning to think you wouldn't show," she greeted.

"Remember what I said about fashionably late?" Reyes reminded, with a smirk. The woman hushed Reyes.

"Introduce me to your companion," she requested.


"A friend huh? Sure you're not also a contact or colleague?" I joked. "Good to meet you, Keema."

"Oh, I'm those as well. Who do you think secured him an invitation to this event?" Keema asked rhetorically. "And pleased to meet you as well, Scott."

"Sorry to cut this short, but I need to take care of something," Reyes butted in. Hm? But we only just got here. He has some kind of plan up his sleeve.

"Just abandoning me to the wild crowds already huh?" I remarked.

"It won't take long," Reyes reassured. "There are important players here tonight. Mingle, make an impression. Like I said in the call."

"Alright, alright, but tell me what it's all about later, will you?" I requested. I got no answer, merely chuckles as Reyes was already heading for the door.

"And there he goes," Keema chuckled, shaking her head.

"You have any ideas what he's doing?" I asked. Keema smirked.

"It's best not to worry about what Reyes does."

"So, how'd you meet him anyway?" I questioned.

"Reyes? The only way anyone meets him. Through business. His skills are quite valuable here," Keema remarked.

"And just how do you represent the Angara to Sloane?"

"In theory, she relies on me to provide an Angaran perspective. I take into account problems more common to Heleus than your people are used to. As well as what the Angara, both here and on Aya, would think of certain moves," Keema explained.

"And in practice?"

"She only listens in extreme circumstances. She makes a show of being pro-Angaran, but the outcasts are her priority. Hardly surprising, however," Keema shrugged.
"You said you explain how the Resistance may react to certain moves. Is that just a guess or…?" I trailed off.

"Evfra and I share information, but I'm not a member of the Resistance. Kadara's problems come first for me," Keema clarified. Hm, I wonder if she is the person the Resistance has on standby to take over… "If war breaks out between the Collective and Outcasts, it will be my people who suffer."

"Shame how common a theme that seems to be in history," I muttered. "I hope these pirates haven't given you a bad view of the rest of us."

"Don't worry, Scott," Keema laughed. "I judge individuals, not groups. You, for example, I like. From what Evfra has told me, and my own observations just now. I'm not sure about who you work for, but most I've heard of them has been rather biased. I've learned to keep my options open."

"You never know who might end up in charge," I remarked. There was a flicker of understanding in Keema's eyes. Obviously, the Initiative wouldn't end up in charge of Kadara, I think Keema knew that. But the Initiative isn't the only faction in play…

"Exactly," Keema nodded. "Now, you may wish to follow up on Reyes suggestion. You won't make an impression talking only to me, after all."


"Likewise, Scott."

"I wandered around the room. I helped an indecisive gambler make a choice that won him a game, and even helped this Turian who tried to be a bad boy to an Angaran woman fix his… well… horrendously stupid mistake. Guy tried comparing her with her sister to make her jealous. When I told him to go apologize, she accepted but chastised him for not just saying what he felt. Hm. Advice I need to take myself. I wandered a bit more when Kaetus stopped me, a hand on my shoulder to get my attention, then crossing his arms over his chest when I turned.

"One wrong move, and you're out," he warned.

"Just here to mingle, Kaetus. I don't plan on doing anything loud and obnoxious," I remarked.

"Just keep a low profile. Sloane's already giving me hell," he stated. I glanced over to her. She was keeping her eyes on me. I think I'll go see just what she has to say. I wandered over to her, and she leaned back in her chair, her bodyguards keeping a close eye on my hands.

"I see that Kaetus needs to vet the guest list more thoroughly," she murmured.

"And here I thought I was getting on your good side when I helped with the problem. Relax, your majesty, a friend invited. Here for the drinks, here to mingle," I reassured. Sloane rolled her eyes.

"You can freeload like everyone else, but don't cause trouble," she warned. I held my right hand over my heart, and the other in the air.

"Pathfinder's honor," I grinned.

"Just go," Sloane groaned. Still no sign of Reyes, I sent a message asking where he was, and grabbed a drink from the bar. I nursed the drink, and no reply.

"I believe Mr. Vidal went off to one of the side rooms, Pathfinder," SAM informed on the private channel. Alright, I want to see just what he's up to. I exited the throne room and made my way to a side room pointed out by SAM. Reyes was in there, rummaging through crates.
"Damnit, why can't the serial numbers be in the same spot," he grumbled.

"Really? Taking you this long to find what you're looking for? So much for a relaxing night at a party hm?" I called him out.

"Er, I suppose 'It's not what it looks like,' is going to work?" he asked, a fake half smirk on his face. Huh, he looks embarrassed

"Was I just a distraction here or is being out there going to benefit much?"

"Yes to the latter, and for the former? This is for both our benefits, I promise," he reassured.

"And that is?" I asked. Reyes opened his mouth to speak, but we heard footsteps.

"Shit, someone's coming! We need a distraction, or… something!" he whispered. I have an idea.

"Sorry," I murmured, and I slammed my fist straight into his gut. Reyes back took a ninety-degree angle, his head in my direction, grunting in pain, holding his stomach, the wind knocked out of his lungs. Casually, I stood to his side, patting his back, and he got the idea, adding in some retching to his pain. At least, I think it was acting. An outcast entered, a woman, grabbed a bottle, seeing us and just rolling her eyes, then left. Reyes looked at me with mild annoyance in his eyes. "Hey, it worked."

"Next time, I come up with the plan," he grumbled. He leaped up onto a crate to begin rummaging through the crate above it. "Finally! Here it is." he jumped down, an amber colored bottle in hand. Whiskey written in bold at the front.

"So, just here for Whiskey? We could have gone to the bar, you know," I reminded.

"This is the only bottle of Mount Milgrom in Andromeda. Triple-distilled and six-hundred-forty-five years old. This isn't whiskey, it's treasure," Reyes explained. I read over the label, and shit. He's right.

"You are sharing that, right?" I questioned.

"Even with that punch to the gut?" Reyes chuckled. "Come on, let's get out of here. I have a good spot," Reyes suggested.

We were sitting on top of a roof in the port, backs against the building, legs dangling off the edge. Looking up at the night sky, the way the nearby nebula glowed, and even some scourge in the distance twinkled. And how the black hole's gravity bent the light around it. And of course, we were enjoying the whiskey.

"Beautiful, isn't it? I sometimes forget," Reyes murmured. "Is Andromeda everything you hoped it would be?"

"What I hoped was more or less what the brochures described. What with the golden worlds and everything. But… every day is an adventure. Even my night's off are interesting," I teased. "But I don't regret coming here. Wish my dad was still alive, and that my sister was awake, but it hasn't been a bad time. What about you? Why did you come here?" I prodded, handing the bottle back to him. He took a moment to think, took a sip of his bottle.

"To be someone," he answered. An honest answer from this rogue. I could joke about that, but… now isn't the time. I could give him shit later.
"You're a resistance contact, one of the best smugglers on Kadara, and a good friend of mine. Mission accomplished, I'd say." I patted Reyes on the back. He looked over and smiled.

"To new adventures," he raised the bottle, and took a swig, handing it back to me.

"And new friends," I grinned, raising the bottle again, then taking another swig. We sat there a bit longer, then Reyes let out a sigh.

"It's getting late, and I have some jobs to do tomorrow. I should get going," Reyes stated.

"Sure, see you around. I think my team and I will turn in for the night, see what's going on tomorrow," I replied. Reyes nodded, and took his leave. I typed out a quick message to the crew.

Attention Crew: It appears we have this night to relax and sleep. Why don't we celebrate this, and our new supply of popcorn (and Graxen) with a movie night! Meet me in my quarters in half an hour.

The couch was in place, Vetra had the food and drinks ready, including dextro sodas for Sid, and everyone was seated. Me at the corner with an armrest, Vetra next to me, then Sid, Drack, Jaal, Peebee, Gil, Liam, Lexi, Suvi, Kallo, and Cora. I stood to speak with the others.

"Glad to see you all here, and our special guest, Sid, tonight. So, unless anyone has anything else in mind, tonight we'll be watching Return of the Jedi, the last of the Original Star Wars trilogy," I explained.

"Oh, I haven't watched any of the movies, but I know of a bunch of old jokes that go with it," Sid exclaimed.

"Of course you do," I chuckled.

"So, everyone good with the selection?" I asked one more time. No one spoke.

"Alright, let's get started then," I stated, grabbing a drink and a bag of popcorn as SAM started the movie. Once again, skipping all the previews and all the legal bits, and the intro text slide began.

"Back to Tatooine huh? For a sand ball on the outer rim it sure is a common stop," Vetra remarked.

"A new armored space station? Has the Empire ever looked at the definition of insanity?" Cora questioned. The opening crawl ended, and we were presented with a view of the still under construction second Death Star. "And it's the same damn thing! How is it any different?"

"If I remember right, it wouldn't have had the same fatal flaw as the first. Likely none at all. And I think they'd even be able to use it to single handedly destroy a fleet," I explained. Cora sighed and shrugged, accepting the answer.

"Oh yeah, I remember watching this old, pixel animated video of an engineer explaining how he should be thanked for his work, when the shot that destroyed the first one was impossible, but space wizards," Sid chuckled.

"Yeah, I've seen the same one," I nodded, as a Death star came into view much like the beginning of A New Hope, and an Imperial shuttle was released, with two TIE Fighters protecting it. The shuttle landed, and a retinue of Stormtroopers and officers stood in formation to greet the Dark Lord of the Sith. The glorious imperial march playing menacingly.
"I, am your father," Sid muttered dramatically. The others chuckled lightly.

*The Emperor is not as forgiving as I am*

"Well, that's not saying much," Peebee remarked.

"Bipedal fat green pigs with horns? The hell?" Cora muttered aloud.

"Gamorrean guards. Yeah, weird, I know," I replied. Soon, Bib Fortuna led R2 and 3PO to Jabba himself.

"Oh, Goddess that is NOT easy to look at," Peebee groaned aloud. "He looks even uglier than when we saw him in New Hope." The scene continued, R2 playing the message for Jabba from Luke. And he offered the gift of his own droids. A surprise to 3PO, and not one he was pleased with.

"And just what kind of plan does Luke have then, I wonder," Vetra mused. Jabba stated that he wouldn't give up his favorite decoration, and the camera shifted to see Han, still frozen in carbonite in a side room. Then everyone in Jabba's throne room began laughing. Even the monkey dog thing. They took the droids down to what essentially seemed to be a droid torture chamber.

"Why go through the bother? Couldn't they just be re-programmed, or turned off?" Drack questioned.

"Just chalk it up as to Jabba being sadistic," Liam shrugged. As the droids were sent away, a kind of band were putting on a show in Jabba's throne room. Dancing girls, one that looked like she had six tits, and a green Twi'lek slave girl in the center, the band having that very weird... I have no idea how the fuck to describe the alien with a mosquito mouth, a tiny frog guy, a furry ant guy, and a Rodian woman with hair, somehow.

"What the fuck..." Vetra murmured, as they performed again.

"Why include this?" Lexi questioned.

"I've seen this movie before and still I'm just as confused as you. It's not one of the highlights," I replied. The Twi'lek dancer began resisting, tugging at the chain around her neck. It occurred to me that when Leia ends up in her place, it will probably be a good idea to find some excuse to get Sid out of the room for a minute. It may bring back some unpleasant memories. Jabba slammed a button on his throne and she fell into a trap door. She was down in a pit, skeletons around her, the others eagerly watching from above. A large metal door began to open, the growling and then roaring quite clear, though it was not yet revealed what beast Jabba was keeping. Though we all knew it just found itself with a meal. Heh, remember to eat your greens.

There was the sound of blaster fire and punching. A small bounty hunter, wearing a mask, dragged in Chewbacca on a chain. Jabba was pleased.

"Alright, that had to be planned. But just what IS the plan," Kallo questioned. The bounty hunter did not seem to believe that the current bounty, 25k credits was sufficient, and demanded the bounty be doubled. Jabba was now less pleased. The bounty hunter pulled a thermal detonator from their belt, and activated it. Most in the crowd began panicking. Jabba laughed, respecting the balls of the bounty hunter. He raised the bounty to 35k, and the bounty hunter accepted. The pigs took Chewie away, the throne room returned to normal, and Boba Fett nodded approvingly. Then we saw one of Jabba's human guards lift his faceplate slightly. Lando.
"Another player back on the board…” Drack muttered.

"Should have known it was her," Peebee remarked, as Leia took off her disguise as the bounty hunter, Han now out of carbonite. Leia and Han kissed, but they were not going to have much of an escape.

"Oh, shit, hey Sid, there's a bottle of Rum in the fridge and cans of Coca-Cola, a soda in the fridge in the mess. Would you go grab a bottle and a can, please? Sorry, forgot to ask before," I requested.

"Sure," she stated cheerfully. As Sid's back was turned to us as she left my quarters, Vetra looked at me questioningly, then Jabba had Leia brought to him, and began licking his lips just in front of him. Vetra didn't need an explanation.

"Thanks," she whispered. Sid returned holding both as Han and Chewie were in a cell. She handed me both and I took a glass, poured both in, and enjoyed the Rum and coke. The scene shifted, Luke entering the palace, then blocked by two Gamorreans. He used a force choke to get both out of his way.


"Ugh," Sid shuddered. At least it didn't appear that the connection went THAT far. Luke stepped closer to the currently concealed trap door.

"I think we're about to see whatever the hell that thing was," Drack murmured. Luke attempted to grab a blaster and shoot Jabba, but as a Gamorrean tried to restrain him, both fell through the trap door. The pig knew the danger and immediately tried to climb out. The large metal door began to open once more. The massive hands of the Rancor appearing, followed by the creature itself.

"Already imagining having that head on my wall," Drack chuckled. The Rancor grabbed the Gamorrean and ate him, then turned its attention to Luke. He was grabbed, but had grabbed a bone, and wedged it between the beast's jaws, hiding under a crevice in the rock. Luke saw his means of escape. He beat the Rancor's claws away with a rock, then ran under its legs and to a small door that was his means of escape. But there was a second security door, the guards on the other side shoved him away. But it was not over. As the Rancor stepped under the large metal door, Luke threw a rock at an emergency button within the cage, and the door slammed shut on the beast, one of the spikes on the door jamming its way through the Rancor's skull. A fat man who appeared to be the beast's handler was rather saddened for the death of the creature.

They had now been taken out to the Sarlacc pit among several skiffs and Jabba's barge. And we got our first look at the Sarlacc itself. A beak poking out of a pit with teeth and tentacles wiggling out.

"Ugh, reminds me of these weird pictures I've seen. Human made, some kind of animated style, from some region on Earth," Sid groaned.

"Yeah, the Japanese are an… odd people. Please, do not remind me of that kind of tentacle crap. It's disgusting," I groaned in turn. I noticed Liam and Gil both had also shuddered at the thought. Cora didn't seem to know what we were talking about.

"What, like Hanar?" Peebee questioned with a smirk.

"STOP!" I exclaimed. My tone held no anger, or anything negative towards Peebee, just disgust at
the mere thought. But that seemed to make the connection for all the others and Liam threw a handful of popcorn at Peebee, to which she just laughed.

When Jabba allowed Chewie, Han, and Luke a chance to beg for mercy, they essentially told him to go fuck himself, though in much less colorful language. Luke was moved to the edge of the plank over the pit, R2 waiting at the top of the barge. He nodded to Lando, and looked at R2. He gave a mock salute, jumped, but turned and grabbed the plank. R2 launched a lightsaber high into the air towards the skiff Luke was on, he jumped over the Weequay guard, and grabbed his new lightsaber. A green one, rather than the old blue, and sliced away at the guards, several falling towards the Sarlacc, one with the classic Wilhelm scream. Lando was knocked off while wrestling with another guard, and Boba jetpacked into the fray, though Lando had fortunately grabbed onto a rope. Luke sliced Boba's EE-3 rifle in two, and the Jabba's barge continued blasting, yet missing, at Luke and the others. The other skiff attempted to end their threat, but Luke simply jumped across and fought them off. Boba turned his back to Han and Chewie as they grabbed a pike to try and get Lando out of the Sarlacc's reach. Han, without even knowing, slammed the pike into Boba's jetpack, causing it to malfunction and send him flying into the side of the sail barge, and he tumbled into the Sarlacc's maw. A rather anti-climactic death for an iconic antagonist. Well, at least it appeared to be his demise. Leia took this distraction to shut off the lights of the barge, slaming the chain into the controls, then jumped behind Jabba and choked him to death with the chain.

"You go, girl!" Vetra exclaimed.

Luke was now on the sail barge, and now both Lando and Han were in danger of being another meal for the Sarlacc, which had a tentacle wrapped around Lando's leg. Han shot the tentacle, his sight returning to him, and saved his old friend. Tarzan style, Luke carried Leia away from the barge on a rope, landing on their skiff, the droids partially buried in the sand, and Jabba's barge about to blow.

"Careful girl, don't let them see too much," Peebee chuckled. The droids were recovered, and the protagonists safely sped away, back to their ships. The falcon heading to their fleet, Luke heading to Dagobah.

"Well, that's a helluva lot more than they had to welcome Vader," Cora remarked, seeing a new shuttle, and row after row of trooper and officer in the hangar of the Death Star 2. There's only one wrinkly old evil bastard they'd be there to welcome. The red-cloaked royal guards exited first, Vader waiting for his master at the front of the shuttle, kneeling. Emperor Sheev Palpatine, with his own dark, foreboding soundtrack, exited the shuttle. Vader and his master spoke as they walked through the hangar. As one would expect, Vader wanted to continue the hunt for Luke. The Emperor suggested he wait, that Luke will come to him.

"Of course he would. That is his father after all," Jaal muttered.

"Hold on. I remember in the first one we watched there were mostly humans in both the rebel and Empire. I could believe that it was because of the budget for costume designs, but now? Why so many humans still?" Lexi questioned.

"The Rebels take whoever they can get. You'll see other species with them later. As for the Empire, well, it wouldn't be too accurate to call them fully Xenophobic, as they occasionally have aliens working with them, or even in high, respectable places, like their Grand Admiral Thrawn, but still, they still prefer humans above all else," I explained.

"Wait, I think I know who Thrawn is. Wasn't he basically a human but with blue skin and red
eyes?" Gil remarked.

"Yeah, the Chiss are pretty much exactly as you described. Eh, don't really know though. I ain't gonna try and psychoanalyze an evil empire from an old Sci-Fi movie," I shrugged.

When nine-hundred years old you reach, look as good, you will not.

"Hah, when I'm 900, the only difference is that I may have slightly paler skin," Peebee chuckled.

"I'm over a thousand and I think I look as good as I did when I first passed my rite of passage," Drack smirked. Almost everyone laughed at the old man.

"I could believe it," Lexi murmured, then quickly went dead silent.

"At least someone appreciates me," Drack grumbled. Yoda continued speaking with Luke, of his old age, his sickness, as he entered his bed. He confirmed to Luke that Vader was his father, and reminded him that anger, fear, and aggression were paths to the dark side.

"Fear is not inherently evil," Jaal argued. "Dos-ashaan. Good fear, I believe it translates. Fearing things that should be feared keep you alive. It fuels your struggle to survive here. It fuels my people's war against the Kett. And when you embrace Dos-ashaan, when you refuse to let it hold you down, that's courage." Huh, that's a very solid piece of wisdom from the Angara. I need to keep that in mind.

"I like that, Jaal," Vetra murmured.

There... is another... Skywalker...

Yoda coughed, and then died, Luke being shocked, and Yoda's body faded, just like Obi-Wan's did.

"Oh, so that's what he meant when he told Obi that they had another hope," Kallo remarked. Speaking of who, Obi-wan appeared to Luke. They spoke, Luke chastising Obi-wan for not telling him that Vader was his father. And that he couldn't kill his own father. Luke asked about the other Yoda mentioned. Obi-wan of course telling him that it was his twin sister. Though the name was not revealed. By Obi-Wan. But Luke quickly figured it out. Leia.

"Wait, didn't Leia kiss Luke in the last one?" Vetra questioned. Sid giggled, I suppose she's familiar with the old jokes of how Leia kissed her twin brother.

"Yyyyyep. She sure did," I chuckled. Vetra was not the only one to make a face. The scene changed once more, back at the Rebel fleet with the others in the meeting room, Admiral Ackbar looking down from above.

"It's a trap," I heard Sid whisper. Damn it girl, just how much do you know? The meeting began, Mon Mothma describing the new data on the Death Star 2 retrieved by the Bothan spies. The ones who die doing everything. Ackbar asked some Bothans to go get him some coffee once. All dead.

"I dunno, this guy looks a bit fishy to me," Liam joked. Cora half groaned, half chuckled. Gil, Suvi, and I, laughed. But with the aliens, it didn't translate. Unfortunately. Han got the command of the ground team for Endor, and Luke arrived just in time to ensure he'd be counted in for the team. Then, in the hangar bay, Han was insisting that Lando take the Falcon for the space battle. So long as it doesn't get even a scratch.

"I'm not sure I'd be able to hand over the Tempest as easily," Kallo remarked.
"I don't expect you'll need to anytime soon. You won't be leading any ground missions," I replied.

"And for that, I am forever grateful," the pilot chuckled, taking a sip of his drink.

"See that guy behind Chewie? Looks a bit old to be on a combat op," Cora remarked.

"Hey, Captain Rex has been through hell and back, he can handle it," I chuckled.

"Who?" Cora questioned.

"A clone trooper and fan favorite from the Clone Wars, a series that was one of the best things to come out of the prequels," I explained.

"Watch those wrist rockets," Sid warned dramatically. I nearly broke out in laughter. That game may have come out in 2005 but it is goddamn legendary. Han offered to go with Chewie and subtly take out the two scout troopers. I don't think any of us expected that to go well, and it was proven when one bitch slapped Han after he stepped on a twig. Luke and Leia both hopped on a speeder bike after a pair of other Scouts were off to alert the Empire, unable to use their now jammed comms.

"I would not want to be in their shoes right now," Vetra muttered. Yeah, speeder bikes in a thick forest? No thanks. Luke kicked a scout of his speeder, hijacking it for himself, and two more scouts appeared behind them. Luke and Leia deciding to divide and conquer. Then, while looking at Leia, one Scout slammed straight into a large tree. "And that's why," Vetra chuckled, Leia now off her bike, relieved to see the scout was dead.

"Ok, I thought furry things were supposed to be adorable. That thing is just creepy," Sid shuddered as the Ewok woke up Leia.

"Not much for teddy bears with murder in their eyes?" Liam chuckled.

"Can't really say that I am," she shrugged in reply.

"They must worship the shiniest of shinies," Sid chuckled. The Ewoks were bowing and humming to C-3P0. They were all brought to the Ewok village, Threepio on a chair, and everyone else tied to a spit to be cooked. Then Leia was brought out of an Ewok hut all prettied up. Hair down, braided, and even in a dress.

"How would they have made that in so little time, and with being so primitive?" Drack questioned. Luke then used the force to lift 3P0 in his chair, scaring all the creepy fur balls.

"FEAR YOUR SHINY GOD!" Sid exclaimed, chuckling.

_The force is strong in my family… My father has it, I have it… my sister has it._

"That's right giiiiirl, you kissed your brottherrrrrr," Peebee laughed. Luke left, and it was revealed he had turned himself into the Imperials, and was taken straight to Vader, who had just landed on Endor.

_It is… too late for me, my son…_

"Well, that speaks volumes…" Jaal muttered. Vader stood as the Stormtroopers took Luke,
preparing to send him with Vader to the Emperor, and Vader moved to look over into the forest. "As does that..." The rebels learned from the Ewoks of a secret entrance, and the scene changed to the Rebel fleet, preparing for lightspeed. We saw Lando, piloting the Falcon, and his Co-Pilot, Nien Nub, the Sullustan.

"Looks like he has a face under his face," Peebee remarked.

---

Everything that has transpired has done so to my design. Your friends on the sanctuary moon are walking into a trap, as is your rebel fleet. It was I who allowed the Alliance to know the location of the shield generator it is quite safe from your pitiful little band. An entire legion of my best troops await them. I'm afraid the deflector shield will be quite operational when your friends arrive.

"BAMBOOZLED AGAIN!" Sid exclaimed. God this kid is fantastic. The rebels began laying explosives in the shield generator as it was stormed by... well... stormtroopers. And the Rebel Fleet arrived at Endor. The Rebels figured out, fortunately before any ships rammed into the deflector shield, that...

It's a trap!

Liam, Gil, Suvi, Sid, and I all laughed as we said it in unison with Ackbar. Vetra was chuckling, shaking her head. Peebee and Jaal, while confused, were smirking. I don't think Kallo, Lexi, or Drack know what to make of it. Now the Rebel Fleet had to contend with the Imperial fleet, Palpatine tried once more to turn Luke, and the Rebels were taken outside. And then Stormtroopers were getting jumped by the little fur balls.

"Do not tell me, that an entire legion, handpicked by the Emperor himself, as the best in the empire, are about to be taken out by a bunch of unarmored little shits with spears made of wood and stone, and bows with stone arrowheads," Drack groaned. As the Ewoks continued their ambush.

"But look, they also have gliders," I pointed out as one was shown dropping rocks on the troops. "They also have rope," as a bunch of Ewoks tried to trip an AT-ST. "And don't forget, big ass logs," I chuckled. Drack simply grumbled. Back on the Death Star, Palpatine ordered the Death Star to begin firing, and a single shot destroyed a large cruiser. While back on Endor, R2 was shot while trying to hack open the doors to the shield generator, but the little blue rascal was still alive. And the tide was turning against the Ewoks. They didn't have much to combat the Chicken Walkers. Though, they did have those giant logs I mentioned. And a Wookie using a rope to Tarzan swing onto another, hijacking it.

"Is anyone else scared by the thought of those things controlling that walker?" Sid remarked.

"I think they'd be more likely to hurt themselves than others," I chuckled. Sid nearly interrupted me, laughing, as a Scout trooper was clotheslined off his bike by a rope the Ewoks had set up. Leia was shot in the shoulder, but I don't think anyone was surprised that she was fine. And the scene changed to Vader and Luke engaged in one, final duel. Luke was playing highly defensively. Fortunately, the Rebels had once again infiltrated the shield facility. Meanwhile, Luke's thoughts, sensed by Vader, had revealed his sister. And it was her being under threat that drove Luke to action.

"See? He wants to protect his sister too, Sid," Vetra teased. Sid merely looked at Vetra and playfully stuck out her tongue. Luke pushed Vader back, attack after attack, until he had battered down his defenses, and Vader's arm was once more cut off. Revealing the wires of his cybernetic hand, much like Luke's. Vader was without his lightsaber, his hand raised with his back on the
ground. A clear sign of yielding. The Emperor was pleased. Offering Luke Vader's place at his side. Luke deactivated, and threw his saber away. He refused the offer. The Emperor's response may shock you. But it was not shown until after the shield generator was destroyed, and the Rebel Fleet once more engaged the Death star, rather than the Imperial Fleet.

The Emperor lifted his hands towards the young Skywalker, and lightning spewed from his fingertips, knocking Luke to the side, and Vader stood, standing beside his master.

"Come on…. Come on…" Jaal murmured, as Vader kept looking between his Master, and his Son. Luke was in pain, calling for his father to aid him. Twitching, convulsing at the Emperor's torture. It was too much. Anakin grabbed his master, the lightning now directed at him, rather than his son, and he cast the Emperor off the edge, down a seemingly bottomless abyss, to the blue fire of the reactor far, far below. Palpatine screamed, and as the electricity lingered on Anakin, it acted like an X-ray, showing the skeleton, the man, within. Anakin's breathing was now pained, heavy. The breathing apparatus damaged. Jaal nodded approvingly.

"So much for not a scratch," Cora chuckled. A radar or comm disk, not too sure what it was used for, was broken off the Falcon as it flew inside the inner workings of the second death star, Luke carried his father to the hangar bay, the Imperials ignoring them both, and set him at the edge of an Imperial shuttle. And his father requested that his mask be taken off. To look upon his son with his own eyes. Luke complied. The visage of Darth Vader was removed. The Dark Lord of the Sith was dead, and now, for a short while, Anakin Skywalker lived once more. His pale, scarred, burned face revealed to the universe, one last time. I think I saw Jaal wipe a tear from his eye.

"I think he wore that mask for more than just his survival," Peebee murmured. Jaal sighed. Anakin Skywalker died in the arms of his son. Free, and redeemed. The Imperial march, this time played by a string instrument, played slowly, hauntingly, one last time.

The Millennium Falcon had just found itself, and an X-wing who followed them, in the reactor core of the death star. With a few well-placed shots, it was destroyed, and they began speeding for their escape. Luke, having carried Anakin's body onto the shuttle, did the same. And the Falcon, perhaps with a few scorch marks, escaped the battle station. The Rebels both on Endor, and the Fleet, were celebrating. Though Han's celebrating was certainly less about the Empire, and more about how he not only lacked any kind of competition with the Princess, but that she already chose him. Hm, I wonder if that night was when their edge lord of a son was conceived. The scene shifted to a torch, at night, on Endor, being used to light a funeral pyre, the body of Anakin Skywalker placed upon it. Shortly after, the galaxy had decided it was time to celebrate. Rebel fighters speeding across the sky, fireworks, and we got to see how other places in the Galaxy were receiving the news. The Emperor was dead, the time of the Empire was coming to a close. Even though their threat was far from over. I knew many of the places shown would be unfamiliar to the others, as most were places from the prequel trilogy.

"Bespin, in the last episode," I reminded, as the people of Cloud City were shown celebrating. Cheering. "Mos Eisley, back on Tatooine. Theed, capital city of Naboo."

Weesa Free!

"Ignore and forget them. Everyone hates the Gungans," I suggested. Sid giggled, likely having heard no end of hatred towards the abomination who shall not be named. "Coruscant, city planet, capital of the Republic, then Empire." And a stature of the Emperor was torn down. And then, back to Endor. Ewoks and rebels dancing and celebrating. Even using Imperial helmets as drums. The triumphant feeling of the scene felt contagious. And I even hummed along to the music a bit. Luke looked to the side, and he saw two familiar faces as force ghosts smiling. Then joined by one
more. His father, before he became Vader.

"Is that…?" Vetra trailed off.

"It is," I confirmed, smiling. The credits rolled.

"When everything settles down, I'm excited to see what other movies your people create," Jaal complimented. "In fact… Gil? Can I speak to you later? I have an idea…"

"Can it wait until tomorrow? I'm kinda tired mate," Gil requested.

"Of course, we won't be able to do anything about it until we return to Aya anyway," Jaal answered.

"Thanks for letting me join for a movie night, Scott," Sid smiled.

"What, you think I'd just have a movie night then not let you join us? What kind of monster do you think I am Sid?" I teased.

"Not one that's as freaky as those furry things," Sid chuckled.

"He'd have to work pretty hard to reach that level," Vetra laughed. The others began to leave, Peebee kissing Jaal on the cheek, asking that he come see her before going to sleep, as Jaal and Vetra helped me clean up, and Sid said goodbye to her hamster, who was still residing in my room for the time being. When done, I wished them all a good night, and that Jaal enjoy himself. Then, I got to bed myself.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I woke the next morning relatively leisurely. Showered, got dressed, had breakfast. No sense of urgency, Essentially, I was just trying to buy time waiting for something to happen, something that could potentially be just what I'm looking for. I was sitting in the mess, my meal finished, thinking about what we were going to do.

"Pathfinder, there is an Outcast officer waiting outside the ship. She is requesting to speak with you," SAM informed. One of the Outcasts? That's odd.

"Can you tell me what she's armed with?" I requested. I didn't want to open the cargo bay doors just to be shot.

"She has left a pistol and a knife in plain sight on the ground in front of her. I detect no other weapons on her," SAM answered. Huh. Even more surprising.

"All right, I'll be right there," I murmured, standing from my seat and heading to the cargo bay. The doors began to open, and I strode out. Call me paranoid, but I still used my biotics to form a light barrier around me. Though it shouldn't be detected by anyone.

"Finally, there you are," the Asari woman muttered. "Sloane wants you to come to the HQ. Alone. She wants your help."

"Forgive my caution, but why wouldn't Sloane call me over comms or something?" I questioned.

"Because it's sensitive and she doesn't want to risk someone listening in. You coming or not?" the Asari crossed her arms over her chest. I glanced to the side thoughtfully for a split second as I came to a decision.

"Yeah, I'll see what she has to say," I nodded. With a wave of her hand, the Asari gestured for me to follow her. Not like I didn't know where we were going, anyway. The guards at the Outcast HQ didn't stop any of us, letting us pass without hassle. Sloane was waiting on her chair in the throne room, speaking with a few trusted advisors at her side, leaning forward. They all went silent as we entered. Though the Asari who led me simply wandered off to the side of the room.

"Leave us," Sloane ordered with a flick of her head. Her advisors and the Asari did as told. As the last left through the door, I spoke.

"Take it someone pissed you off," I remarked.

"The Charlatan used my own people to beat up Kaetus. He's alive. Barely," she explained. Was that a hint of nervousness creeping into her voice? I suppose this, plus their two actions when dealing with the Kett confirm that suspicion. Kaetus is more than her right-hand man. And I have a few ideas as to just where that right hand goes. I can feel sympathetic with Sloane here. This kind of tactic doesn't surprise me with the Collective, yet I still feel some disappointment.

"My condolences. But, why did they target him?" I questioned.

"I didn't call you here for a pity party," Sloane murmured.

"Just why did you call me? I know that on a list of people you don't like, I'm kinda high up there," I
The Charlatan left a note on Kaetus. He wants to 'settle things' between us. Meet in a cave in Draullir," Sloane answered.

"Which certainly doesn't sound sketchy," I shrugged.

"Putting it mildly. Right now, I can't trust my own people. You? You're an outsider. And… honorable." Well, she knows I'm not exactly in her camp. And I know that I'm not in full approval of Collective methods. But… damn it, the status quo is not one I can accept. I stalled a bit, asking why the Charlatan would act now. She explained how she ignored them for too long, underestimating them. She wants to end it now. "You with me?" she asked. Well, I can be there for it, and decide what I do on the way…

"I'll go," I nodded.

"Kadara's fate will be decided at this meeting. I was hoping it wouldn't come to this, but… hey, shit happens, right? Meet me at these coordinates, you can brief your team or whatever. I don't care," Sloane murmured.

"Yeah, I'll go get suited up," I nodded. Well, It's Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiigh nooooooooooooon.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I was driving the Nomad to the coordinates Sloane provided. With me, Drack, Jaal, and Vetra.

"So, I need opinions. Thoughts, whatever. If I have to choose in there, Sloane, or the Charlatan?" I questioned.

"I can't claim to be a fan of either side. In the grand scheme, I want it to be back with the Angara. But, one step at a time," Jaal muttered.

"I don't like Tann or Sloane that much, but she did betray the Initiative. Loyalty counts. Not to mention she has a bone to pick with the Initiative. As for the Charlatan, I can't say I trust someone who hides like they do," Drack grumbled.

"Honestly, while I can't say I like all their methods, the Collective is probably going to be better in the long run for both Kadara and the Initiative. If we want an outpost here, they are a much safer bet than Sloane. If we want to do business, again, much safer bet than Sloane. I don't know what their intentions are for the port itself, but given what we've seen in the slums…" Vetra shrugged.

"Yeah… been thinking the same. Maybe this is all for naught, that I won't even need to make a decision and it'll just sort itself out…" I murmured.

"You don't believe that," Drack remarked.

"Heh, no, no I don't," I half smirked.

The rest of the ride was in silence, until we pulled up to the cave marked at the coordinates. There was a shuttle waiting, and as the Nomad approached, a lone figure, Sloane, stepped out. A hand on her hip, waiting.

"Took your sweet time," Sloane complained. Not really helping her case here. "Come on, let's get this over with." Sloane led us inside the cave. A well-lit open area in the center, an opening in the
cavern roof. Ahead, a ledge, and to the right, deeper in the cavern, not nearly as well lit, plenty of stalagmites and stalactites. We looked around, didn't seem like anyone was here.

"You look like you're waiting for someone..." No... that voice, that phrase, holy fucking shit. Reyes stepped out from the shadows at the ledge above. Now that I did not see coming. I didn't even know what to say as we stared at him.

"I'm here for the Charlatan, not some third-rate smuggler," Sloane growled.

"Yeah, they're one and the same," I murmured.

"Surprise," Reyes shrugged.

"So, just what was, well, everything? You've been lying the whole time? Cause I honestly have no idea what to fucking say right now," I questioned.

"Not the whole time..." Reyes murmured, glancing down. A bit of shame? Acting? What?

"You said you wanted to 'settle things.' How?" Sloane got to the point.

"A duel. You, me, right now. Winner takes the port," Reyes answered, jumping down from the ledge, and patting the carifex on his thigh.

"Prevent a full-on war by the leaders duking it out," I mused.

"Better for everyone this way," Reyes shrugged.

"Except for whoever loses," Jaal muttered. Still, I doubt he would prefer a true war between the factions.

"I'll take those terms," Sloane smirked. She was confident.

But so was Reyes.

Reyes and Sloane both clenched their hands by their pistols. Then slowly began walking in a circle. Perfectly on opposite sides of said circle. Reyes had his back to the deeper portion of the cave now, Sloane's back to-wait, was that? A glint in the darkness. A skeptic would say it could be a crystal or something else. But anyone with a shred of common sense would tell you right then and there, that was the glint of a sniper's scope. Do I jump, push Sloane out of the way? Do I risk my life for her? Even if I don't take a bullet, I don't think I'd be able to shoot Reyes. He still feels like a friend. Despite me not exactly knowing what was and wasn't a lie. And if he gets away, that means it's war. Just as I made my decision, a loud bang ringed echoed through the cavern. And Sloane slumped to her knees, letting out a final breath, and then fell to the ground, dead. Well, at least the choice made for me was the one I had just made.

"Bang," Reyes smirked, shooting a finger gun at her, then blowing away the imaginary smoke. I admit. I feel a bit guilty. I could have saved her, but did she really deserve to be saved? "Get her out of here," Reyes ordered his sniper, who had just joined us. "Prepare the crew. Kadara port is ours tonight." Reyes began walking down another passage in the cave, tapping me on the shoulder to follow.


"What I want, is peace," Reyes retorted. "Sloane would have brought war to Heleus. We don't have the population to survive that."
"Is Reyes even your real name?" I questioned, a bit annoyed.

"It's what my mother called me," he answered, then stopped, sighed, and turned. His head lowered slightly. "It's my real name. I lied about being the Charlatan because I didn't want those rumors to taint your view of me."

"Which ones in particular? There's a few I'm having trouble dispelling." I crossed my arms over my chest.

"What I did in there, I did for good reason. I know I'm not as fast a draw as she was. If I died, everything the Collective does in the slums, Charybdis point now, thanks to you, wouldn't last long. And there would have been war. Losing honor was a fair price to pay," Reyes defended. "Kae tus? We had to ensure Sloane would answer the challenge. Not continue to ignore us." I sighed, pinched the bridge of my nose.

"I... can't say I agree, but I also can't blame you. There are worse reasons," I murmured. "So, what now?"

"I get to work. Kadara Port won't take itself," Reyes shrugged.

"And just who is going to be in control? It's an Angaran port, it deserves to be back with the Angara," I stated.

"Remember Keema Dorghun? She'll be the one in the throne. I can't run the city, and I still prefer the anonymity. She will essentially have free reign, and we agree on most things anyway. If I have a suggestion she disagrees with, well, she's always managed to convince me so far," he explained.

"And the plans for the Port?" I questioned.

"First and foremost, the protection fees will stop immediately. All the non-violent exiles will be allowed to return to the port at any time. And we will work on stopping the violent ones. We'll improve conditions in the slums. Maybe digging out some caves to build some actual houses or apartments," Reyes answered, "And there is one more thing:

With Sloane gone, there's room for the Initiative on Kadara. No strings attached. I want it just as much as you do. It will have my full protection, and you don't need to hand over even a fraction of a percent of what it produces. THAT, is a promise. And I don't break my promises," he reinforced.

Alright, I think I can believe that.

"Thanks, Reyes," I nodded. He smiled, and held out his hand. I shook.

"Now, I do have to go be a part of the transition. You go and pick out a good spot. Next time you come to port, it'll be under new management," Reyes remarked.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I finished typing my message to Addison and read it over once more.

*Kadara Port has had a regime change. Sloane Kelly is dead, and the Outcasts are out of power. The Port is essentially under Angaran control, working closely with the Collective faction. They offer their full protection if we were to establish an outpost. For no cost to the Initiative. Simply that we be willing to trade. Coordinates are embedded within the message, as well as any geographical information you may need.*
Content with the message, I hit send. The Nomad was parked at the outpost site, and we were all standing around. Drack had plopped himself in the water, and Jaal had removed his boots, testing the water with his feet. Vetra had been on a call. I overheard the end of it.

"You realize that even if I do find it, it's going to cost you," a man reminded her.

"And you know I'm always true to my word, so just get it done," Vetra retorted, and ended the call. I wandered my way over to her. "You feel it? Scott? Back on the Nexus, Aya, even? People aren't afraid like they used to be. The Kett, Exiles, Heleus itself," she trailed off "The Kett used to be terrifying. But after Eos, Voeld, even, everyone knows they're not so tough."

"True enough. Though Kett didn't sound like what you were discussing," I prodded.

"Wasn't. I have a friend keeping a lookout for a lamp. One brought from home, but stolen in the revolt," Vetra answered.

"Didn't know you were so sentimental," I smirked.

"Not the only one," Vetra retorted, a glint in her eyes, calling me out. "Suvi has her father's antique instruments. Cora has her Asari prayer book. Liam has… that junk he collects. And you have your dad's armor. These things are important. They remind us of where we come from," Vetra murmured thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I never want to forget what I left behind. Who I left behind…" I nodded.

"Even as we look forward to the future," Vetra grinned. She slowly began walking, me following, to a rock on the coastline of the lake.

"So, what's so special about this lamp?" I questioned.

"It's awful," Vetra chuckled. "It's got this butt-naked Asari for the stand, and she's holding… a moon."

"Well, that is… ugly. What makes it a prized possession?" I asked with a smirk.

"The foreman at my first job had the lamp. When he was a dick, I'd focus on it so he wouldn't see me upset. Now I keep it so I remember where I started," Vetra explained. "Most of my life was doing stuff to survive, taking shit from assholes, or… being one," she admitted, a bit of shame in her eyes. She turned and looked back at me, "I don't have to do that anymore. I can start over. Something honest," Vetra grinned.

"Heh, Vetra Nyx, Farmer. I'll believe it when I see it," I chuckled, "But do you really want to start over? In that way, at least?" I asked.

"I don't know," she shrugged, genuine uncertainty, but not any real concern about it, "Point is, I have the choice of changing if I wanted to," Vetra turned to look out at the lake again, "For a while, I didn't care that I'd lost the lamp. Everything was a mess and it… just didn't matter," I stood to her side, "But we've made progress, Scott. Small things matter again. People are daring to dream," Vetra continued, she wasn't able to hide the smile shining through. She was daring to dream too. I'm glad I was able to do that for her.

"It's nice seeing you like this," I grinned. Well, it's nice seeing her like… almost anything, really.

"I know. I like being able to let go and do something for myself for once," she mused, "Let's hope this is just the start, huh? What about you? Anything you're hoping or dreaming for?" she asked,
turning to look at me.

"I think my dream is… finding someone special to explore the galaxy with," I answered. Ooh, there's that feeling in my chest again.

"Oh?" Vetra held her hands behind her back, looking out at the lake, slightly changing her stance, and… is she learning closer to me? You know, I'm feeling more at ease than I have before, when that feeling surfaces, "And have you found this person?"

"I'm pretty sure I have," I smiled. Her head swiveled slightly to look at me. Was that a very small flash of concern? "You'll love her. She's tall. Great with guns, and getting people to do what she wants," I described. Vetra faced out towards the lake again, her mandibles flaring once more, and she let out a breath. I think she knows. And… I'm starting to think the feeling is mutual. Vetra chuckled. God, I love her laugh.

"Hey, while we wait for the Outpost, remember my offer of a rock climb?" Vetra asked.

'Yeah, got a spot?"

"Yeah, yeah I do. Not too far," Vetra answered.

"Alright, let's do it."

---

**Vetra Nyx**

I had a good feeling about this. When Scott told me he had found the woman he was dreaming of exploring the galaxy with, I thought it was over and done. But then he described her… that sounded an awful lot like me. Yeah, I still can't know for sure, but it helps. I haven't felt as at ease as I did at the end of that conversation in a long, long time.

Jaal and Drack were fine staying at the outpost site for a while longer. They had guns, they had their armor. And Charybdis point was just up the hill. Scott has allowed me to drive us to the spot I picked out for our climb, and we had just arrived. He had gotten a message back from Addison. The Outpost had come as a surprise, and she was preparing a block now. Despite Tann's bitching. Should take them two hours to prepare, and another six to arrive.

"So, guessing it's out of the question for any safety clips, harnesses, whatever the hell," Scott remarked.

"Pathfinder Scott Ryder," I chuckled teasingly, "You disappointed me. Don't tell me you're afraid of heights."

"Nah, I'm afraid of falling down a cliff-face," Scott smirked. No, should be fine, that regard at least. Should we leave the armor behind? Lighten our load?"

"Well," I began, taking a closer look at the mountain side, grabbing on to test. "The jump jet is going to be our safety measure, but DON'T use it just to climb. This is us having fun, climbing the old-fashioned way. Don't be a cheat," I chuckled my warning, "Gauntlets, should help your grip, keep any rocks from scratching your soft, fragile, fleshy hands. Same with the boots and greaves," I explained, "Besides, don't be a baby, you're wearing your Pathfinder armor, mine's heavier."

"Fair enough," Scott shrugged.

"Here, this looks like a good spot for you to start. Lot of rocks, bigger ones. Plenty of places to
grab and plant your feet," I suggested, moving so that my route would be slightly harder, but I've handled much worse.

"Why thank you, madam," Scott teased. I bowed mockingly, and he moved to test out the area I left for him. I was reminded of a concern I still had. Reyes.

"Be careful with him, Scott," I warned. He sighed.

"Trying to. I want to believe him, I do. What he's saying he wants for Kadara, I want too. But that still came as a fastball. And a big one," he murmured.

"He May have been the better choice for the Initiative, sure. For now, at least. But we got a show of just how well he can lie, and how big he can make the lie," I warned. "Keep an eye on him."

"Yeah…" Scott sighed. I felt sorry for putting his train of thought back there. He's clearly conflicted. This was supposed to be relaxing.

"No more business talk, I promise. Come on, let's get climbing. View should be great up there," I suggested.

We began at the same time, courtesy of a countdown I gave. He was a few feet to my right, so I doubt either of us are going to worry about getting in each other's way. And for his sake, I wasn't going as fast as I could. I'd stay ahead of him, but I wouldn't end up leaving Scott in the dust. I kept my breathing controlled, and did everything in my power so that each pull, each lift, consumed as little energy as possible. Normally, I'd expect that Scott would be feeling the burn, and a lot more burn much sooner than I would. But with SAM… I don't really know. I suppose that doesn't really matter as much however. So long as we make it.

Not sure if it was because we'd been climbing a while, which I doubt, if it's that this region of Kadara already has a high altitude, or even if the clouds here are lower, but eventually, we ended up with our heads in the clouds. Literally. It was even managing to block the view of the ground from us. I had spent just about the entire climb so far, several feet, yards, even, ahead of Scott. But always within ear and eye shot. His breathing was growing heavier, but it didn't sound like it was close to the level I'd call exhaustion. We can keep going, and we should be close now too.

"You were right, the view is great from up here," Scott remarked. I looked down, his head was turned outward, both hands still clinging onto the rock. I released my grip with one, as both legs were firmly planted on an outcrop, and my other arm was secure. I left my right arm dangling as I turned my torso outward enough to give myself a good view. With the sun still rising, all the other mountains and the landscape, yeah, it was pretty good.

"We're not even to the top yet. Come on, I'll race you," I smirked.

"What? We haven't been racing this whole time?" Scott groaned.

"Nope, that was just a leisurely stroll," I teased.

"Ugh… Heh, maybe give me some motivation. What do I get if I win?" he asked with a smirk, and a glint in his eyes. My body and my arm were already back on the rock face, ready to continue climbing. Keeping my grin internal, I looked down.

"What would you like?" I asked playfully. Scott had a sly grin, keeping the same glint, his eyes on me, as he readied himself to continue climbing.

"The bad guy defeated, a magic sword…" he began pulling himself up. "And the girl?" he ended
casually. I grinned internally again. But… still, there was that doubt. That damn doubt. I continued
my own climb.

"Good thing you're losing, then. I don't have a magic sword," I teased. The ledge was in sight. Just
a little further. And he's still behind. Heh, if not for the tux flaps on the back of my armor, he'd
have a decent show the whole way up. My hands grasped the top of the ledge, and I pulled myself
up. Scott was just behind me, I could see the sweat from here. I was sure he'd make it. And he
hasn't used the jump-jet. He passed that test. I stepped away from the ledge, glancing around the
area and took a deep breath. This is it… isn't it?

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Oh… God… Jesus… Christ… Mother…Fucker… FINALLY! My hand reached the top of the
ledge, my breathing heavy and labored, sweat practically pouring down my face. My arms, legs,
stomach, all burning. And I lost the race. I was so tempted to use the Jump-jet but… no, she
wanted to do this the old-fashioned way. I wasn't going to ruin that for her. I could see her a yard or
so away on the top of the mountain, just turning to see me barely pull myself up, and roll over flat
on my back, looking up at the sky. I used my feet to push me a bit further from the edge. I took a
deep breath, it was over.

"Having fun?" Vetra asked teasingly with a heavy breath of her own. Least I'm not the only one
feeling it. I kept my eyes closed, and instead raised up my right hand, the middle finger raised.
"You look like you're having fun," she chuckled. I heard her lay down beside me. I opened my eye
slightly, she was just to my right, looking at me. A concerned, no, nervous look in her emerald
eyes. "Hey…" She looked up, and both my eyes were open. "Is this real?"

"Yeah, I think the sky's real," I joked. It was an empty joke though. I could feel that feeling in my
chest again.

"No," she breathed. "This. How you are towards me. Specifically. It's like you… care, more than a
friend," she murmured. The back of her hand brushed against the back of mine. Almost…
longingly. Well, this is it. I let out a deep breath myself. "I don't mind if it's no," she continued, I
could hear, feel, even, the sadness hidden in that. "I just want to be sure. It gets messy
otherwise…” I turned my head to look at her. And she turned her's slightly. I took her hand in mine,
and grasped it tight, and she did the same.

"Yeah… I do care about you. More than a friend…” I answered quietly. Not even a remote air of
joke, sarcasm, tease, anything. Just sincerity. She turned her head more. Her eyes wide.

"Really? I didn't want to assume. It seemed so unlike-" Ok, time to shut us both up before we get
into an awkward, babbling mess. The solution? Well, it just came naturally. I sat up and leaned
over Vetra, my left arm gently grabbing onto her hip, and I closed my eyes, my lips against hers.
They certainly didn't feel like human lips, not fleshy enough. But it didn't feel bad by any stretch.
That feeling in my chest was exploding, not to mention that feeling of my 'third leg,' so to
speak. Down boy! I moved my head back, still above hers.

"And how's that for proving it?" I asked quietly, my eyes gazing into hers, even through her visor.

"I'm convinced," she smiled. She reached her hand behind my head and pulled me back down to
her. This time, as our lips connected, her's opened. I knew what that meant, and I opened my own,
our tongues dancing. Hers was longer than mine, which felt weird, and it was also a bit larger. Also
weird. But not in a bad way. Just… different, I suppose is a better word. I felt pretty goddamn
happy. All in basically one fell swoop, I learned that the girl I had been crushing on also had
feelings for me, we had our first kiss, and then our first makeout session. Our hands explored each other, though in armor, I don't think either of us felt much of each other's hands. Though for both of us, they had remained pretty much exclusively to either the head, the sides, and maybe the outer thigh. We stayed like that for… not sure how long, just getting lost in each other's presence. The last time I felt this way, let alone with a woman, would have been one of the last times I ever saw Laura. Normally, the mere thought would have saddened me. But now, it was just pushed back. My mind refusing to have this be ruined. Not to mention the whole-

"Pathfinder," SAM spoke in our private channel. I shot back eyes wide, falling onto my side, arms flailing. I sat straight up, Vetra incredibly confused right next to me.

"JEEZ-LOUEEZ WHAT THE FUCK!?" I exclaimed. Vetra cocked her head to the side, concerned. Better clear this up. "SAM! DO NOT! FUCKING! DO THAT!" Vetra's eyes widened in understanding. She began laughing, but still had her mandibles flaring in a blush, like a bit of embarrassment. I know I must be beet red. I sighed and leaned forward, head on my forehead.

"What is it?" I asked calmly.

"When Peebee went to meet the Exiles who took her Remnant technology, someone hacked their way into the Tempest," SAM explained.

"What?! What did they take?" I questioned, growing serious. Vetra sat up wondering what happened.

"They only took Poc, and left behind the technology, and a recorded message" SAM answered.

"Funny idea for a trade," I murmured. "Sorry for lashing out SAM, you just scared the shit out of me. If you need to get my attention when there's a… moment, have my Omni-tool ring like there's a call," I requested.

"Acknowledged." Was his simple reply.

"Guess we both forgot we had a third wheel," Vetra chuckled. "What happened?"

"Someone snuck onto the Tempest," I sighed. "Took Poc, left that tech Peebee wanted."

"Well she's not gonna be happy. We should probably get back to the other's," Vetra murmured.

"Yeah, go see how the port is doing, I guess," I muttered. It seems neither of us wants to go.

"Sid is gonna flip her shit…" Vetra chuckled.

"Well, she had already figured me out. Hell, so did Lexi, Jaal, Peebee, Sarah. Pretty sure Drack did," I remarked awkwardly.

"And I didn't? Spirits, they are going to give us so much shit," Vetra groaned.

"I don't know. People don't seem to be giving Peebee or Jaal much," I shrugged.

"Yeah, but no one really saw it coming, and it wasn't really going on for that long before it happened," Vetra countered.

"Well… then let them talk shit. I don't really care what any of them have to say about… us," I chuckled awkwardly.

"Hm, yeah, I don't think I do either," Vetra grinned. "Hey, so Turians aren't able to have quick,
small kisses like humans, so," Vetra grabbed the back of my head and pulled it towards her gently and pressed her forehead against mine, her eyes were closed, and she let out a breath. She opened her eyes, gazing into mine. "That's how Turians do it." I gave her a look, still smiling. "Oh, fine," she chuckled, and we shared one more kiss. It didn't last too long, but it was still a good one. And so began our climb back down.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

To say that Peebee was distressed over her bot would be an understatement. And the message left behind certainly didn't help her. While it was technically addressed to me, it was clearly meant to mock and insult Peebee. Kalinda, the woman we met on the Nexus, was apparently in control of the exiles who'd been trying to take the Rem-tech. I asked Peebee why Kalinda is so obsessed with her. She hesitantly revealed… well, I was surprised.

Back in the Milky Way, Kalinda was born to a high-class family with a lot of influence. They met, and she was Peebee's window into a more… sophisticated and elite lifestyle. She had become infatuated, and for a time had believed Kalinda felt the same.

Except again and again, Kalinda would degrade Peebee. Verbally. Mocking her to her friends, insulting her, so on and so forth. And I know Peebee enjoys banter so the odds that it was being taken the wrong way? Slim to none.

Peebee would break off, only to be drawn back by hollow apologies and promises soon broken. Then came the Initiative, and the last straw, which Peebee didn't want to talk about, where she finally broke off for good. And Kalinda had lost her toy.

She's obsessed with control, and now she can't control Peebee anymore. So, she's trying to manipulate her a different way. Unfortunately, there's not much else we can do rather than to play her game. Right now, that means find Poc. She can't complete the scanner without pieces in the bot. Peebee tried apologizing that we were getting caught up in this. That she'd take care of it on her own. I wouldn't hear any of it. We'd help gladly.

As for the port itself, they were working hard at re-branding it as a "free port" now. Apparently, once Sloane was dead, Reyes had signaled sleeper agents for a coup. According to what I could overhear, there were plenty, and all seemed to be positioned perfectly. The fighting was kept within the Outcast HQ, but even then, it was minimal, quick, and efficient. It certainly wasn't a bloodless coup, but to Kadara's standards of bloody, it may as well be. The Outcasts who surrendered were spared, and given a choice. Those who refused, were cuffed and taken away. I have little doubt of their fates. The same choice was then broadcast along Outcast channels. Surrender, and they can come and live in the port. Fight, and a fight will be what they get.

My crew now all knew the Charlatan's identity. While no one tried to argue that I should have saved Sloane, everyone either had no opinion, like Peebee and Liam, while the rest had their own little warnings and cautions. Cora? That he murdered Sloane in cold blood. That we can't forget what he is. I see her point, but a part of me wants to argue that if he told me the truth about why he did it, that it couldn't truly be that cold. Drack told me that it's hard to trust someone who can fool everyone, but shrugged it off saying that he doesn't have to trust him. Jaal just still hates this place and doesn't trust anyone here. And Vetra already told me her concerns before our climb. Speaking of who… where'd she get off to? I mean, I don't exactly have anything to occupy me until the Outpost arrives.

Vetra was, in fact, at the docking area just by our ship, with a small mound of supplies. Looking at the labels, not the kind of stuff I'd suspect we need. She had her back turned to where I was. I
smirked to myself and kept quiet. I wouldn't go and grab her at the shoulders, hips, anything. After all, we only started a few hours ago, but I did suddenly appear to her side, my back to the crates, leaning against them, and my hands holding me up.

"Watch out for those crates," she warned, not even fazed. "Fragile stuff."


"Oh, I know," Vetra chuckled a bit awkwardly. "Just in case you wanted to take a seat or something."

"What? You'd think they'll break it if I sat down? What are you saying about my weight?" I questioned, mock offense in my voice.

"Oh, I don't know. You tell me, Scott. We have had a few extra rations go missing," Vetra shrugged.

"Yeah, yeah," I chuckled. "So, what's in em?"

"Supplies for the outpost. Trade goods. That kind of stuff. Only one of these crates will even be going on the Tempest. The rest will head down to the Outpost when it gets here. Heh, wouldn't have minded hearing Tann's reaction to the news," Vetra snickered.

"I'm sure he's already blaming me and calling me all kinds of names. To himself, at least," I remarked.

"Plenty of choice words, I'm sure," Vetra smirked. It went silent, neither of us really knowing what to say. And I think we both felt like we needed to say… well… something. Instead, I got a call. Lexi.

"Scott, would you come to the med-bay please? I've finished my examination of the Kett corpse, and want to speak with Jaal about the results. You being there will likely help him," Lexi requested.

"Sure, I'll be right there," I nodded, and the call ended.

"See you, Scott," Vetra smiled, and continued checking the crates. I think I should probably have a chat with Lexi when the thing with Jaal is done.

I arrived in the ship's med-bay. Lexi was, of course, inside, as was Jaal, who's back was turned to the door. All were looking over the Kett body that lay, it's torso with a large cut down the middle stitched back together. Lexi saw me enter and nodded, a sign of appreciation for coming.

"Jaal, look at these scans. I've searched the genes of every different kind of cell in the body. I can only find a sliver of the Angaran genome. I'm afraid that the Exalted ARE Kett. Entirely," Lexi explained solemnly.

"But… there must be a way," Jaal muttered. He must have known I entered, yet was too focused. He turned to look at me. "There must be a way, yes?"

"I… I don't know…" I murmured. "Honestly, I don't see how exaltation is even physically possible in the first place. Changing someone's entire genome, changing their body, all in one fell swoop? I… I just don't know. Just… if anyone would be even remotely close to knowing how to reverse the process, it's probably the Kett. And they wouldn't exactly be looking for a way to turn back," I answered, shaking my head. "I want to believe. I do, but…" I shrugged, letting out a breath.
"Damn it…" Jaal murmured. "I need to be alone," he turned on a dime and left. Lexi let out a saddened sigh.

"Thanks for supporting me there. I know it couldn't be easy, but trust me, it's what Jaal needed to hear," Lexi explained.

"Yeah. False hope only ever hurts you. Still, just… damn," I replied quietly.

"I understand. I should probably dispose of the body before it starts to smell. Leave it in the airlock by the bridge in a body bag, seal the airlock, and once we return to orbit, send it out," Lexi remarked.

"Sure. Uh, would you mind coming to my quarters when you're done? I… have something I want to talk to you about," I requested awkwardly. Lexi raised a brow for a brief moment, but quickly caught herself, returning to completely professional features.

"Of course. Should only take me a few moments," Lexi nodded. I let her get to work. I returned to my quarters, and sat on my couch, twiddling my thumbs as I anxiously waited for the doctor. Soon, she arrived, as promised. She sat down on the other end of the couch, sitting straight, and crossing one leg over the other. Willing to bet this is how she'd normally speak with her patients before she joined the Initiative.

"Is something troubling you?" she began.

"Er, no, doc. In fact, things are getting pretty good," I answered. "While waiting for the outpost earlier, Vetra invited me to climb a mountain, and at the top we… uh…" I began stuttering. Lexi moved to finish my sentence.

"Had sex?"

"No! No, we didn't. But, things were said, and… we kissed. And I… want to know what I need to do, or be careful of if I'm going to be dating a dextro," I asked awkwardly.

"I see. Well, Turian-Asari relationships were common long before Humanity made first contact, as were even Quarian-Asari relationships before their exile. In addition, some years after first contact, Human-Turian relationships began cropping up. So, you're not the first, but it's still wise to ask. The amount of saliva exchanged during kissing shouldn't be enough to cause a negative effect in either of you. And with SAM's help, I'm relatively certain that it shouldn't affect your system. Unless of course, you somehow find and drink a gallon of Turian saliva," Lexi ended with the joke.

"Well, that's a thought that might make me vomit," I remarked.

"As would the gallon," Lexi smirked.

"So, remember when I asked about thoughts on the crew? Well, what advice do you have for me with her now?" I continued.

"Relationship advice? Well, I told you that what she needs is some me-time? Since she spends so much caring for others?" Lexi reminded. "Give her that time. Treat her." My cheeks went red again.

"Well, that kinda leads to another question…" I muttered awkwardly.

"I did mean that you treat her in non-sexual ways, but I can still do the sex talk," Lexi stated, professionally. Pretty sure my cheeks went redder. "I imagine you have some measure of
experience, so are you just asking about the risks, or are you asking what to do specifically for a Turian vagina?" Yep, cheeks went a lot redder.

"Uh, just the risks, I'll ask her the latter if we ever get to that point," I stuttered. Lexi nodded as she began her answer.

"If you're giving Vetra oral sex, what you get from that might cause a minor reaction. Not likely, but possible. If she orgasms, it will taste sweet, though try not to swallow any of it. It most likely will cause some kind of reaction later. Certainly not deadly, but uncomfortable. I don't know how much of a difference SAM will make, but I doubt he'd negate it entirely. But, if you 'train your body,' so to speak, with just the saliva, then your body should grow used to those proteins and not react. Negative effects normally only happen for those who begin their relationship with sex. Now, if Vetra performs oral sex on you, she must be careful. Turian teeth are sharp, after all. Though the length of their tongues can partially compensate. If you orgasm, and she swallows, it may cause a reaction in her depending on the amount. Though again, with the 'practice,' she may not. And if there are reactions in either of you, I can add a pill called Reversal to my stock," Lexi explained.

"Reversal?" I questioned, a bit eager for a respite from this. I imagine I was as red as Arcturus. Still, this explanation has been largely reassuring so far. The bit about Turian teeth made me cringe at the thought, but I already knew they had sharp teeth.

"It's a pill that was developed shortly before we left. It was marketed as being a way for food connoisseurs to safely sample the foods of other Chiralities, so long as they purged themselves a few hours later. Though, as you may expect, it also sold very well among cross-chirality couples. And the levels should pass quickly enough or just be small enough that a purge shouldn't be necessary," she answered.

"Huh, whadda ya know," I remarked. "So, any other risks?"

"There are the talons, though Vetra has the guards for both her hands and feet. And even then, if it was big enough a danger to hospitalize species with softer skin, such as Quarians, Humans, and Asari, then the numbers of those species in relationships with Turians would be far shorter than it is. There isn't a risk for either of you in vaginal or anal intercourse, so that's something you don't need to worry about. As for a Turian's plates? Their inner thighs lack plates, and instead have their soft skin. The waist, hips, buttocks, and the area surrounding the vagina also lack plates. Obviously, her abdomen on the other hand does have plates, though it has evolved to be smoother, and shouldn't scrape, scratch, or chafe your own chest. And as you've likely already seen, the inside of the arms also lacks plates. Everything else, you've seen," Lexi finished. Well, I never needed to be concerned about anything anal related in the first place. Never been eager to try that on a woman. Why? I don't want shit on my dick.

"So, those plates shouldn't be a problem then?"

"Perhaps a minor one if this was Vetra's first time with a non-Turian, though I am aware she has been in relationships with Asari before. She should have a good idea as to how to keep both of you comfortable," the doc confirmed.

"Alright, so this talk has been both enlightening, and highly embarrassing," I remarked. "Thanks, Lexi, can you go ahead and let me soak this all in?" I requested.

"Of course," she smiled, turning from professional doctor, to the friend. "And, I believe I neglected to say this, but I'm happy for both of you, and I wish you luck."
The Nomad came to a stop, having followed the roads, for once, to the south side of the new outpost, where the last of the pre-fabs, for now, had just landed. In the Nomad with me, was everyone who wanted to see it. Vetra, Liam, and Jaal, who was now feeling better after the talk with Lexi. Accepting it. Liam and Vetra were, of course, ignoring each other. The ride was silent, but it would likely have been silent anyway. The road branched off both further to the south, and a road going straight through the center of the outpost. Right now, I counted a total of four buildings, but only two were of the variant I'd consider 'large.' The one on the left of the outpost's southern border, and the one I suspect to be the main complex on the hill, against the shoreline. The other two smaller, two story pre-fabs were on opposite sides of the road, but connected via an overpass. There were automated turrets guarding the south road, and I could see some smaller AA guns on the roofs of the larger buildings. There were guards patrolling the rails and overpass, and I got a message on my Omni-tool.

As promised, I have scouts keeping an eye on all approaches to the outpost, watching for any signs of attack. They can call for Collective reinforcements at the touch of a button, and alert your own outpost just as quickly. The Outcasts may be leaderless, but they still bear a grudge against the Initiative. And against you. -Reyes.

Not surprised the Outcasts bear a grudge, but at least Reyes is keeping the promise. I wanted to snoop around the Outpost, but I know Addison wants to do our customary talk over the holo. As I suspected, the pre-fab on the shoreline of the lake was the main building. The holo waiting for me just inside the lower level. I pressed a few buttons, and the holographic figure of Addison appeared.

"Amazing. This may manage to piss off as many people as it feeds," Addison remarked.

"And I trust you're content with the results?"

"The results are what I care about at the end of the day. And the results are promising. But Kadara? Where the worst of our exiles staked their claim? You better be sure about this," Addison warned.

"It's my job to make these planets safe for colonization, Director. And that's exactly what I've been doing, and what I've done here. I wouldn't send these Colonists here if I wasn't confident in their safety. In addition, they're still our people. And they are plenty here who aren't as bad as you think," I crossed my arms over my chest.

"It's your call..." she murmured. "And the motivational address?"

"I won't lie," I began, my eyes ensuring Addison got the subtle message. "Kadara wasn't the easiest. I've seen people here pushed to extremes. But those extremes are going away. I've made sure of that, and we're going to stay. We didn't come to Andromeda because it was easy. And we're not leaving Kadara because it's hard."

"For posterity. You may want to speak with Christmas Tate, the mayor of the new outpost. Should be on the second floor," Addison suggested, and the call ended.

"She's certainly a fan of you," Liam remarked.

"As much as I'm a fan of Kadara," Jaal grumbled.

"You know, you don't have to come out and around when we're not in combat Jaal. You could stay on the ship," I hinted for our Angaran friend.
"I don't want to miss out, which I would be, here," Jaal retorted.

"Fair enough," I shrugged, leading the others upstairs. There were people working on setting up wires inside, and other technical necessities. Around the corner, along a window looking out to the sulfur lake, standing beside a couch set up near a bed, as if this was the mayor's less than private living quarters, was a man speaking with an advisor holding the data pad. The man heard our footsteps, and turned, his aide pausing. The man had black hair, tanned skin, and a fuzzy moustache that barely stretched beyond the corners of his lip.

"Well, if it isn't the Pathfinder," he greeted warmly, despite a gruff, gravelly voice. I almost expect him to throw on a cowboy hat, strap a six-shooter to his thigh, and call for the town's sheriff. "Welcome to Outpost Ditaeon," he reached out a hand. I shook it, and he continued. "Christmas Tate of Mining Company 07, at your service."

"Scott Ryder, pleasure. I'm sorry, but I have to ask. Is Christmas a nickname, or…?" I returned the greeting. Tate let out a hearty laugh.

"Afraid not. My old lady, Holiday Tate, had quite a sense of humor," he smiled.

"Think you'll continue the trend?" Liam asked with a grin.

"What trend?" Jaal asked.

"We'll see. So, to answer the question of your Angaran friend…" Tate trailed off, requesting a bit of help.

"Jaal," Jaal stated.

"To answer your question, Jaal, Christmas is the name of an old Human holiday. And with my mother being named Holiday, she thought, rightly so, that it would be funny to name me a holiday," he explained. Jaal nodded his understanding.

"So, things going well?" I asked.

"We only just set up, but no one's been shot in the back, which is more than I expected," Tate grumbled. "I don't like making deals with people flightier than ghosts."

"Yeah, I understand. With the options I was given though, the Collective seemed like the better choice. Hasn't been long enough to say whether I've been proven right or wrong," I remarked.

"True. I wasn't awake for the uprising, but I've read the reports on Sloane. Guess she wouldn't have dealt with us anyway. Better a deal for an outpost than none at all, I suppose," Tate shrugged.

"So, mining company 07. Must have been significant for you to still mention it," I made the suggested question clear.

"Everyone here who was a part of our original outpost block, so everyone minus a few guards, all came from the company together. Best damn Eezo miners on Mars till the ground dried up. They picked us because while you made the water potable, there's still plenty of sulfur in the bedrock. And we can use that to make fertilizer," Tate explained.

"Makes sense. What about Ditaeon. Mean something?" Liam asked.

"Inside joke among the company," Tate chuckled. "Temp name we came up with. It's an acronym. 'Deploy in the Ass end of Nowhere.' Seems like that got at least a good chuckle out of everyone
present. "Reminds me, here, our flag. Why don't you go hang it in that nice little bar next to the others huh?"

"I'll be sure to do that Tate. Good meeting you, and good luck," I grinned.

"Good meeting you too, Pathfinder. Good luck out there." We exited the building, following the catwalks to explore a bit. We ended up at the only other building on the east side of the outpost.

"Storehouse huh? Gonna tell the req officer what I've gotten for them," Vetra called out. Well, if I'm here to explore and meet people... We all walked in, a Turian man was sat at a desk, crates lined in the back. "Well, well, well, I'll be damned," Vetra chuckled.

"Nyx, I was wondering when you'd show up," the man remarked casually, leaning back in his chair.

"Guess this explains why you never sent me those regulators, Seneca," Vetra teased.

"Got busy with the move. But I set them aside for you," Seneca joked. Ok, feeling a tad bit protective here. Just gonna repress the urge to say anything. He must just be a friend to her, else she wouldn't have kissed me on that mountain. And it only happened today, so it's not like he knows. That look in his eyes. I recognize it. I've had that look. Stop it Scott, it's fine.

"Do you know everyone?" I chuckled, releasing some of the inner tension by letting something out.

"Dru used to work the stock rooms on the Nexus," Vetra explained.

"So, much to requisition right now?" I asked jokingly.

"Req officer is my official title, sure, but I'm happy taking care of any odd jobs that pop up," he shrugged. "Scrubbing, cooking, whatever I can do."

"Sure the others are thankful for the help," I remarked.

"Keeps me busy. I used to work the drill on Mars. Till I messed up my hand. Lucky I didn't lose it, but the nerves never healed right," Dru explained, struggling to form a fist with said hand.

"Got everything you need? Bought some supplies to give the Outpost," Vetra asked.

"Of course you did. Thanks. But yeah, got everything we need, and the Collective actually contacted me on our way. Got a few other things that should be coming. I swear they can get their hands on anything. They're even more reliable than you," Dru teased Vetra.

"Hey!" she smirked.

"Kidding, kidding," Dru held up his hands in mock defense. "No one's better than you, Nyx." Damn it Scott, stop yourself...

"Thanks," Vetra smiled, and then subtly, without any kind of show being made about it, so much better than I'd be able to, Vetra took my hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. Pretty sure I heard Jaal let out a huff of air. He noticed. "Well, good seeing you, Dru. Those supplies should be arriving sooner or later." Dru was still smiling and then he looked down, his eyes locking on Vetra's hand clasped with mine. His features fell slightly, and he glanced at me. Our eyes met and there was a sad look in his as they darted away, unable to look at my own. I really regretted how I felt now. I know his position all too well. Whether he waited too long to act, or he acted, it failed, and then saw her with someone else later on, it doesn't matter. I've been in the shoes of both.
"Yeah, yeah... Good seeing you too, Nyx," he ended, masking whatever he was feeling. We left. And she was still holding my hand. No complaints.

"So, you do that because you read me, or you read him?" I asked quietly.

"Call it a bit of both. He's not a bad guy, but we just never spent that much time together," Vetra answered. "Glad you didn't do anything though. That would have just made him angry. And sad."

"Sangry?" I joked.

"Ugh, you're just like Sid," Vetra groaned.

"And yet you still kissed me on that mountain," I teased.

"Um, what?" Vetra laughed. "You kissed me, remember?"

"Sure, the first one. Then you pulled my head down and made out with me," I retorted.

"Oh, so that's how it's gonna be huh? Alright, then what was that poking my thigh?" Vetra remarked playfully.

"Oh fuck off, there's no fucking way you felt that through your armor and my own," I retorted. Shit, I just admitted to it.

"You're right, I didn't. But I know how men work. And you DID just confirm," Vetra teased.

"Uh, guys, should we leave?" Liam asked. Ah shit. Vetra and I both turned around. Liam just looked uncomfortable, while Jaal was smug. Extremely smug. Well, I think the 'secret' is out.
The Bluff

Chapter Notes

Here's a few chapters for N7 day

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The little revelation at the Outpost didn't need much explaining.

And our little exploration didn't last much longer anyway.

We were surprised to see that Doctor Ryoto had moved in as the Outpost doctor, having the information be leaked to him by the Collective, he was on site, with his bags, waiting for the Outpost to arrive. In addition, he was allowed to treat any exiles who came for care in a true medical center for free. That's doing wonders for the Initiative's reputation on Kadara.

It was getting late in our sleep schedules, and we still weren't absolutely certain what we'd be doing next. If nothing decided to pop up, we honestly may just wait for the Resistance scouts on Havarl to finish their reports on the Roekaar presence, and the Tempest would remain docked in Kadara. My dreams that night were… not dry, let's put it. And also, very pleasant. I woke up, making sure I'd have a clean pair of underwear after my morning shower, then after the shower and getting dressed, went to the mess for some breakfast. I wasn't the only one present. Gil, Drack, Jaal, and Liam were all having their own meal. Jaal had a knowing grin, still rather pleased with himself.

"So, sleep well?" Jaal asked casually. I saw the ghost of a smile on Liam's face.

"Well, I'm awake and my eyes don't feel crusty. Don't feel tired, so," I shrugged.


"I don't really remember most of my dreams when I wake up," I avoided the question.

"Oh? Did any of them involve someone? Maybe… oh, I don't know, Vetra?" he smirked. Gil's eyes widened, quickly followed by a grin of his own. Drack was slightly grinning himself now.

"You having any dreams of Peebee?" I retorted, placing a bowl of cereal on the table.

"Why would I? I don't need to dream about that. I'm perfectly happy with what happens while I'm awake," Jaal remarked. The others chuckled, and I just flipped them all off as I took a bite.

"Bout damn time you two figured it out," Drack grumbled.

"Hold on, this is news to me. What happened, and how? I want details," Gil requested.

"Yesterday, Vetra invited Scott for some mountain climbing. Apparently, that ended with them revealing their feelings. And more," Jaal explained casually. Well, there I go getting beet red again. Gil laughed.

"I knew something was going on, but not this much. So, have a full home run, or…?" Gil asked
"Jesus guys, come on. No, we didn't do that," I answered, lowering my head in my hands.

"Call it payback for your jokes about Peebee and I," Jaal teased. "No, Gil, the conversation the two had when they forgot about Liam and I behind them revealed that while they didn't do that, they did 'make out.' Which I believe is simply a lot of kissing."

"Guys, please, can you just… wait for it to settle in? Just still feels weird right now," I requested meekly.

"Of course. When I seemed uneasy, you dropped it. Only fair that I do the same," Jaal nodded.

"Alright, fair enough. But just you wait until it 'settles in,'" Gil warned teasingly. The others remained silent, and left the mess as they finished their own meals. Soon, I was the last one.

As I finished the last bite, the door opened. Vetra.

"Morning," she greeted, getting her own cereal out of the dextro cabinet.

"Morning. So, word spread," I remarked. Still… an odd feeling in the room. Maybe not uneasy, but… I don't know. Feelings are weird.

"Well, we did forget we had two people behind us yesterday," Vetra muttered. "And I told Sid…"

"And?" I smirked. Can only imagine her reaction.

"Possibly the worst thing I've ever done. She won't shut up about it," Vetra groaned, beginning to eat her own meal. I chuckled in response. "She thinks it's the cutest thing because you're 'sooooooo tiny,'" Vetra quoted, using a higher pitched voice. Well, Vetra does have a head on me height wise. "And I'm probably going to regret telling you the joke she at least got out of the way immediately. 'Scott Pathfound the way to your heart… and other things,'" Vetra sighed, her eyes closed. She opened them again, gazing at me. And a slight smile. "Worth it though. Cuz of you."

Vetra had left her hand resting on the table. I smiled. A real, genuine, happy smile. My brows even raising a bit.

"Definitely worth it," I stated softly, and placed my own hand on top of hers.

Vetra's mandibles flared further in a smile of her own, and she turned her hand so that it could grasp mine, and continued eating. We both stayed there, in silence. Just enjoying the feel of the other's hand, enjoying being in the same room as the other.

She finished her meal and stood, without letting go to put her dishes away. I had yet to put mine away, and stood to do the same, still holding onto Vetra. When that was done, I tapped her on the shoulder with my other hand. She turned her head, and, maybe or maybe not on the tip of my toes, gently held my forehead against hers, like she taught me. I couldn't see it, but I know her mandibles were flaring. I moved my head back, and Vetra wrapped her arms around me. Both arms over my shoulder. One hand on my back, the other on the back of my head. Instinctively, I held her at her waist and back, as she drew me in for a kiss. It was gentle, and our lips parted, gazing into one another's eyes. Without words, we had another. This one had more… energy, about it. Our hands exploring the backs and sides of the other. My own back was turned to the door, and Vetra spun us around, then slowly began pushing me back. My calves made contact with the seat, and I sat, Vetra's lips and tongue still interlocked with mine, and Vetra straddling me. Vetra and I both were still just wearing clothes. Not armor. And I had sweatpants on! She could definitely feel that one part of me getting active. It was feeling hot in here, and both our breathing had slowed, and grown
more labored. Letting out large breaths through our noses, and taking in smaller ones.

"Uh, you know, your quarters are a lot more private."

We immediately stopped, our hearts stopping in our chests. Vetra spun off my lap and onto the seat beside me, staring at the figure that just broke us out of our little trance. She was standing at the door, a hand on her hip, and incredibly smug. Damn it, Sid.

"When you said you were going to get a meal, I didn't think it was going to be him," Sid teased her sister. I was even redder than Sid's face paint. Vetra's eyes were wide and her mandibles twitching. Neither of us really had a response. "Hey, this is gonna be what happens when you're not somewhere private and the door is unlocked," Sid shrugged. "So, should I come back later?" Sid grinned

"N-no, no, go ahead and eat," Vetra muttered.

"Alright, but-"

"Sid," Vetra warned. She didn't need to say what she was warning Sid about, the tone said it all.

"Alright, fiiiine," Sid answered, getting her own bowl for her own breakfast. She sat, and began eating, the cereal crunching in her mouth. "So," she swallowed. "What's next on your plans?" Vetra looked at me for an answer.

"Depends. Not much else we can do on Kadara. Apparently Roekaar are mobilizing on Havarl, Jaal is waiting for scout reports for us to move on that. That might be next for us," I answered.

"What about after that?"

"Eh, probably go to Elaaden. Drack got a message about some issues at the Krogan colony. Could be another potential outpost world. And I remember a message from Avitus Rix, the second to the Turian Pathfinder. There's a lead there for Natanus," I explained.

"Hope we can find them," Sid murmured, taking another spoonful of cereal. There weren't any more questions, we just kinda sat there. Though Vetra had taken hold of my hand again under the table. Sid finished the last of her food. "I'm not trying to tease or anything. But you guys should probably talk to Lexi, right?" Sid recommended.

"We have it under control," Vetra answered, and left it at that. Sid shrugged, put her dishes away, and let us be.

"I uh… did have a chat with Lexi," I murmured as Sid left.

"That quickly?" Vetra asked, a brow raised.

"Well, I didn't exactly know if I was going to react negatively to just kissing," I defended awkwardly.

"Yeah, and I'm sure that's all you talked about," Vetra grinned. "Guess it means you care enough to make sure the both of us are fine." I couldn't do much more than simply shrug. "Well," she began, turning my head to her and tapping her forehead to mine. "I want to call some of my contacts. See what they can do for Ditaeon. Talk later?"

"Sure. Should probably figure out what exactly we're doing anyway," I answered.
"Sounds good," Vetra nodded, and then leaned forward, whispering into my ear.

"And if you want, I might be persuaded to do a bit more of what we were up to before we were so rudely interrupted. In the meantime, you… seem a little stiff. Why don't you go take care of that?" Vetra suggested, heavy and hot breath brushing past my cheek. I was speechless. Simply staring at Vetra as she placed her head back in front of mine. She snickered, and tapped our foreheads again, before standing and leaving. The air in the room felt heavy. I was prepared to take her suggestion, but Jaal called. I wonder why he didn't come looking for me or send a message. I answered.

"Scott? The scouts have finished their reports on the Roekaar mobilization," Jaal informed. I went business mode.

"Tell me everything."

"They're camped at a place called the forge. It's believed to be the birthplace of our civilization. Akksul likely believes that this bold move will rally followers. Normally, the site is filled with research teams, but the scouts have seen only Roekaar. And I doubt so many of them were recruited. Evfra has agreed to have a shuttle on Havarl take us there," Jaal explained.

"Any sign of your family?" I asked gently. Jaal sighed.

"The scouts would not know them. But… I KNOW that's where they are."

"How are we going to handle this? Sacred site, people we don't want to kill shooting at us, maybe indistinguishable from the others?" I questioned cautiously.

"Very carefully. Akksul will know that they are family of mine. I suspect he will keep them close. Not out of distrust to them, but as a way to get to me. As for the rest of the mission, it won't be a stealth op, but the preference is to be relatively quiet. The Resistance wants us to get in, and see what they're planning. Thin out their numbers, maybe even get to Akksul. At least for the forge itself, we can't damage anything. No explosives, no heavy hitters, like Drack," Jaal answered.

"You have a specific team you want to bring along?"

"We'll be in a shuttle, so we won't be limited by space in the transport. Perhaps just bring everyone but Drack. I like him, and he's a good fighter, but I'm skeptical about his subtlety. And again, the risk of collateral damage," Jaal stated.

"Then that's how it will be. I'm sure Drack will understand caution around something so important to your people. I'll make sure we start making our way there immediately," I nodded. Jaal gave me his thanks, and ended the call. And I ordered Kallo to run a check for everyone being on board, then fly us to Havarl. Meanwhile, I had to go take care of something in my quarters…

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Hormones. A goddamn pain in the ass. And it doesn't help when your crush turned girlfriend is teasing you like this. I threw away the make-shift rag and covered myself back up, went to the bathroom for a quick hand wash, and came back to my quarters. My Omni-tool rang again. Wait, SAM? Fuck. He's in my head. Right. So, he knows exactly what I just did. He knows everything Vetra and I did in the mess, and everything I felt during that. I hope I can at get used to it.

"Uh… yeah? SAM?" I asked, more than a bit embarrassed.

"Scott, may we discuss your romantic attachment with Vetra Nyx?" the AI requested. My head fell
into my hands. He knows what I just did, and he's following it up with that question. Well, he
doesn't have a concept of timing. But at least he didn't just say my name to make me shit myself.
Well, he is learning, I suppose I should answer his question…

"Uh… ok… I don't need to tell you the birds and the bees, do I?" I asked with a half smirk and
partially fake chuckle.

"You do not. My experience of such attachments was a long-established relationship. Cherished,
familiar, but tragic. I have never known the beginning of an attachment, let alone one which cannot
possibly produce offspring, which in my early years, I had wrongly assumed to be the sole reason
such relationships are formed. Your perspective, why it is you are in a relationship with her, would
place it in context," SAM requested.

"Huh. Well, it's a lot of things, I suppose. She's witty, smart, completely selfless, and overall a
great person. Me, being someone who appreciates wit, smarts, and selflessness respect her a lot.
Then, our personalities, how we act? It just clicks. We just… connect. I support her, and she
supports me, and I'll always be grateful for that. I… I really care about her, SAM…" I murmured.
"She makes me feel at peace, and… I hope she feels the same."

"All life strives for connection. The connections of friendship, the connections of family, and the
connection of love. I understand better now. Thank you, Scott," the AI stated. Huh, we haven't
used the L-word yet, it is a pretty… serious word, to me, at least, after all. But… yeah. I do think I
love her.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

It was not a short flight. Havarl was practically on the other side of the cluster. Took up about half
the day just getting there. At least we spent it power napping or staying relaxed to preserve our
energy. Wouldn't be a good thing to arrive at Havarl and start yawning, ready for a night's sleep.
Though Peebee had some trouble with that. She was still concerned about Poc, who we hadn't
found a lead on yet. Her scanner was at work, but it can only scan so quickly.

As I had predicted, Drack was unfazed by the request that he stay behind. He grumbled at not
getting to shoot shit, but didn't argue. Our landing site on Havarl was Daar Pelaav, where we had
first landed on Havarl, and where the shuttle would be waiting to take us to the forge. Kiiran Dals
was pleased to see us again, and not short on praise for the scientists working alongside them. We
didn't have long to chat, however, as the shuttle landed minutes after our own arrival. The doors
opened upon our approach, and we all entered. The pilot quickly shut the doors, and took off. The
pilot would be able to drop us off at a clearing close by the Forge, but that would be it. Evfra was
still uneasy, even with them stealing supplies on Voeld, murder on Kadara, blatantly attacking the
Initiative, to make explicit enemies with the Roekaar. Can't say I blame him, how many Angara
would be uneasy with the prospect of declaring a whole faction of their people enemies?
Fortunately, our presence means that even if indirectly, Evfra can still act.

"So, if we find your family, how do we get them to stop shooting? With us all being outsiders…" I
cautioned.

"It will give them a different perspective. If they see me with you, I know them. They will stop,"
Jaal reassured. "Just trust me. Follow my lead. No matter what. Especially, if we encounter
Akksul."

"Well, then I suppose I officially transfer operational command to you. I'll still throw out tactical
orders, but everything else on this op? That's you," I nodded. "Hear that everyone? We follow
"Jaal's lead. What he says, we do," I ordered the others. The sea of heads nodded acknowledgement. "Good. We're in good hands here." The shuttle soon came to a stop, and lowered over a clearing in the dense, rocky jungles. The doors opened, allowing us to jump out and onto the ground below. There was daylight creeping in over the mountains as the shuttle sped off, and our feet splashed from a small river we needed to follow. Jaal took point, rifle out and ready, so we all followed suit with our own weapons.

"Move carefully. We don't want to alert the Roekaar," Jaal cautioned.

"You been here before?" Peebee questioned.

"The Moshae brings all her students to the Forge. I know my way around. The Govataan, a welcome center, is up ahead," Jaal answered.

We followed the river, and came to a rocky ledge, an Angaran ghost town greeting us amongst the bioluminescent plants. "Just like the scouts said. Deserted. The Govataan is usually filled with travelers. Where have they all gone?" Jaal muttered.

"And why aren't there any guards?" Liam remarked.

"Guarding something of value further in? Keeping eyes off something?" Cora theorized.

"Going further in would only bring you closer to the Forge itself. Why would Akksul want to keep others from seeing it?" Jaal countered. "Search the buildings, maybe we can find some clue."

The first building we searched had a log of arrivals. Steady until a week ago. And a terminal of the head of the Forge site notifying everyone of an important visitor, and then a mandatory meeting. The second was a storage building, still fully stocked.

A console showed that one of the workers here was complaining about the Roekaar having supplies left in the supply room that they wouldn't let anyone near. And an audio log of, assumingly that worker, saying that she told someone named Droka to make Akksul leave. The third building had a blue stain on the floor. Small, but clearly visible. Angaran blood. SAM was able to determine that the amount was non-lethal, from blunt force trauma to knock someone out cold. But why?

"Akksul doesn't kill Angara," Jaal had murmured. There were other oddities. Plants that the researchers would have never have neglected, dying of dehydration. Another building of scattered supplies and furniture, and a broken vase. Either someone had left in a hurry, or were forced out.

"Do not be fooled by kindness. The Milky Way Menace are just as evil as the Kett." A pre-recorded message, playing on the site's loudspeaker system? Really? Blaring propaganda all day long, Akksul?

"He really likes the sound of his own voice, doesn't he," Vetra muttered. We were now at the last door in this area of the site. Likely a way to the next. Jaal led us to the door.

"Stand to the side, don't take your weapons out unless they start shooting," he ordered. We nodded, and stood at the sides of the door, like a breaching maneuver. Anyone inside wouldn't see us. But they would see Jaal. He placed his rifle on his back, and opened the door.

"Thought you said you got them all!" a woman exclaimed.

"I did! He must've-" a man began. I turned the corner, as did Peebee, followed by Liam, turned the corner. Myself followed by Vetra and Cora.
"Aliens! Kill them!" The woman ordered.

A shot rang out, striking me in the shields. Without hesitation, I used my biotics to lift the woman in the air, then slammed her into the man next to her. The force shouldn't have been lethal to either.

"Shit, hope no one heard that," Vetra murmured.

"They're not dead," Jaal stated, having checked the bodies. "Unconscious, but alive. Thank you, Scott.

He grabbed their weapons and went back outside, dumping their clips out onto the ground, and tossing the weapons up over the ridgeline, along with the knives. He pulled what seemed to essentially be zip-ties from his belt, and tied their hands together. Wouldn't hold them that long, but will do well enough. Jaal led us through the hallway, and to another door. He opened, revealing a rather nice courtyard, an almost glowing waterfall at the center. We had remained at the sides once more, but again, the Roekaar out there had seen Jaal.

"There's too many to sneak by. Show yourselves, and... we'll fight through," Jaal ordered sadly, stepping forward so that he could quickly take cover behind a metal crate.

I ordered the others to let me show myself first. I did, with my Sweeper out, but holding it level to my thigh. And it was accompanied by gunshots. Bullets striking my shields. Jaal and I both dove into cover at the same box. Vetra, behind us, got on a knee, her power armor activated, Peebee and Cora funneling their biotics to a barrier to protect her, and she opened fire on Roekaar. I wouldn't imagine the weapon to be that reliable on most of the Roekaar, but it would suppress them, allowing Jaal and I, Liam if he can get a good shot, to fight back. And Vetra had quickly taken down the two Roekaar down by the waterfall anyway. Jaal and I pulled out snipers.

"So much for going in quiet," Peebee exclaimed.

"We have a plan B?" Cora questioned.

" Surrender is not an option with Roekaar. Take them out!" Jaal ordered, pulling the trigger, killing a sniper on the ridgeline by the waterfall.

"Kill them! Bring their bodies to Akksul!" one of the Roekaar called out.

"What would they want with our bodies?" Liam asked, as I had put down another sniper, and Jaal a rifleman.

"I think we'll learn soon enough," I remarked.

I really hope none of these Roekaar are Jaal's family. Roekaar began jumping down to our level, as if trying to charge. That simply made it easier for Vetra to mow them down. Until some Roekaar who stayed above focused fire on her, and she retreated to cover, Peebee and Vetra readying their own weapons.

"Don't give them an opening!" Jaal ordered. I took a grenade, and primed it, counted down to three, and threw it at the Roekaar. It wasn't exactly a long throw, and I even saw an arm fly past me and onto the metal ground beside me.

"Shields recharged!" Vetra called out, and got back into position, the biotics supporting her. We took down another sniper and rifleman above as they attempted to focus Vetra, and then they began playing defensively, retreating to cover.
"Push, quickly yet carefully," Jaal ordered. "Get to the ramp, and the second level. Can you be ready to quickly form a barrier?"

"We can. Peebee, Cora, form up on me. Keep those biotics flared, make that barrier the moment you see someone peek us," I ordered.

We ran close together, the three biotics on the outside edge, closest to the Roekaar. We saw a pair of Roekaar peek us the moment we reached the ramp, and immediately the barrier went up, rounds pinging off it. The Roekaar set themselves around the railings and barriers of the next building firmly. Their fire had yet to break our barrier, and we all safely took cover.

"Keep fighting, they're breaking," Jaal ordered.

With biotics and gunfire, the Roekaar simply couldn't keep up. Someone went into cover? He was plucked into the air by an invisible hand. He tried to charge us, he got riddled with bullets, or slammed back into the side of the building with enough force to dent the wall. They stood to fire, and were rewarded with a shot to the head. The area was clear.

"So… they weren't among them, were they?" Liam muttered.

"I… do not believe so. And we don't have time to check. But the Roekaar know we're here now. Perhaps that will flush them out," Jaal theorized.

He led us into another building. Looks like a kind of cafeteria. A kitchen at the back, tables with half eaten food throughout the main room. Another pre-recorded message. About how the Angara are being invaded. Losing their homes. Kadara, Elaaden, and even Aya being at peril. His arrogant voice was grating.

"I really want to punch him in the mouth," Vetra grumbled.

"You should hear him in person," Jaal remarked. "Elaaden is only inhabited by scarce few Angara. It's too hot, and scarce in water for us to bother truly settling it. So why he bothers including it, I won't understand."

Outside, as the mess hall was a dead end, and more messages. One that states how it's hard for the Angara to put aside their Altruistic nature, as with us, it will lead them to ruin. Another about how the Milky Way could be allies, but asks of the cost. How often it would come to be collected. That they have fought valiantly for so long, and don't need the help now. A society can't be Altruistic. It's too much. An individual can be altruistic, and a society can be generous. But an entire, altruistic society? I've seen enough of the bad sides of the Angara to understand that's false. That's just part of being people. There's some shitty ones.

"He really hates us," Liam muttered.

"The Kett made us fear the unknown. And your arrival is bringing about change. Akksul fears that change," Jaal explained.

We found another terminal in a side building. It revealed the fate of the researchers. They were gathered and sent away. Akksul claimed that it was for their own safety. Someone had resisted, but they were struck in the back of the head, knocked out. Explains the blood stain from before. We came upon a locked door, but that didn't do much to stop us. SAM scanned, and found wires beneath the ground. And those wires led me to a generator, which powered up, and unlocked the door.

"There's a bridge to the ruins beyond these doors," Jaal informed, leading us along. "Hopefully…"
my family should be there…”

Peebee grasped his shoulder gently, and Jaal's hand had raised to grab hold of hers, giving it a squeeze. And he led us out.

The sun was in the sky, lighting up the ridge we'd walk along and the canyon separating this side from the forge. An ancient stone bridge connecting the gap. Then there were explosions along the bridge's support beams. And the entire structure crumbled into the canyon below. Jaal roared out in anger.

"SAM, tell me you have a recording of that," I growled.

"Affirmative," the AI answered.

"Send that shit to Evfra. Right now. Hell, why not the Moshae too?" I ordered.

"At once. I will include that they shouldn't reply or contact you until after the mission," SAM stated.

"Good, don't want a call in the middle of a firefight," I remarked.

"What now?" Cora asked. Jaal calmed himself down, breathing hard.

"We'll need to jump. There's a ledge below the bridge we can reach," he informed.

We now stood at the base of what remained of the bridge. The forge must be located in that mound ahead. A large mushroom tree was growing out of a rocky hill, and branches covered in moss were sticking out from the mushroom tree and into other further away rocky mounds. We jumped down to a ledge on our side of the canyon, and then across to the other. Laser sights greeted us as we began the climb along a natural, curving ramp back up by the bridge.

"Snipers! Take cover!" Jaal ordered.

We all took cover, Jaal and I taking out our rifles. "Give our shields everything you can!"

Cora and Peebee nodded, supporting both of us as we engaged the snipers. One shot pinged off the barrier and it flickered, but our combined fire broke through his shields and skull, leaving two more. Another shot, and the barrier collapsed, and drained my shields halfway. Another sniper down. We both took cover again, and the two prepared their barriers once more. The last sniper didn't stand a chance. A shuttle arrived, just slightly up the hill. We'd all be able to take on those Roekaar.

"Take them out! We can't let them reach the nest!" a Roekaar ordered.

The shuttle dropped off a squad of five soldiers. With biotics and firepower, they couldn't keep up. Either thrown off the ledge into the canyon, or found a bullet in a vital organ.

"Ammo check!" Jaal called out. Those Roekaar were dead, yet we had seen another shuttle.

"Brought plenty of clips. Can share if someone needs them," Vetra informed.

"What's ammo?" I joked, holding out my Sweeper.

We climbed the hill and… well damn. There was a lake with plenty of rock formations out ahead. Mushroom trees of their own reaching into the sky. And the sunlight made it stunning.
"I can see why Akksul wants this place to himself. It's gorgeous," Vetra remarked.

"Hm, just wait till we get inside. There's a cave ahead, where the forge itself is," Jaal smirked.

"Why's it called the forge?" Peebee asked.

"The stones used were shaped from Havarl's bedrock using extreme heat. But, history lesson later," he suggested.

We readied our weapons, and continued up. Jaal led us up another ledge, and bullets found themselves bouncing off the dirt at our feet. Almost like warning shots. We flew into cover, and these Angara were without helmets. And they were continuing their fire. I was about to call for a barrier, so we could retaliate.

"Intruders have breached the nest!" a woman called out.

"I count six, we should fall back," a man suggested. Jaal grabbed my shoulder, his eyes wide.

"Wait!" he exclaimed to us. "I know those voices," he murmured, shocked.

"Lathoul, go for backup," the woman ordered.

Lathoul? That's one of their names, isn't it?

Jaal raised his hands into the air and dashed out of cover. Just to be safe, I began giving him a barrier. Peebee was clearly nervous, and doing the same already.

"Lathoul! Wait! Stop!" Jaal exclaimed. The three Roekaar stood, lowering their weapons.

"It's Jaal, a blue skinned Angara," called out. "Jaal, is that you?" He holstered his weapon, a broad grin. He mantled the stone he was using for cover and ran towards Jaal, who met him halfway. Both were chuckling, and Lathoul had his arms wide for a hug.

Then Jaal punched him. Twice. And hard. It appeared as if the blue Angara was about to fight back, but then the two brothers embraced.

"Uh, what the fuck?" Vetra muttered. The other two Angara approached. His family.

"Baranjj. Our mothers sent me," Jaal stated calmly.

"All of them?" he asked, confused.

"Did our mothers send these aliens too?" the woman growled.

I stood from cover, stepping out with my hands raised. She stormed right towards me, glaring me right in the eyes. Well, she has balls, I'll give her that.

"Huh, Jaal, you didn't tell me your sister was a badass," I remarked. Returning the stare, but without her aggression. I didn't think she was a badass of course. More like a hot-head kid. But hey, maybe an ego stroke could help.

"Your people are a joke," she sneered.

"Trust me, he's the joke. The rest of his people are alright," Vetra joked, arms crossed over her chest.
"Hey! I have my moments," I joked back.

"Eh, sometimes," Vetra smirked. "You're a good kisser..." I know I blushed, meanwhile, the Angara woman in front of me just had a look of disgust.

"Teviint... please..." Jaal requested softly. She turned her back to me and shoved her way past another of the siblings, Lathoul, I think, the purple male. Now Jaal was in front of me.

"Why'd they send you?" Baranjj questioned.

"Because we've lost enough to the Kett. They're afraid to lose you to this insane cause," Jaal explained.

"A few days ago, the Roekaar tried to attack one of our outposts. You know, filled with civilians just trying to grow food and research. We countered with a trap, fought them off, and then Akksul said that HE'D be the one coming for vengeance," I remarked.

"I didn't hear about that..." Lathoul murmured.

"But... Jaal..." Baranjj stuttered, doubt in his eyes.

"I want you to meet my friend, Scott. So you can see that Akksul is wrong," Jaal interrupted.

He turned, and grabbed me by the arm, dragging me forward. I know I must have looked a bit surprised, but managed to retain my balance.

"Uh, hi. So, we need to work together against the Kett. We're here to stay, gave up everything we ever knew, after all. I want us all to get along," I stated.

"Who cares?" Baranjj muttered.

"The Angara don't want anything you have!" Teviint growled.

Well, there's the medical advancements, the tech, the numbers and weapons to use against the Kett, so on so forth. Those so far seem to be things the Angara have been interested in.

"Jaal, our mothers want us to live truthfully," Teviint argued.

"It's because I love my mother that I will die for this cause," Baranjj stated firmly.

"Akksul is going to blow this place up," Lathoul revealed. I hadn't even seen the torn look in his eyes.

"Lathoul!" Teviint exclaimed as he pushed his way through.

"That's why he sent the researchers away," Lathoul continued.

"Stop. Talking." Teviint warned. She was behind him now.

"He has bombs. Stolen from your people," Lathoul continued.

He looked very nervous. And bombs from our people? He's willing to blow up a sacred Angaran site, and frame it on our people? You might as well say 'He's been poisoning our water and killing our crops! Well, not really, but are we going to wait around until he does?!'

"Those bombs go off, it'll look like the Initiative did it," I murmured.
"We have to disarm them," Jaal nodded.

There was a gunshot, and Lathoul fell forward, Jaal catching him. I could see the wound, burning. Plasma round. At least it cauterized the wound. Not in the center of the back, so it missed the spine, see an exit wound at the other end, smaller. And it's the lower back, should have missed the lungs. Lathoul had an expression of pure shock on his face as he struggled to breathe.

Baranjj almost looked as shocked, rushing over to help his brother. While Teviint, had her arm outstretched, holding a pistol with a smoking barrel. She had a face of anger, that shifted to realization, and then horror. The pistol fell from her hand. And she screamed. She was twitching, hyperventilating. Baranjj ran back from his brother and held her still, ensuring she couldn't do anything else.

"No, no, no," Lathoul groaned. "The bombs. In the forge. I'm ok, Jaal. I'll be fine," he breathed. We set him down against a stone.

"Baranjj, round went straight through his lower left side, looks cauterized, can you keep him stable?" I questioned.

"Y-yes, I can," he stated.

"I can leave behind someone if you need. They may be able to help," I suggested.

"N-no, I can do it," Baranjj murmured, he let Teviint go, who was now sobbing, curled into a ball on the ground, and helped his brother.

"I hate Akksul," Lathoul growled through the pain. "Don't let him win."

"You got it," I nodded, clasping his arm. Jaal was barely able to leave him, but he, the rest of the team, and I began running.


I nodded. Peebee did as well, but nervously. We ran through the cave to the forge itself. A central stone structure with two large pillars, with a bomb in the center. One right against our drop off. One in the back left by a corner piece, and one to the right in another corner piece. Roekaar were still down there, securing the area, securing the bombs.

We opened fire, mowing down any not by the central structure per Jaal's orders. Quickly, only two remained, taking cover behind those pillars. Cora and I used biotics to lift them out of the way, and they were put down. SAM led me to get to work on the bombs. We had three minutes left when we first opened fire, and had used thirty seconds.

I had begun defusing the central bomb when reinforcements arrived. Fortunately, the others were ready, waiting for any sign of hostiles. They began mowing them down, and I'm betting Vetra had turned off her safeties. I moved to another bomb, a minute and a half left. More Roekaar being mowed down. Another bomb, and another. We were clear, and the bombs offline. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Jaal! Jaal!" Teviint cried, running out from the same entrance we did, followed by Baranjj. She seemed hysterical, embracing Jaal. "I killed Lathoul. I killed him. I'm so sorry," she cried. Jaal's eyes fell.
"I stabilized him, he's fine," Baranj stated.


"I lost my mind, Jaal. I want to go home..." Teviint sniffled.

"I joined because of you," Baranj muttered to his sister.

"I shot our brother!" Teviint exclaimed.

"Don't leave me," Baranj pleaded. A familiar figure strode out from behind him.

"Let her go. I only want soldiers who are committed to our cause," Akksul scoffed. There was cold fury in his eyes. "Not weaklings who stand by and watch the destruction of our people at the hands of aliens!" he growled.

"Looks to me that if these aliens stepped in there would have been some hefty destruction of your people by yourself," I retorted, arms crossed over my chest.

My weapon stored. He wants to be a martyr. I know that. My team knows that. I made sure they all understood just what martyring him would do. More Roekaar, weapons drawn, appeared on the ledge above us. Well, we'd have to be very quick to shoot our way out without casualties to our own squad. I have doubts if we'd be able to keep Baranj and Teviint alive.

"You recruit kids and make them fight their family. Your cause made Teviint shoot her own brother in the back," I stated loudly. "It's sick. And so are you."

"I speak for our people!" Akksul stated loudly, dramatically, his arms out to the sides, and he turned back to his troops above us. "And I say: You're done in Heleus."

Liam raised a pistol, and I slammed his hand down. Fortunately, he didn't pull the trigger. Goddamnit Kosta, keep your cool.

"Liam, don't!" Jaal exclaimed, staring right into his eyes. Akksul laughed, and waked right up to Liam, grinning. I kept holding his gun down. I could feel him resisting slightly.

"Go ahead. Martyr me. I dare you," he whispered.

"We don't kill unarmed psychopaths," I spoke for Liam. He stopped resisting, and put his pistol back. Akksul glowered, and turned.

"They move onto our planets. They take our resources. Make us weak," Akksul spoke loudly.


"Exactly. And they'll never let us forget it," Akksul countered.

"He rescued your beloved Moshae, and everyone imprisoned alongside her!" Jaal continued.

"I know..." Akksul murmured. The Roekaar above were glancing among each other now.

"Saved her life," Jaal emphasized.

"I know... Stop defending them!" Akksul demanded.

"The Moshae trusts Scott and-" Jaal continued, facing Akksul.
He pulled a pistol from his thigh, and pointed it right at Jaal. His hand twitching ever so slightly to the left. I heard Peebee gasp quietly.

"Stop! We've been fighting the wrong enemy. Maybe the enemy is this traitor!" Akksul exclaimed.

Jaal simply stared at him, unfazed. He looked at us, at Peebee. He shook his head to the side oh so slightly. The message is don't. And... I think he's bluffing. The twitch of his hand was giving it away. I could see the looks of the Roekaar above. They wouldn't approve. Akksul should know this.

"Easy..." Jaal muttered. Not sure if that was meant for Akksul or us.

"Don't you dare hurt him," Peebee growled, raising her pistol.

"Peebee, don't." Jaal stated firmly, a hand raised and lowered slightly. I placed a hand on top of the barrel of her gun. And gently lowered it. She glanced at me.

"Think Poker," I whispered. She seemed confused, but thought about it. It seemed to be catching on. It's a bluff. Call the bluff.

"The Moshae trusts Scott. Evfra trusts Scott. You have been stealing supplies on Voeld. Murdering Angara on Kadara. And you were about to destroy our history. You've become a danger to your own people," Jaal stated calmly. "Walk away."

"Or... I kill you, and reveal the Resistance for the traitors they are," Akksul growled.

How the fuck does that make any sense? How does killing your own people reveal the other faction as traitors? Peebee almost raised her gun again, but I held it down. I saw the pistol twitch to the side again, and then the pull of a trigger.

Shit. Was I wrong in the bluff?

Time seemed to slow down in my vision. Peebee began screaming, I saw the plasma discharge around the barrel of the pistol. Jaal's eyes didn't widen at all. I watched the green bolt of plasma travel towards my friend's head. Jaal's head began turning to the side. The bolt of plasma brushed past his cheek, burning, scarring it, and passed by his neck flaps harmlessly. Jaal did not even grunt out in pain, though he was grimacing. The scar still glowing. Peebee's scream stopped immediately, and Jaal stared back at Akksul. Teviint and Baranjj were both shocked behind us. As was my squad. The Roekaar above began turning to each other, whispering amongst themselves. Akksul looked up at them all, pleadingly, almost. One shook his head, and left, dropping his rifle. Followed by another, and then two, then four, eight, and so on, until all were left. Akksul had revealed just how far he had fallen.

"The alien is not the monster here," Jaal stated.

"I love my people," Akksul murmured.

Jaal simply stared back. Then turned to his family.

"Come on, let's get you home. Leave him," he suggested.

"You ok?" Peebee asked, concerned, as we began leaving the cave.

"Yeah. Thanks." He grunted out in pain, letting out what he had held in. Peebee just latched onto his arm. We left Akksul all alone.
The shuttle had landed back at Daar Pelaav. Lathoul was alive, but had given a dose of medicine that had knocked him out to help with the pain.

Now, he was awake, and Teviint was still a mess. Hell, Peebee was close to being the same, clinging to Jaal. The doors opened allowing us to exit. Teviint helping Lathoul along.

"I'm so sorry Lathoul. I never-" she murmured.

"Couldn't even kill me at short range," he teased. A pair of Angaran women stepped up to the landing pad.

"They're here," Jaal murmured to his family. The women and Jaal's siblings raced towards one another, embracing. "Let's give them a minute," he suggested. He led us along to the edge of the landing pad.

"Thank you all for trusting me. Killing Akksul would have made the Roekaar stronger," Jaal explained.

"He shot you," Peebee argued.

"I'm glad he did. It exposed how far he'd fallen," Jaal retorted.

"I've got to admit. You were pretty badass," I remarked.

"Can't let you be the only showoff," Jaal chuckled. He turned towards me, arm out for the Angaran salute. I smiled, and returned the salute as best I could.

"You've been practicing," Jaal laughed.

"Well, I have had plenty of opportunities for it," I smirked.

"I'm just glad you're ok," Peebee murmured.

"As am I. It means a lot that you trusted me," Jaal replied. "Come, I want to say goodbye before my family heads home."

"Gonna tell them about…?" I gestured between the two of them.

"Not today. They've… had a lot going on. I'll wait for things to calm down," Jaal answered.
**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

I have the feeling we won't be seeing much more Roekaar activity in the future. There'd probably small cells most radical will linger, but I don't suspect much more. Akksul may be alive, but he seemed rather shaken up. Not that I believe he's about to become all buddy buddy or some bullshit. When Jaal had said his farewells to his siblings and his "other mothers," or in our words, his aunts, they had been eager to meet us, and expressed regret that Jaal's true mother was unable to be here.

Well, all in due time, I suppose. Back on the ship, Drack had quickly asked if we could now head off to Elaaden for the Krogan colony. I remembered my promise, I didn't hesitate to give Kallo our new destination.

I had just gotten myself back into regular clothes when I found myself with a visitor. When I heard the door open, my back was turned. I had hoped it might have been Vetra, coming to see me, and finish what we were doing in the mess earlier. I turned, and was slightly disappointed to see Peebee. I didn't let it show however.

"Hey, Scott? Bad news. My remnant scanner isn't picking up any signs of Poc," she grumbled.

"Shit. Any ideas?" I asked.

"Well, seems like her band of exiles base themselves or at least do business on Kadara. Maybe someone there can point us in the right direction?" Peebee suggested.

"Sounds likely, but I promised Drack we'd head straight to Elaaden," I began. Peebee looked down, depressed. "Hold on, let me finish. I could try contacting Reyes. See what his people can gather," I suggested. I wasn't eager to start pulling favors, but… we need to get Elaaden done. And if we can get a lead on Poc without needing to stop on Kadara, all the better, honestly.

"Really? Mind if I listen in?" Peebee requested.

"Sure, I'll give him a call right now," I nodded. I keyed my Omni-tool and the call began, simply waiting for him to pick up.

"Ah, what can I do for my favorite Pathfinder today?" Reyes greeted. Couldn't help feeling a bit uneasy. With almost everything he said, I felt suspicion.

"Got a favor. While we were last on Kadara, a jilted lover somehow snuck on board our ship and stole something important to one of my crew. A message she left told us that she was running a group of exiles that had previously been trying to beat us to some choice pieces of Rem-tech. The thief's name is Kalinda, an Asari, and one of her lieutenants is a Krogan named Krannit," I explained.

"I know the group. They spend more time scavenging those Remnant sites than anything else,
havent paid them much mind. But, they recently did kick someone out of their little group. Samrick. Been spending his time drinking at Kralla's song. Not the first of Umi's constant customers, and certainly not her last. Want us to question him for you? Save you a trip?" Reyes offered.

"If you can. Just… take it easy on him," I muttered. Reyes sighed.

"We only get rough if they're a bastard like those cannibals you took out, or necessary, like Kaetus. I doubt it will take much to persuade Samrick. Either an offer of creds or goods, or a minor threat. Hell, maybe even a drink," Reyes defended. It's the fact they get rough at all that I disapprove of. I know I was rough with those cannibals, but I sure as hell don't approve of my actions. I do feel guilt.

"Yeah, yeah. Just let us know when you have the intel," I requested.

"Sure. May not even take that long. Talk to you later," Reyes nodded, and the call ended.

"Thanks, Scott," Peebee smiled.


"What am I, Lexi?" Peebee joked. "He's… good. He told me that he feels like he's had a big weight lifted from his shoulders. He admires you, you know. A lot," Peebee answered softly. "You've got a lifelong friend with him. Especially after trusting him like you did."

"Glad I was able to do that. Heh, remember when he first came on board? How nervous and unsure he was?" I chuckled.

"Oh yeah," Peebee giggled. "It was kinda cute almost."

"And Evfra's last words to him before he came with us was telling him to have his gun ready for when we try and kill him," I reminded.

"Haven't met him, but from everything I've heard, that sounds about right. Doubt he ever expected one of us to try and bed him," Peebee laughed. "How's Evfra now?"

"Now he's starting to warm up. Still waiting to make drinking buddies with him," I smirked. "So, what about you and Jaal? How's that been going?" I prodded slightly.

"Looking for ideas huh?" Peebee teased. "We're… good. We're still doing a lot of talking. I haven't told him, but with everything going on with Kalinda... he helps. And he's given me a new perspective on some things. For once, I feel like I belong somewhere," Peebee mused.

"And who would have thought the girl with one foot already out the door from the moment she got here would start to feel like this," I teased. Peebee smirked.

"If I had known this was going to happen before signing on, it wouldn't have mattered how many Remnant discoveries you'd offer, I'd already have been looooooooong gone from Eos," she chuckled. The door opened, and Jaal stepped in.

"Ah, there you are," Jaal remarked.

"Aw, looking for little ol' me?" Peebee teased with a smirk.

"Perhaps. What are you talking about?" Jaal asked, taking a seat next to her. The scar seemed to be
healing alright. A black cut along his cheek, similar to the slash on his left neck flap.

"Peebee came by to talk about Poc. No leads on the scanner, but Reyes knows someone on Kadara that his people are going to ask about Kalinda's group. Maybe find out where Poc is," I answered.

"He ask for anything in reply," Jaal grumbled.


"I think the scar will be impressive," Jaal stated proudly.

"It is," Peebee had a sultry grin as she ran her thumb across it.

"One scar is badass, now two? Peebee might need to start fighting the women off of you," I joked.

"That appealing?" Jaal chuckled.

"Of course, look at all the dates Drack gets," I joked again.

"How reassuring," Jaal laughed.

"Well, maybe I should remind you just why those other women won't stack up. That way you'll help me fight them off you," Peebee whispered, though not nearly quietly enough, into Jaal's… ear? Uh, the side of his head?

His eyes widened, and he muttered a barely understandable response. Peebee giggled, and with his hand in hers, she dragged him out of my quarters.

Well then…

I grabbed a beer from my mini-fridge and began nursing it. Waiting for her. Another knock on the door. I called for whoever it was to come in. Thankfully, it was her, holding a beer.

"I was heading down the hall to use the restroom when I saw Peebee and Jaal leave your quarters and go scurrying up the ladders. And Jaal was a stuttering mess. Thought it would only be right of me to… check in," Vetra mused, walking over to the couch alongside me.

Pretty sure she was swaying her hips too. She was dressed casually. A shirt that looked like a Turian version of a tank top. Her arms and shoulders uncovered, the neck was fully exposed, but the carapace surrounding it was still covered. And she was wearing the same kind of sweatpants I've seen her wear during movie nights. Baggy enough to cover the whole leg, even with the bend, and cover the leg spike too. Her feet were bare, aside from the plastic talon guards. Suppose it makes sense, with the plates I'd assume shoes aren't necessary for Turians to keep their feet warm on metal surfaces. They certainly wear some kind of shoe while out in public, and of course boots in their armor, but I suppose this is different.

"How thoughtful of you," I smirked.

I let my feet up, resting them on the coffee table in front of the couch, and sipped my beer. Vetra sat herself down on my right side, crossing her legs over one another and resting them on the table as well. My arms were already behind the couch, so… I slid my right arm forward and around the back of her neck, resting my forearm on her right shoulder.

"Really? Going with that, huh?" Vetra stated.

She looked and raised a brow-plate at me. I shrugged.
"Fine," Vetra chuckled. She slid herself forward a bit more and leaned onto me, resting her head on my shoulder a bit. The top of her head resting against my temple. She let out a deep breath, and we both sipped our drink. "You're warm," Vetra remarked, shifting into me a bit more.


"Huh. Guess Turian body temps are a bit lower," Vetra mused. "Not to mention this… hair, right?" Vetra asked, rubbing her left hand through the hair on the back of my head.

"Yep, that's hair alright. Doesn't exactly do much to insulate though," I answered with a chuckle.

"So, it grows, and you just... cut it off? Doesn't that hurt?" Vetra questioned, starting to play with a strand.

"Heh, no, it's dead cells," I chuckled. "It grows, we trim it. And the beards, human males don't grow until puberty. Some keep themselves fully shaved, some let it get bushy. I keep it kinda shaven."

"Hm," Vetra ran her hand against my beard.

Her palm and fingers lacked plates. Her skin felt warmer than her plates. Felt fleshy, comparable to a human hand. Same kind of roughness. I wonder if the rest of the unplated skin feels the same. "Feels weird," Vetra murmured.

"I can shave it off if you want," I offered. Taking another sip of my beer.

"No, not a bad kind of weird. Besides, I like the look of it," Vetra stated. Well, good to hear she likes the look of me.

My beer was finished, and I tried to throw it to the trash can over by my desk. I missed. I was a bit… distracted with someone.

"Meh, I'll get it later," I mumbled.

"Don't want to move? Good, this feels pretty comfortable," Vetra grinned, leaning into me a bit more.

I started stroking Vetra's arm. Didn't even realize I was doing it at first. The plates on her shoulder and upper arm were smoother. Vetra took another sip of her drink and another deep breath. When it exhaled it almost sounded like she purred. And it was adorable. She had her eyes closed, and I could feel her breathing. We just sat there like that for another moment. Me, stroking her arm, her, with an arm around my shoulder and her head resting on my other shoulder. She opened her eyes and looked at me, tossing her now empty beer can in the same general direction I had. I looked back at her, grinning. She did the same, her emerald green eyes gazing into mine. I tapped my forehead against hers.

"Your eyes are… beautiful," I murmured.

"Hm," Vetra giggled. "Such a weird compliment you humans have. The eyes. Well, I suppose yours look nice too. So blue.

"So, what should I be complimenting you on?" I asked, a brow raised, and my lips creased in a smirk.

"Well, a Turian would compliment me on my fringe, or mandibles. Or my waist," Vetra answered.
"Is that so? Well, I don't really know what the fringe is, or how to describe the mandibles, but…
you do have quite the nice, thin waist. Feels nice to hold onto," I answered softly. Vetra giggled.

"Why thank you. So, what should I compliment you on?"

"Well, you already got my hair and eyes. I guess next would be how I look, how I'm built, that kind of thing," I shrugged.

"You don't know how to describe my mandibles, and I don't know how to describe your face.
Fleshy, I suppose," Vetra chuckled. "As for how you're built, that's something I know how to do…"

Vetra trailed off. She ran her right hand across my chest. Rubbing it softly. She ran it over my shoulder and arm. I might have been flexing as subtly as I could.

"I can feel you doing that, you know," she laughed softly. Still love that laugh. We were still gazing at each other. "Feels pretty well built to me," she whispered.

"Guess that's part of being a soldier. And running for our lives every other day," I joked.

"Practically," Vetra giggled.

Her hand came to the back of my head and pulled it towards her. With our lips together, our tongues danced. Our breathing became heavier, our hot breath coming out of our noses and against the faces of the other. Our feet were both off the coffee table now and at the base of the couch. Vetra began putting more of her weight on me. And more, and more, until her body had shifted so that it was facing me entirely. I shifted my own body, Vetra taking some weight off, our eyes still closed and our tongues still together and I was gently pushed down with my back on the couch, Vetra straddling me again. I had one arm wrapped around the small of her back, and another at her side. She had one arm exploring my chest, and another on my cheek. Her legs were pressed up against mine. She was careful with her talons, I only felt the softest of touches from them. This was clearly leaving us both hungry for more, but neither of us were bringing it to that level. I was fully willing to go at Vetra's pace, and if this is all she wants to do at this point in time, then this is all we're going to do at this point in time. Vetra giggled as she must have felt me poking her lower stomach. It must have been an unplated segment, as I could feel flesh giving way slightly rather than a hard surface. Well, she is taller, makes sense that it's not poking her waist or her… well…

Oh come on Vetra, why you gotta go and do that? I thought to myself. She pressed her body down against mine and back up slightly. Maybe it was unconscious, the movements being just slight enough that that seems possible, but still, it was a tease. Especially to that one rather sensitive part of my body right now. I gently tightened my grip on her back, and rolled us so that now I was on top, mouths still together, yet our eyes had both opened. Vetra had let out a small cry of surprise, followed by a chuckle. A playful look in her eyes as we parted for breath. Breathing hard.

"Surprised you could do that without rolling us off the couch," she teased. "And how provocative," she smirked.

I worked my hand under her head and pulled it up to mine, my way of shutting her smart-ass self up. My other hand was rubbing itself along her side, along the curve of her waist, but no further. The back of her head felt soft, aside from a small bit of plating at the top of the back of her head. But it didn't hurt to glide my hand across it. Vetra had her hands wrapped around my back, and then… oh come on… still finding a way to tease me. She wrapped her legs around me as well, giggling as she did so and both hearing and feeling my huff of annoyance. I pressed her head up against mine a bit harder. I was pretty sure I was poking her right around that area. Not like there
was a lot of space between our bodies after all. We continued like that for... I don't know how long, when Vetra decided she wanted to be in control again, and tried to spin us around on the couch again. Problem is, she must have misjudged how much room we had left, and we both fell onto our sides on the floor, ending up both sprawled together and on our backs. With our heads forcefully parted by gravity, we both just began laughing. As our laughter died, our heads turned to look at each other, both of us smiling. I took a hand and gently rubbed a finger along the side of her head. She closed her eyes and leaned her head into it as it moved along, that slight purring sound again. And my hand came back to the middle of the gap between us. Her own hand quickly finding mine.

"And we were having so much fun," I joked.

"Oh, I could tell," Vetra teased with a giggle. I blushed awkwardly. Vetra looked down a moment, then back to me. "Not yet. Sorry, just... not yet." She murmured.

"Don't apologize," I squeezed her hand, "I can wait. You just go ahead whenever you're ready," I stated softly. Vetra's mandibles flared in a smile. And she pressed her forehead against mine.

"Thanks." She turned her body onto her side and rested her head on my shoulder. Her right arm draped across my chest, and her leg around mine, her body pressed into my side. Still on the ground. She closed her eyes. I suspected we'd just lay here a small while until she was ready to change position, but then I heard something. Very quiet. I heard Vetra began snoring. I grinned, looking up at the ceiling, then back down at her. No way in hell am I waking her. Or moving out of this. I reached up and pulled a cushion off the couch. I positioned it under my head as a pillow, leaning my head against Vetra's. The lights in the cabin dimmed, and the viewport was tinted to prevent light from shining in if we exit FTL. I closed my eyes, and fell asleep. It was the best, most comfortable, happiest sleep I've had in a long, long time.
Gently, slowly, I began to drift back to consciousness. There was sunlight starting to drift in. It was bright, and warm. There was a weight on my shoulder, someone pressed up against me. A lazy grin formed on my features. Felt like I was back home, in Florida, on leave with Laura. As my conscious mind began to restore itself, however, I remembered just how far away Earth was. And that the person pressed up against me, head on my shoulder wasn't Laura. Not even a human. And while I would always mourn her, I still felt happy.

Wait, why are we on the-oh, right. Vetra rolled us off the couch. Her arm was still draped over my chest, her leg intertwined with mine. Her head still resting in the crook of my neck and shoulder. My right arm was still over her side, and my left was on top of her hand and arm draped over my chest. I began to rub gently, an attempt to wake her. Soon, she began to stir. Groaning slightly as she was roused from sleep. Her body shifted, but remained in the same position. Just moving each muscle a bit. Smirking to myself, I turned my head and gently kissed her forehead, eliciting a hum from the half asleep Turian.

"Just a bit longer," she grumbled.

"Don't wanna move huh? Well, this is pretty comfortable," I recited teasingly.

"Damn right," she mumbled, digging her head further into the crook of my neck. I stopped moving my hands for a moment as I took a deep breath. "Didn't say you could stop," she teased. I chuckled lightly and continued. While I was plagued by the same issue every man faces almost every morning, I was managing to keep myself under control. It helps that her hands are nowhere near-Fuck. She shifted her leg. It brushed by it. I focused on holding back. Vetra chuckled. Just barely, her leg shifted back, barely brushing past it, and yet somehow, that was even worse than the first time.

"One of these days I'm gonna retaliate, you know," I warned.

"Maybe I'm counting on it," she teased.

"Yeah, Yeah," I murmured. "SAM, how long have we been asleep?" I asked.

"As long as the flight to Elaaden. Four hours. I began to remove the tint of the viewport upon our landing," the AI answered.

"Well, people are gonna talk," I muttered.

"Yeah. Fuck it, Peebee and Jaal didn't get it that bad. Only one I'm not looking forward too is Sid," Vetra ended with a groan. "I think I can convince her that we didn't do that, but the truth is just gonna get her squealing about how 'adorable,' it is."

"Come on, it is kinda adorable," I smirked. For the first time that 'morning,' at least that I know of, Vetra opened her eyes, and lifted her head to look at me.

"Do you want me to continue teasing you?" Vetra threatened. Not aggressively, of course, but I don't believe that was an empty threat. "Thought so. Well, they're already gonna be talking, and I want more sleep. SAM, tint the windows," Vetra ordered. He complied. Huh, and seems I'm already taking her orders myself. Though not like I want to argue with staying here. She turned her
head to the ceiling, eyes closed, and stretching her arms and legs. Her mouth opened wide, her mandibles stretching far out to the side, her left one brushing against my cheek, and her tongue rolling out of her mouth in a yawn.

"And people say I have a big mouth," I teased. "Should we move to the couch or bed? The floor isn't the most comfortable."

"Awwwww, is a wood floor hurting your bum?" Vetra teased, using something akin to a baby voice. "So fragile. Alright, have it your way." She rolled off me, and sat up, standing, and I did the same, tossing the cushion I used as a pillow back onto the couch. Vetra took my hand in hers, my five fingers wrapping themselves within her three. My index between her thumb and index, my middle and ring between her index and… pinky? Ring? And my own pinky at the outside of her own. I plopped down onto the bed, flat on my back, and scooted up to the pillows, and the blankets ready to be thrown back on. Vetra places herself against me just like she was on the floor, but this time on my left side, and I threw the sheet and blanket over us both. Covering us to our necks.

"Never realized just how bad the crew beds were till now. This feels like damn luxury," Vetra remarked. "Remind me to ask around for replacements on my own."

"I might, if I had an incentive…" I trailed off, raising a brow at her.

"You're lucky I enjoy this," Vetra chuckled. She pulled my head down to hers and we kissed. It only lasted a few seconds, but…

"Call me incentivized," I murmured.

"Thought so. Remember the ice cave on Voeld? This would have been a much nicer way for us to huddle," Vetra remembered.

"If you want we could always go back and find that cave, try again," I suggested jokingly.

"Hell no. Once was enough," Vetra chuckled. "Now, shut up, and get some sleep."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We awoke a few hours later. Gently, and well rested. Content as can be. Wouldn't mind a plain and simple lazy day like this, but we have work to do. Vetra had left, though not without another kiss so she could go get showered, suited up, and fed. Not to mention stopping Sid before she got too excited. I stayed in my quarters for a bit longer. Reyes had called back while I was asleep. SAM had answered, and Reyes left the intel on a hideout of Kalinda's gang. Believe it or not, Samrick had a good idea where Poc was. And it was a safe house not far from our landing zone here on Elaaden. A pleasant coincidence, I might add.

Reyes wasn't the only one to call while I was out. Evfra called about the Roekaar footage and our report on the mission itself. He was annoyed with SAM's partial explanations of it not being a wise choice to wake me at the time, until the AI stated that "I was resting with a crew-member."

Apparently, Evfra had chuckled, and let it be. Finally, there was an additional message in my emails. On Voeld, someone with the Resistance on Voeld, Raelis, was requesting my specific aid. Apparently, she was seeing very odd activity with the Kett. Not sure why I was chosen for it, but, it'll give me a reason to go back to Voeld other than looking for a ZK satellite.

As for Elaaden itself, it was a desert moon, one of many orbiting a gas giant and tidally locked. Leaving one half of the moon in eternal day exposed to the blistering heat, even at this distance, of
the blue giant and the other in eternal night. The Tempest had landed at a small encampment that the locals had named The Paradise. Only spot on Elaaden to get water, apparently. At least, as a reliable source. Like Kadara port, it was a cease fire zone, but the water wasn't cheap. New Tuchanka was to the north of the Paradise, only a relatively short ways. Upon our approach, the others had reported seeing Monoliths, so obviously, another vault. And what else is here... My omni-tool ringed. Peebee?

"Scott, there is no fucking way I am letting any of you off this ship without me. DID YOU SEE THAT REMNANT STARSHIP?!" Peebee exclaimed, nearly squealing.

"Er, I was asleep for the trip and landing. What?" I asked again.

"A Remnant starship! SAM says it's only forty-one percent exposed! The rest buried in the sand. It's amazing! And did you see the reports on this Remnant Abyssal? It's like a giant, indestructible metal worm that explodes up and into the dunes north of New Tuchanka. Oh, and, uh, the Vault. Right," Peebee answered rapidly.

"Well, I'll be damned," I whistled. Some impressive tech on this planet. "Lucky for you, I was gonna bring you along anyway. We are gonna get Poc back while we're here, after all," I reminded.

"Great to hear! Thanks!" she ended the call. Beaming. I went back to reading the report, skipping the part of the starship and the abyssal. Peebee had told me what I needed to know. Seems like mostly everyone here aside from The Krogan and whoever runs the Paradise are scavengers and people exiled from Kadara. Common surface temperature outside right now rounds up to fifty-one degrees Celsius. That's about one-hundred-twenty-three degrees Fahrenheit. I may love the heat, and can be fine and dandy in the nineties and even the low one hundreds, but what I don't love are heat strokes. Still, with cooling systems within the suit, it may not be as bad as the numbers are making me think. Still, I think I'll take an extra canteen. Satisfied with the report for the time being, I left my quarters for a shower, got in the under suit, grabbed a protein bar, and made my way to the cargo bay to get suited up with the others.

Vetra, Drack, and Peebee were all present. Drack, already rearing to go. Peebee had apparently chosen to go in the outfit she had when we first met her, thanks to the heat. I can't say that I like that she wasn't as protected, but so long as she's careful, and this isn't a high-risk combat op anyway. Vetra was still in the process of getting suited up. Sid offering to help where she could. Heh, like a Knight's squire. I, myself would be wearing my dad's Pathfinder armor. Wearing all black in the desert. Yeah, not the best thing. But it's my armor, and it does at least have cooling systems built in. I set my armor down by a crate beside Vetra as I sat and began strapping it all on. With a devilish gleam in her eyes, Sid opened her mouth to speak.

"Don't even let her start, I already made sure she knew the truth," Vetra stated before her sister could. Drack chuckled, Sid pouted, and Peebee looked confused. Were she and Jaal as preoccupied with each other as Vetra and I?

"Was still plenty fun knowing you two snuggled. On the floor," Sid giggled.

"Wait, what?" Peebee questioned with a laugh.

"Saw this coming from a bit after the start. Remind me to collect my bet winnings from Kesh," Drack remarked.

"So, Scott and Vetra were-" Sid began.

"Making out and then she rolled them off the couch, and they fell asleep on the floor," Sid continued, louder than Vetra's insults. Against my better judgement, some laughter broke through. Vetra gave her beaming and smug sister a stern look. Drack rolled his eyes with a toothy smirk, and Peebee, mockingly, held her hands over her heart.

"Awwwww, how adorable," Peebee teased.

"Up yours, Asari," Vetra retorted. Ah, banter between friends, isn't it great?

"So, Drack, any developments?" I asked.

"Haven't heard anything else, but Jorgal Strux is waiting to meet us at a landing pad here at Paradise," the old man answered.

"Sounds good. We'll listen to him, and you can be a judge of the severity of the situation. If you have doubts, I say we go get Poc and the vault online before heading to New Tuchanka. If you think the situation is that bad, we'll head straight there," I suggested.

"Yeah, yeah, sounds alright. That vault will only help improve conditions at the colony, might even influence Morda," Drack nodded. We were now all suited up and ready to go, and the cargo bay doors began to open. Vetra and Sid shared a hug, and then Sid hugged me, wishing us luck out there, and left. We were still in the shade as we strode down the cargo ramp. Temperature read at about thirty-nine degrees Celsius, so about one-oh-two Fahrenheit. I've dealt with that before. The ground was dried and cracked here. Patches of sand elsewhere. Across the horizon to the north, a collection pillars, likely a nearly white stone covered in sand, reaching into the sky amongst a few mountains. To the west, an absolutely massive pillar, reaching maybe miles into the sky, and it was probably miles away. Helluva climb. To the east, and behind us, however the terrain appeared flat for miles, with large sand dunes out in the distance. And the massive, looming shadow of the gas giant and two other moons was an impressive sight. The gas giant itself reminded me of pictures of Jupiter, brown-yellow clouds streaking across it. The Paradise itself had plenty of shade, and even plant-life. Trees with bright red leaves surrounded the main complex, and there were blue shrubs and large red roots poking out of the ground in patches.

We stepped out of the shade so we could reach the Paradise grounds itself, and the heat transition was... something else. I immediately felt the sun on my face. Reminded me of sitting around a campfire, and you feel either adventurous or cold, so you sit closer and closer. Not touching the flame, no, but you can feel the heat starting to burn your face. Laying out in the sun for longer periods of time in the nineties or low one hundreds would feel heavenly. But doing the same here would soon prove uncomfortable. And yet...

I fell back, arms and legs wide onto the ground, smiling, just letting the heat wash over me. Vetra's gaze had snapped right to me to ensure I was ok, and upon seeing my smile, knew I was fine. Drack simply remained quiet, seemingly unfazed by the temperature. Peebee? I think she was already feeling the heat.

"Could have warned me," Vetra chastised with a grin. "That does feel good though…"

"Sunbathe later, will ya? We'll give you privacy to... get a full body tan," Peebee remarked.

"Don't think going that far here would be a good idea. Look at all the sand. I'd chafe, getting rashes on my balls just from swimming at a beach if the surf is rough, and that's WITH clothes. And I can tell you, a damn ball rash, is NOT fun." I retorted, standing myself back up.

"Ugh, then I'd probably get a sand rash in my damn vagina," Vetra shuddered.
"Don't talk to me about rashes like that until you spend weeks to months living on Eos without a washing machine," Peebee countered.

"Uh, there was a pond at Promise, not to mention the big lake that the vault was under? You could easily have washed your clothes out there," I reminded.

"...shit..." Peebee murmured. The rest of us, burst out laughing. Finally, without distracting ourselves, we were under the line of shade that will bring us to the main building. There were plenty of scavs. All of them with their eyes on us. Sizing us up, no doubt. Murmuring amongst themselves. I made a point of staring right back, a solid glare. We made our way to a bridge crossing a chasm to the main building. A man, human, called out to us.

"Hey! Hey! Welcome!" he greeted. "Come this way, follow me," he insisted. Seemed jittery. I hovered my hand over my Hornet as we followed. "Fancy ship you got all right. You'll find lots of deals inside."

"She's not for sale," I replied curtly.

"Oh... well, not just the ship. Deals on what we sell. I'm sure you have a lot," he murmured a reply.

"You work here?" I questioned.

"Yeah, just talk to my boss. The Paradise is a special place, keep those guns holstered," he insisted. Well, guess it's safe to assume that the people we've seen around with their guns out are hired hands as guards. The man led us inside. Some were browsing selves or digging through crates, others talking to one another or skulking in a corner. One was talking to an Angaran woman behind a gated counter.

"It's a fair exchange," the woman stated firmly, arms crossed over her chest.

"Why because you say it is?" a man angrily questioned.

"Partly. I wouldn't be in business if I wasn't fair," the woman retorted. "If you don't think so go trade somewhere else."

"Okay, I will," the man stormed off. The Angara scoffed.

"He'll be dead or back within a week, mark my words." I approached the counter. "I take it you're from that nice, shiny ship that touched down a few hours ago? You're far too clean and that armor too military to be a scav," the Angara questioned.

"Pathfinder Scott Ryder. And you are?" I introduced.

"Annea. I run this place. No weapons, no violence within my little paradise. You're safe here, but the moment you step foot outside my boundaries, you're fair game to the bloodthirsty fools," she recited.

"I could certainly see plenty eying us up on our way down. And not a one did anything. Sure there's not something in the water?" I asked, only half joking.

"Nothing so complicated," Annea let out a single laugh. "They need me. They need what I sell. They either behave, or they're out. So, anything I can get for you? Don't look like you need water or food, but I have other supplies," she offered. I glanced at Vetra, and she shook her head to the side. She's been looking at the price tags, so to speak, and nothing is striking her fancy.
"Just some questions. Reports can only tell me so much. You get along with the Krogan?" I asked.

"Everyone comes to Elaaden with the dream of leaving. Except me, and the Krogan. They built their colony into a sink hole. Smart. Keeps it cool enough for them, I guess. Still, wouldn't recommend you go down into most others, the heat gets even more blistering," she warned. "They don't have their own water, but Morda and I get along well. So far, at least."

"So far? You have suspicions about them?" Drack added.

"I suspect everyone on Elaaden. It's why no one other than myself know where I get my water, and how I'm still alive," Annea answered.

"Fair enough. What can we expect out there people wise?" I continued.

"Mostly everyone on this planet are desperate folk. Misfits, some. Those that can't get along in the regular world. Or… people willing to make a profit off that desperation," she mused. Yeah, I don't need to wonder just which category she falls into. I said nothing, but the look, with the raised brow I gave her, conveyed a mutual understanding. "Then, there's a place they call The Flophouse eastish of here. Den of murder and misery. Great place to stay and bring the family." Well, that could be a good place for us to wipe out. Take out a large hostile exile faction. But… it's weird. Everyone on the Initiative was screened. How are there so many psychos or people who so easily went on to murder? Sure, there was pressure, but to this level?

"Oh, what about the derelict Remnant ship?" Peebee questioned eagerly.

"Ah you came here to get killed, did you?" Annea responded with false cheer. "Scavengers trying to pull it apart. Hear plenty that it still fights back. I don't go near their claims. They shoot on sight"

"Wonderful… Thanks for the intel," I ended, leading the others outside. I gave Drack a nod, and he led us up to a landing pad with several Krogan waiting. The lead straightened their stance upon recognizing Drack. Behind the lead, I could hear two of the Krogan bickering. A female aggressively claiming that Jorgal Strux, the one we're here to meet should run New Tuchanka, and a male trying to shush her that while he agrees, she should quiet down a bit. Seems that ambitions are at least at play.

"Strux." Drack stated simply.

"Drack." Strux turned to look at me. "You who I think you are?"


"Thanks for coming," Strux remarked.

"Everyone's best chance for survival here is to cooperate, including the Krogan. So, just what is going on?" I questioned.

"Good to know some people are on our side," Strux grumbled. His forehead plate was green, and there was a black line of face paint going down from the center to his chin and down his neck. He looked on the relatively older side. Younger than Drack, obviously, but older. "Colony is heading to a bad place."

"We can't be there anymore!" A Krogan woman exclaimed.

"Morda's become a tyrant," Strux explained. Though I'm hard pressed to call that an explanation.
"She kick you out?" I continued.

"Hasn't come to that yet," Strux shook his head. "So, we're staying low. I want to keep my eye on her. She's planning a strike against the Nexus. That much we know." Well, a helluva claim. And if true, we need to put a stop to it.

"Drack? When you first got contacted, you said that what you heard didn't sound like Morda. That still true? I trust your judgement here," I stated, turning to the old Krogan.

"Morda's leading the colony for a reason. She's tough, but that's good. She wouldn't do something pointless and stupid, which attacking the Nexus, would be," Drack pointed out.

"You're not there, Drack," Strux retorted angrily. "Morda is going to rip this colony apart."

"And then we're all going to die," another Krogan spoke up.

"Tuchanka's worse than this place. And you could just hitch a ride to Kadara. And that's leaving out Eos, or even the Nexus," Vetra retorted.

"Everyone needs food and water, even Krogan. Morda's rationing," Strux began.

"Bah, so's the Nexus, even with three outposts on three different worlds, trade with the Collective, and the Angara. Grow a quad, Strux," Drack scoffed. He glared at Drack, then looked back at me.

"My group thinks the Krogan should make peace with the Nexus," he suggested. So, an offer on the table. I won't commit to them until I KNOW exactly where Morda stands. And if these guys are lying about the Nexus strike, exaggerating the Rationing, I don't want to take their offer. We don't need whiners and backstabbers.

"We need the Krogan, and the Krogan need us," I nodded.

"Well there won't be a colony to make peace with if Morda ruins it. Don't believe me, head to the colony yourself, see what she's planning," Strux suggested. "Talk to Ravanor Brenk. He's one of us, on the inside."

"I'll take a look around. I can't make any promises beyond that," I answered. Strux nodded, and led his group away, down the staircase we used to meet them. I let out a sigh, and faced Drack.

"Alright old man, thoughts?" I asked.

"I think… Strux is either lying or exaggerating. Maybe a bit of both. He wasn't the most trustworthy back home. But… the claims he made were serious. As are the consequences. We can go ahead and get Peebee's toy and the vault, but then we go to the colony," Drack answered.

"Then that's our plan."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

While getting ready to head out, we were stopped by a man named Kent Halsey. Nexus security, all the way out here. Long story short, his sister was exiled and ended up on Elaaden. He wants to find her and take her back to Kadara, start over. Unfortunately for him, he had no means of actually going out into the desert and finding her. He pointed us in the direction of a scavenger who runs some trade between here and Kadara. A Turian woman, who strongly hinted her ties to the Collective. She gave us a stronger idea of the shit going on out in the wastes. Slavery, cannibalism, gang leader worship. Splendid. As for Isabel Halsey, Kent's sister, while she had never met her,
heard some scavs talking about her and a cave in the dunes. Her time being limited. She gave us the nav-point, and a warning. It's a bad area.

"Scott? Requesting permission to leave the ship," Lexi spoke into comms.

"Don't tell me you want to join us out there, doc. What about 'do no harm?'" I asked teasingly.

"Just wish to investigate Paradise. Every Initiative applicant was screened. I don't understand how so many became aggressive and mentally unstable. I want to scan scavengers, and see if I can detect anything. The scans will be non-invasive, and they won't even know," Lexi explained.

"Permission granted, Lexi. Keep me up to date on what you find, will you? Oh, and, I know you have the doctor's oath, but, take a pistol. At least for show. It's a neutral zone, but call it a safety measure," I ordered.

"Understood. Thank you," Lexi replied, ending the call.

"SAM, bring us the Nomad, will you?" I requested. We were standing at the north end of the Paradise. We could see a line of beacons in the sand, flashing a red light, marking the end of the neutral zone. I doubt there's anyone waiting on the border of it, but I'd rather just have the vehicle. We got no response, but didn't need one. I could see the Nomad drive out of the Tempest and through the shaded path towards us, and park beside us. "Thanks." Ah, seems our synthetic friend had already started the AC unit, cooling us down nicely.

"Ooooh, that is sooooo much better," Peebee moaned, fanning herself. Chuckling, I pulled up a map of the region on my Omni-tool. New Tuchanka was a short drive straight north, and about halfway to the northernmost Monolith. However, there was a Monolith due west of here, and the safehouse that hopefully has Poc, further west, but still a straight shot. The westernmost Monolith was north and a bit west of the safehouse, and the location of Isabel Halsey was just north of there. Seems like an effective route to me. So, let's get started.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Before we had even gotten halfway to the first Monolith, we were sidetracked. Exiles were scavenging Remnant sites, and scans Peebee and SAM had made as we passed suggested that Remnant cores were among the pieces. And as I learned right then and there, unstable Remnant cores attract the Scourge. And this planet doesn't need more ecological interference. We fought through the scavs, and shut down the cores. Unfortunately, our detour had to continue to a pair of sites to the North and north east, before finally getting back on track. It's worth noting that, while maybe standing out in the sun isn't that bad, running around in a combat scenario? In heat like this? Yeah, not fun. I had already drained half of my first canteen. Though, at least we could probably call down one of those Forward Stations for refills.

The Monolith didn't provide us with any trouble, just some climbing and puzzle solving, and it was good to go. Lexi had called to let her know she had finished her scans and had returned to her lab to figure out just what they meant. Finally, we arrived at the coordinates provided by Reyes, that he got from the former member of Kalinda's gang. It was a small building in the middle of nowhere. One room, I'd bet. Looked abandoned, but doesn't mean nothing is inside. With weapons raised, I led the others inside.

"Figures all they left was junk," a voice grumbled. Male, and with the harmonics, Turian. On a table beside him? Poc.
"Poc! We found her!" Peebee exclaimed.

"Who the-DON'T SHOOT!" The Turian stood to face us, then immediately raised his hands into the air in fear. "JUST A SCAVENGER, LOOKING AROUND!"

"Damn it, she's broken," Peebee murmured, inspecting her bot.

"Guess Kalinda didn't take very good care of her," I remarked. Poc was covered in sand. So was the scavenger. Hell, so was everything on this planet. Seeing that we were essentially ignoring him, the scav calmed down.

"Look, I don't want any trouble, but I found this place abandoned. By scavenger law, it's all mine," he argued. Well, that's a surge in confidence.

"Look, we're just here for the Observer. They stole it from us, we hunted it down to get it back. I don't give a shit about anything else here, but we're leaving with the observer," I stated casually, calmly, and matter of fact.

"Scavenger law. It looks broke, but easy to fix. Could do so and make a killing. So, your offer?" he stood his ground. Peebee burst into laughter.

"You're kidding, right? I took her apart, and built her from the ground up with blood, sweat, and tears. I know her inside and out. You aren't fixing that so easily. Not without parts that I have plenty of."

"You want my offer? Here it is. We take the bot, you ignore us. You get to keep everything else in here. We don't knock you the hell out and take the bot anyway. We have guns, biotics, and a Krogan. You don't even look armed," I gave him my ultimatum. The scav sighed.

"Fine, fine…" Without a word, Drack and I carried Poc and set her in the storage compartment at the back of the Nomad, and got back in.

"Thanks Scott. Maybe this nightmare with Kalinda will finally be over," Peebee murmured.

"One can hope. When we get back to the ship, scrub her for any bugs though," I warned.

"Yeah, wouldn't put that past her," she grumbled.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"So, that thing is over half buried?" Vetra asked. The second monolith was online, and we were driving by part of the Remnant starship to reach Isabel Halsey. It's a good thing she's not named Catherine, else I'd be suspicious.

"That is what my readings and estimations state," SAM answered.

"Spirits, makes our warships look small," Vetra murmured.

"My measurements indicate that the starship is indeed longer than an Alliance Dreadnought," SAM confirmed.

"Jesus, and with the size of the vaults, I wouldn't be too surprised if that thing was a damn frigate to the Remnant," I remarked.

"Imagine all the tech we could find in there…" Peebee mused. The coordinates we had been given
led us to a cave with an exile encampment outside. They immediately began shooting, rounds pinging off the Nomad's shields. I parked it behind a truck they had left parked slightly further out them themselves, and it provided ample cover for us to all disembark. They were either in cover behind some small escape pods, still capable of flight, and kinetic barrier emplacements that only provide cover for one person each. Shoot a generator though, and the barrier goes away. I pulled out my sniper while Drack grumbled about being too far away, when I noticed a red canister at my feet. It was an explosive. I grinned as an idea popped into my head. Using biotics, I picked the canister up, leaving it hovering in the air, and attaching an explosive charge onto it. Quickly, I turned the corner and tossed it right to the back of one of the escape pods, and counted to three. On three, I peeked out, and the canister was exactly where I wanted it, an exile scrambling to move it away. I detonated the charge. The exile, and both escape pods exploded violently, killing all the others surrounding them. Drack roared with laughter.

"HA! Great going, kid! Fucking beautiful!"

"Ok, hold it. You, the one killing my guys? Come in here. I want to talk to you," an annoyed woman demanded. Well, interesting turn.

"That was Isabel, wasn't it?" Vetra remarked.

"Well, I'm sure we just made it soooo much easier for us to convince her to go with her brother," I stated, sarcasm dripping from my voice. Still keeping our weapons out, we entered the cave. There was a small building built within, and a handful of guards with their weapons lowered. And a very annoyed human woman with her hands on her hips. Red hair, just like Kent, same color of skin, and a similar face. Yep, Isabel.

"Well, well. You're from the Nexus. Should've known. I don't sell to your kind. Matter of principle," she stated, both disinterestedly and dismissively.

"Not here to buy. You Isabel Halsey?" I asked.

"Yeah. What's it to you?" she questioned suspiciously.

"Your brother Kent sent me. He's here on Elaaden, wants you to go back to Kadara with him," I explained.

"Well you can tell him, I'm not going anywhere," she replied pompously. I can't imagine Sara and I being like this to each other. "On the Nexus, I was a merchant's assistant. On Kadara, I ran errands. Now, I make weapons for the most powerful gang leaders on Elaaden. I get perks, protection, no one would dare touch me. Finally get the respect I deserve." Oh. Again, someone like that… ugh.

"Your brother came all the way from the Nexus to this dustbowl just to find you. And don't pretend you don't have enemies here, heard in the Paradise some people itching to attack. This looks like your one shot to get off this hellhole," I suggested. She looked away for a brief moment, then back. "Whether I like it or not, this is home now. I have no reason to leave," she argued.

"Your brother would clearly give his life for you. That's not a good enough reason?" I chastised.

"You're a pain in the ass, you know that," Isabel grumbled. "Fine. Can't stand the heat anyway…" Isabel shooed us off and we were only too eager to leave.

"Anyone feel like we just punished Kent rather than help him?" Vetra muttered.

"She was a bitch. Reminded me of my own sister except less… criminal," Peebee remarked. Our
next stop, the final Monolith, to the north of New Tuchanka. We crested another sand dune as we drove along, seeing the Krogan colony to the east, and some construction creeping out of the sinkholes it was built in to. Ahead, we could see the Monolith in the distance, and-

"FUCKING HELL! The reports did not do that shit justice!" I exclaimed. We watched from afar as a Remnant… worm exploded out of the dunes in the distance. It appeared to be constructing itself at the front rather than moving. Then it's "tail" followed the Abyssal as it's "head" returned to the sand. It appeared to be deconstructing itself. How very interesting… Cautiously, avoiding the Abyssal as best we could, we arrived at the third Monolith. With the glyphs, and the puzzle, it was online. I checked the map. New Tuchanka was directly south of here, the vault appeared to be to the south west, in fact we likely passed right by the entrance on our way to this Monolith. The location Avitus Rix had given us for a lead on Ark Natanus? Just a bit south east. It's worth a detour, and Drack agreed.

The coordinates led us up another sand dune, small Remnant pillars poking out. There were vehicles. Initiative make, exile hands around the site, clear by the amount of disrepair. And… stasis pods. We could see stasis pods in the distance as exiles dug around.

"Shit…" Vetra murmured.

"Watch your fire, if any of those pods are active we don't want to damage them," I ordered. We sped towards the group, running over a human scavenger who began shooting us, the wheels of the Nomad crushing him. We got out. The untrained scavs here practically ran at us. Meat for the grinder that is Drack. They didn't stand a chance.

"No life signs detected, Pathfinder," SAM stated. And even the AI had an air of sadness.

"They're all dead…" Vetra whispered.

"Fuck…" I shook my head to the side. "Let's scan the pods. See if any of them are Macen…" The Omni-tool would log all their names and their cause of death, but I wasn't sure if I'd need it. I might just remember every name.

Quatus Vecturis, blunt force trauma from surface impact. Aevalis Senectus, blunt force trauma. Balven Grus, cerebral hemorrhage from the impact. Cnaeta Libutes. Exsanguination, scourge pierced the pod. Marae Parnum. Starvation, fortunately they were comatose. Astur Relux, cardiac arrest. And…

"God fucking damnit…" I exclaimed, slamming my fist into one of the nearby exile vehicles. And leaving a dent. "Vestella Speri. Just a little girl. Scourge cut off her oxygen supply," I explained sadly. I can handle death. We deal with it on a daily basis. But that's always been adults. Not to say adult lives aren't worth as much, but there's just something different. A child is innocent. They have so much to live for. Vetra stepped over to my side, wrapped her arm around me in a half hug.

"A goddamn child… She stepped into that pod either terrified, or excited as could be. And this…" I gestured a hand towards her pod. "Is what fucking happened." Vetra opened her mouth as if to say something, but Peebee spoke first from behind.

"Scott, this one still has power. No life signs, but… maybe we can get something," Peebee stated solemnly. I took a deep breath, and Vetra gave me a sympathetic look, asking if I was alright. I nodded, and forced the feelings down. We were still in the field. Trebia Canus, another name to the list. SAM accessed the data history.

"According to the final logs, this stasis pod was jettisoned from Ark Natanus," SAM informed.
"Judging by the scorch marks, maybe when it hit the Scourge?" Vetra suggested.

"The timeline doesn't match. The pod was ejected long after Natanus was reported missing," SAM explained.

"Then maybe it's still intact somewhere. But… why would it be dumping colonists in stasis?" I questioned, anger creeping in. I sighed again. "When we're back on the ship, I'll give Avitus a call. See what he's found."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The vault had emergency power, and a relatively easy puzzle had been solved, allowing us entrance. The door opened, a kind of weird tree like we've seen before inside. There were a pair of Assemblers, but they easily were dispatched. The Vault led us to the right, some shield bubbles, some more bots. A Nullifier and an Assembler. Easy kills once more. Next? Now that was a large chamber. Some Observers were hovering a head, but not yet hostile. We surprised them with tech attacks, and they collapsed. We surveyed the area. Obviously, the core of the vault was in the large door ahead, but there was a gap without a bridge. And I saw consoles in the distance, likely what form the bridge. There was a small door to the right, and another open area to the left. We went right first. It decided to be difficult. We had to activate deactivate consoles so that we could jump to other consoles, and close the gap. We entered the door and then-

"Shit! Turret!" I exclaimed, shoving Vetra down into cover with a dive. The shot passed right over our heads. "I'll take care of it," I stated, and cloaked. There was a console just next to the Turret, Assemblers moving to engage my squad, and I hacked SAM into the turret. Now, it charged another shot at an Assembler, and just as it fired, another Assembler stepped into the shot. Double kill. From behind, I helped the others finish off the Assemblers. With the room clear, we investigated what lay at the end. A console, that when activated, a small part of the bridge began to form, and pillars rose from below for a path back to where we began.

The other side of the chamber was lower. Remnant bots patrolling, and not engaging us yet. We took the advantage. Focusing our fire on a Nullifier to eliminate it from the get-go, and casually eliminating any Assemblers remaining. The console for the bridge was just to our right. I activated it, but hey, I'm curious. We delve deeper to this side part of the cavern. A few Assemblers lingered, but provided little resistance. I hacked into a turret, and then Observers appeared from over the ridge. Made short work of them. At the far end of the area, the platforms rose and led to a door closer to the vault entrance. And there's a Destroyer… great. Had half a mind to order Vetra to fire a cobra missile. We focused fire on the turrets, disabling those while simultaneously damaging the shields. Finally, it opened its core for the main cannon, and we collapsed the shields, and destroyed the core. Sometimes I wonder if I'm too curious for my own good.

The door guarded by the Destroyer revealed a room with a kind of cube with a console on top. And another console had risen from the floor. One of which, with a light. Wait, as we approached others, they had lights too. All except one… alright, so I know the puzzle, just had it the other way around. I activated the console without a light, and continued doing the same as that console sunk into the floor. Two additional platforms raised. One against a wall, one by a door. The door? Opened to reveal a barrier. So, obviously, when the vault begins to purify. The other? A side room. We investigated. Data patterns all over the walls. And a data core at the center. Peebee eagerly pocketed it, and we ran scans of everything, even finding some glyphs. Which, unsurprisingly, helped with the console on the cube. It wasn't the easiest, but Peebee and I still solved it. A flood of data. Content we had everything we could, we returned to the bridge we had formed to the vault room. And I had spotted another barrier behind us, between the ramps we used to come here in the
Nullifiers tried to stop us, but they were slow and lumbering. Their shots were easy to dodge. With some mobility, we hit them where they hurt, and they all fell. With the area clear, I nodded thoughtfully, planning just what we'd do.

"Peebee, see the barrier just behind us? I want you waiting there to grab what you can. I'll be running by you, so you won't be left behind. Vetra, Drack, you two wait by the barrier at the vault entrance. Grab what you can. You'll have more time, and I'll be showing up to activate the vault, so you'll be out before it goes back on. Just radio in when you're in position," I explained. The three heads nodded, and left. About five minutes passed before Vetra and Drack checked in. Content, I warned them, and established a link to the console, turning on a heel, finger hovering over the activation key. I gave a countdown, slammed the button, and ran like hell. I began climbing the ramp as I called for Peebee, turning to see the purification field steadily approaching, and Peebee jump jet up to join me. She was holding tight to some rem-tech, and we soon re-joined the others, already done looting, waiting for us. As I turned to the console alongside the tree, I could see the purification field approaching. And then, it was gone. Another vault done.

"Is it weird this shit is starting to feel normal?" I questioned, catching my breath from the sprint.

"I think we're all long past the line of weird and normal," Peebee chuckled.

"Yeah, you're fucking an Angara, and these two are snuggling," Drack remarked, gesturing to Vetra and I. I blushed slightly, but Vetra and I both still chuckled.

"He has a point," Vetra murmured. We found ourselves back outside the vault, out in the sunlight. Still felt hot, but compared to how it was, significantly less hot.

"Ambient temperature has decreased to thirty-four degrees Celsius, and humidity has increased by 21 percent," SAM informed.

"Fucking hell, that's ninety-three degrees Fahrenheit. Just another goddamn sunny day back home," I laughed. "Depending on how much water this place gets, I might make myself at home here," I mused.

"A practically perfect temperature back on Palaven. Clean up the scavs and… yeah, I could see the same," Vetra nodded. Drack shook his head, chuckling. Peebee raised a brow, smirking. Well… Off to New Tuchanka then.
The Nomad parked outside the Krogan colony, built into a pair of sinkholes just next to each other, and under a large stone pillar reaching into the sky. It was painted with a large, red Krogan sigil that the translator wasn't picking up, and there were large cloths adorning the sides of the colony and above the main entrance of the same red color. The cloth above the main entrance however, had the same sigil as on the stone, but white, to show on the red background. We allowed Drack to lead us to the colony entrance, and the pair of guards outside. Another pair were working on a vehicle as we passed. They stared either in curiosity, or suspicion. Krogan are hard to read. Both guards stood straighter, popping their chests out as much as they could to try and intimidate as we approached, brandishing, but not aiming their rifles. One nodded at Drack, but while appearing to sound disinterested, spoke to the rest of us.

"Move along, no outsiders."

"He's with me. Human Pathfinder," Drack informed.

"Drack. It's been a while," the other guard remarked. His voice was as rough as sandpaper.

"Jorgal Strux said there was trouble at the colony. I want to talk with Morda," I explained.

"So now Strux is friends with the Nexus? Traitor," the first guard growled.

"Think I'm a traitor too?" Drack questioned, gaze set firmly on the guard, daring him to say the wrong thing.

"Shut it, Brek," the second guard warned.

"Not here to step on any toes. Just to help," I raised my hands to try and help calm the situation.

"You assume we need help," the second retorted. No aggression, unlike the first, just matter of fact.

"Hey, you guys did your job. Now, stand down, let em in," Drack insisted.

"But Drack," the first, Brek, began.

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?" the second cut him off. "I'll spread the word so Morda knows you're here." He typed into his Omni-tool, and the door unlocked, granting us passage.

"Thanks," I nodded. We stepped in, hearing a larger ship's engines warm up, and then saw said ship lift into the air, and speed away towards one of the moons. I didn't pay it a second thought, until I heard Drack mutter.

"That better fucking not be…" We were gaining stares from Krogan within. Not much in the way of a crowd, but I also don't believe there's much reason for them to be up at this level anyway. Seemed like most of their stuff was built into the lower levels.

"Pathfinder's pretty sure of himself to wander on in here," one Krogan male remarked.

"Wonder how long he'd last in a real fight," a female mused. Both were speaking more than loud enough for me to hear. Like I give a shit what they say, they haven't stormed Kett facilities.
"They're testing you, seeing if you'll take the bait," Drack whispered.

"Well, the bait isn't exactly good," I whispered back. Drack's Omni-tool began to ring.

"Shit, it fucking is," he grumbled. And answered the call. "Hark, was that ship what I think it was?" I couldn't hear the other end of the call, just waiting for Drack to react or speak. "Damn it. Fucking damn it. Look, the Pathfinder and I are already at the Colony. We'll head right down," Drack reassured, and ended the call.

"What happened?" Vetra asked.

"Thought the ship looked familiar. Colony transport. Just got stolen. The ship itself isn't important, but it's carrying our seed vault. One of a kind shit. Our females are already laying eggs, and when they hatch, those children NEED the nutrients in those plants to survive. If even ONE clutch hatches before we get that stuff synthesized... effects would be permanent," Drack explained. There was a hint of nervousness entering his voice. "Hark, one of the colony's botanists is locking onto the signal beacon on board. I hope you'll go with me to take it back." The old man would do it alone, can't say I'm surprised. I didn't even hesitate.

"Then let's get down there and figure out where the hell those thieves are off to," I nodded.

"Knew I could count on you," Drack gave a hint of a smile. "Owe you one."

"Wait, wait wait, we were counting? Come on, you don't owe me a thing," I reinforced. We rushed through the colony, following Drack. We passed by their water supply, large tanks that they likely purchased from Annea, and started seeing green. Large flowerbeds with ferns or larger plants growing out of them, some with fruit starting to show, though likely far from ripe. There was a Krogan nervously looking over a counter at the building surrounded by the plants. He spotted Drack, eyes going wide, and releasing a held in breath, waving us through as he opened a door, getting us inside.

"Drack, sir! You're here!" he exclaimed.

"Settle down, Hark," Drack stated calmly.

"Sorry. This is just more excitement than I'm used to," Hark raised his arms defensively.

"Transport is headed straight to one of Elaaden's moons. You need to take your ship. Nothing we've got has stealth."


"I... Had the security system off while I was transferring a new sample, and well...they snuck in from the far side," Hark explained meekly. "Right now, as far as Morda knows, Vorn took the transport for a sample run. I didn't tell her otherwise," Hark whispered.

"If she finds out what happened, she'll fry your quads over a low fire," Drack warned. Hark went pale and shuddered.

"I know. Thank you so much for helping me."

"Alright, so, let's go," I stated.

"Wait, wait. I think they just landed. Yeah, coordinates on the moon. Bringing up a map... ok. Land here," he pointed to a portion of said map that did not have constructs on it. Seems there's a base out on that moon. Should be close enough to sneak in. And the moon has a breathable atmo, so
that shouldn't be a problem," Hark explained.

"Just what are we walking into?" Drack questioned.

"Group of Nexus exiles bases themselves there. Some old complex," the botanist answered.

"Exiles. Absolutely no bone to pick with the Krogan, I'm sure," Vetra muttered.

"Certainly made plenty of 'friends,' back in the mutiny," Drack grumbled. "Let's get back to the Tempest, make sure it gets passed on to Morda that something came up."

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Per my orders, the Tempest was already set for lift off from the moment we got back on board. No one bothered unsuited even a little bit, though we did begin brushing the sand off our armor and weapons. There'd be time for proper cleaning later. However, we did call for Jaal to join us and get suited up. Would help having another marksman ready.

"Kallo, stealth drive engaged?" I questioned. We hadn't bothered keeping it online that much. Hasn't been a need. But now we needed an element of surprise.

"Affirmative. All emissions are being captured and stored," Kallo confirmed.

"Good. Let's go in quiet," I stated.

"Until it's time to start shooting, right?" Drack asked.

"Yes, until it's time to start shooting," I chuckled.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We climbed down from the ridgeline to the front of whatever this place used to be. There were lights placed outside, as well as the facility. And it was raining. A much better way to clean off our weapons, I must say. The facility was built on two separate sides of a chasm, bridges connecting them down the length of it.

"This place is a dump," Drack remarked, sizing the place over.

"Well with a pirate hideout, who's surprised?" Vetra retorted.

"Then you've been hanging around the wrong pirates. Not Omega or the low to mid-tier shit. Talking Blue Suns or Eclipse, and a few upper middle that still had rules that I ran with. Now they know the proper way to have a hideout," Drack explained.

"You were a pirate, Drack?" Jaal questioned, some surprise.

"Look, kid, Krogan are built for fighting. And when your species has been demilitarized, and there's a booming market for mercenaries in a lawless region of the Galaxy, like Terminus was, you go with it. For what it's worth, my groups more than half the time raided other pirates, 'cause Terminus was that full of em. And when we came across civvies, they still left with their ship and lives," Drack explained. "Not proud of it, but the reason most of clan Nakmor and the other stragglers joined the Initiative was so that we didn't have to do that shit anymore." Jaal seemed satisfied with the answer, and remained quiet. Drack returned to looking over the facility, and
scoffed. "Don't even have a look out at the back door."

"Most people wouldn't complain," I remarked.

"Be nice to have some kind of challenge. It's the least they could do, making us come all the way out here to kick their sorry asses," Drack retorted, a grin beginning to form.

"Over there, is that the missing transport?" Jaal pointed to the distance. A ship of the same make we saw earlier at the far side by a landing pad. The ship being attached to some docking clamps.

"Yeah, that's it," Drack nodded. The seed vault better still be on board.

"And if it's not?" Vetra questioned. He glanced back at the Turian.

"Then I tear this place, and everyone in it, apart until we find it," Drack growled. Never seen the old man this passionate about anything. Well, this is his people we're talking about. He stood and began moving towards the facility. The others remained kneeled behind me.

"It's a plan," I remarked, standing and following him. I could see pirates on a balcony above. Three, all with their backs turned to us, helmets off. I nodded at Jaal and we took aim with our rifles. Counted down, and pulled the trigger. Two heads exploded, the other, an Asari, panicking as another round found its way into her skull.

"Intruders!" a voice yelled out.

"These idiots are barely worth the ammo," Drack grumbled. He stormed forward just making it to the side of the entrance door before pirates began running out. He waited for them to pass by, before stepping behind them, and activating a flamethrower. It engulfed all the pirates in fire, just as they began shooting at the rest of us, and the rain did little to douse their flames. They screamed in pain, and we put them down mercifully. "Shouldn't have jacked our transport. I've had better fights in my sleep," Drack muttered, and then spit on one of the corpses.

"I'm sure things will pick up. They always pick up," Vetra muttered.

"Humph. Yeah. Speaking of picking up, what do you think about that Matriarch?" Drack asked.

"You're still going on about that?" Vetra exclaimed. "It's a scam! The oldest scam in the book! Hardly anyone even uses it anymore because NO ONE falls for it! You don't give credits to someone you don't know on the extranet asking for credits, so they can access a stash of credits they supposedly have!"

"Wait wait wait wait, you got the ol' Nigerian prince asking for money to take his country back from a usurper scam?" I laughed.

"No idea what Nigeria is, but yeah, exactly what Drack got," Vetra continued, exasperated.

"Seems legit to me… could be a good opportunity," Drack mumbled.

"It's not an opportunity at all! It's a scam!" Vetra repeated. Drack just continued to grumble as we moved along. We began crossing one of the bridges over the chasm, Drack's eyes lit up with recognition.

"Ore refinery. Been ages since I've seen something like this."

"Makes sense. This moon has a wealth of materials. We mined it before the Kett came. Became too
risky to continue transporting from here," Jaal explained. We were about halfway across when we got some comm static.

"Mic check, anyone leave theirs on?" I asked.

"Pathfinder, that signal came from an outside source. I will attempt to clear it up," SAM informed. I just shrugged in response as we continued. We passed through a door, looking out to the left, as the right was just a wall. There were Angara mulling about some crates, and a Human with the hair on the side of his head shaved, leaving only the top slicked back. And he had diagonally cut through his sideburns. An… odd look. One of the Angara saw us, eyes going wide. How the hell did they not already know we were here?

"Aroane! We've got a problem!" Aroane? He stood, sending orders to his men, getting their asses in gear.

"Get it together! Stop them!" he ordered, taking cover. The Angara struggled to reach their weapons and opened fire, so we dived into cover, crouched along a support for the roof. I lifted my Sweeper above my head, blindly pointing the barrel towards them and pulled the trigger. I doubted I hit anything, but it seemed to get a few heads down.

"Wait, did I hear Aroane?" Drack questioned rhetorically. Aroane stood out of cover, firing a pistol at us.

"I heard it too. Think Spender's involved?" Vetra suggested.

"It would explain how they got the codes to the transport," Drack growled. "Aroane!" Drack yelled out. "We're gonna have a friendly little chat, you and I!" Aroane looked scared now, and started staggering back, firing one last shot as he turned and ran. And that provided a distraction to the pirates that we needed to engage. I opened fire as Vetra rolled out from behind the support and onto a knee, sweeping her Cyclone along to take care of them. Aroane had managed to get out of sight, unfortunately.

"Someone's holding a grudge," I mused.

"Oh, I'll teach him a thing or two about how to hold it," Drack remarked. A pair of Adhi charged us and a sniper opened fire. Drack was only too eager to take out the Adhi, and with the lack of gunfire being concentrated at us, Jaal and I paired our rounds to take out the sniper. We moved up, and now we had a line of enemies dug in firing. I popped a quick barrier as we dove into cover once more. "About time they got more organized," Drack laughed.

"You get too happy when people shoot at you," I muttered. Drack simply laughed some more. An Asari began pushing, a barrier in front of her. My counter? I charged a shockwave and launched it. It broke through the barrier with just enough force to stagger her, then Peebee followed it up with a throw with enough force to slam her into a wall, leaving a sizeable dent, and we didn't see her get back up. A Turian seemed to be coordinating the movements of the pirates, I could just barely hear him calling out orders. Drack must have heard it to, as the moment he stood to fire on us himself, Drack fired a flak round which appeared right in front of him before he could even react, and it shredded his torso and a few exiles next to him. With the loss of leadership, the remaining pirates fell quickly. We got the comm static again.

"Must be a lot of interference down here," Peebee murmured.

"Hey! Aroane! Find your quads yet?" Drack shouted out. I could even hear it echo in the chasm, yet no response. We pushed into the next store room, a handful of exiles scattered about inside, and
completely uncoordinated. And they were doing so well before…

"Come on! The boss said to hold them here!" One shouted. Drack proceeded to blast him in the head from mid-range with his Ruzad.

"How about you learn how to aim first?" he remarked. He stepped out of cover and charged an exile down with us, rather than the stair case or catwalks above. She staggered back, her gun lowering in fear as the bayonet was sent right through her skull, and pulled back, her body falling limp. I saw rounds impact his shields, and then his shields break followed by a round in the shoulder, bouncing off his armor. "Come on you can do better than that!" he yelled as he shot back at the exile on the catwalk. "Fucking pitiful," he murmured with a smirk as the room was now clear.

"Drack, why did you leave the colony?" Jaal asked. I suppose the timing comes from Drack being as passionate about this fight compared to others.

"Kept tripping over young ones asking for war stories," he answered. Then, he gave a different explanation. "Morda had things in hand and didn't need an old relic like me around. So, I set out to hunt Kett." Not sure why, but it still doesn't feel like that's the full answer. We continued up a set of stairs, two exiles popping out of cover and ALMOST surprising us. But we had our weapons out, because we're smart, and they quickly found bullets in their heads before they could even shoot. The bridge over had apparently had its roof collapse as crates were now haphazardly thrown into a large pile, some on their sides, not even on any side, and pipes. We had to climb up to the roof of the bridge and follow along. More comm static.

"Stop hiding and fight you quadless bastards!" Drack shouted out as we came across a very messy cargo track. Looks like it used to be an automated transport area for ore. Now? Just crates everywhere. Gunfire began bouncing off our shields form a distance. But there was so much cover, we could move up, so long as we were careful, without our shields taking a single hit. Gave us moments of surprise as well, where we could take out at least one pirate at a time. And the Adhi they sent our way were next to useless. Just running in a straight line, perfect target practice. One particular pirate seemed to be a decent shot. Every time he stood, he at least hit SOMEONE's shields before they went back into cover. So, I ensured I stood for just a moment while he wasn't, an incinerate round already primed, and then locked onto his signature. I fired and took a knee just as my shields collapsed. I heard him scream as the flames engulfed him. With the combined fire of the others as my shield's recharged, another area had been cleared. More comm static, new channel.

"Hey, that's the emergency channel," Vetra noticed.

"So that means it's not an old piece of equipment," Jaal remarked.

"Hopefully SAM will have it cleared up soon. Come on, I see a path through all that… shit. Seriously, it's a fucking mess, why keep it like this?" I questioned. The way ahead was blocked by scrap and crates, all having clearly collapsed. But there was what appeared to be a metal stand blocking the way. We should be able to lift it. Least, with a Krogan. I began looking for a place to grab on when I was relatively gently shoved out of the way by a reptilian arm. Drack squatted down and took a hold, lifting it up with ease, then keeping it up with one hand while we passed through, letting the stands fall back behind him as he joined us. There was a large group of exiles moving back. Not shooting, though clearly ready to.

"They're falling back to the main building," Vetra called out.

"Like that's gonna help," Drack smirked.
"Hello? Can you hear me out there?" the comm static was no longer static. Recognition flared in Drack's eyes.

"I know that voice. It's our head botanist, Vorn," Drack muttered.

"Pathfinder! Drack? It's you!" Vorn exclaimed. "No wonder the pirates said they need reinforcements.

"Why are you here?" I questioned.

"I was on the ship doing inventory when the pirates stole it. It happened so fast I couldn't warn anyone," he explained.

"Right. Quit messing around and get down here," Drack ordered.

"I would but I had to lock myself in one of the containers to keep them away! Pretty sure they want me dead right now," Vorn warned. I heard engines warming up. Looked up, and it was the transport ship. Wouldn't be taking off just yet, but it was preparing to.

"Of course they're warming up for lift off," Drack grumbled. "We don't have time for this. We can't let them get away. Colony's doomed without the Vault on that transport."

"They're digging in. Ready for a fight?" Jaal cautioned.

"Your call, Drack. Transport or Vorn? We need to make a move," I stated. Drack glanced down, deep in thought. Grumbling. Then slammed his fist into the crate we were behind. "You know what the Colony needs, Drack. You can point us in the right direction, and we'll get it done," I reassured.

"We need the seed vault, but it's useless without the kid…" Drack murmured. Drack slammed a finger to his comm piece. "Vorn, we're headed your way." Drack turned the corner out of cover, and began storming towards… a wall? He placed an explosive charge on it and walked back to minimum safe distance. Everyone else behind me. It detonated as Drack was walking away. Cool guys don't look at explosions, huh? The wall, and the pipes behind it were blown away, revealing a catwalk below, Drack leading us along.

"That doesn't look steady," Peebee murmured.

"It'll hold," Drack stated, confidently. That view was not helped as we had to jump across gaps where the floor had fallen away.

"Pathfinder? If you don't make it in time… could you give Kesh my love, please?" Vorn requested. "Wait, what?"

"Don't be stupid, of course we'll make it in-wait, WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST SAY!?" Drack demanded. I could hear Vetra let out a whistle.

"Uh. Oh! Oooh…" Vorn stuttered. "I said love, didn't I?"

"I'm going to rescue him, and then I'm gonna kill him," Drack growled. I did my very, absolute best to not begin laughing. Peebee tried, but I could hear the giggling. Damn it, stop or you'll break all of us.

"I know what I'm gonna tease Kesh about next time I see her," Vetra chuckled.
"Uh, you do know that you no longer have room to talk shit, right? She's probably gonna know about us soon enough," I warned her.

"What makes you think that?" Vetra asked.

"1: We're clearly very, very bad at hiding it. 2: Do you know who your sister is?" I asked rhetorically.

"Yeah… almost forgot about that," Vetra sighed. We crossed the catwalk and ended up flanking a group of exiles. Since we had the drop on them, a pair of well thrown explosives surprised, and then killed the lot of them.

"Ten-thousand credits for the Krogan, dead or alive!" Aroane spoke through the loudspeakers. "I don't care what you have to do, stop them!"

"Come on, you can do better than that!" Drack shouted.

"Fifteen-thousand credits!" Aroane raised the bounty. We all laughed. We continued through the compound, up another staircase.

"You know, back in my day, Krogan asked for permission before they went in and started courting," Drack grumbled. "They didn't just hop into things without the proper clan traditions. Kids these days… no damn manners."

"Hey, so long as he makes Kesh happy, right?" Vetra retorted, I could see her smirking. She's poking the bear with a stick and she knows it.

"And she should tell me! Yeah, I may not think Vorn is great. Small, weak, not a fighter, but I can suck it up if she's happy, and he treats my ru'shan right!" Drack exclaimed.

"Fair enough, eh?" I shrugged. We went opened the next door, Aroane was there, along with several exiles, already opening fire. We dove into cover behind some large crates, waiting for our chance.

"Aroane! Get over here so we can talk!" Drack called out.

"I don't think so, Krogan! Stealing your transport was just step one. We're going to destroy everything you care about!" he shouted back over the gunfire.

"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," Drack trailed off. Think that's more than one, old fart. "So, a lot of things are getting destroyed here, actually-AND ALL OF THEM ARE YOURS!" There ya go. Drack stood as he finished, rounds were pinging off his shields and yet he fired. And fired. And fired. Each round killing an exile as he returned to cover. Aroane ran. The rest of us now able to open fire. "We find Vorn. Then the transport. Then I deal with Aroane," Drack growled.

"So, Vorn is the head botanist? Sounds young," I remarked.

"Kid's real good at making things grow," Drack muttered. "But he has no survival instincts. At all. Miracle he made it to adulthood." We finished off the rest of the exiles Aroane ran from.

"You're all useless! Twenty-five thousand credits!" Aroane shouted into the loudspeakers.

"You offer a bunch of idiots already fighting at their best even more money against people way better trained, it's not gonna help your odds," Vetra remarked.
"Vorn, update," Drack requested.

"They're just shooting at the door. So far, it's not doing much," he answered. "Oh, I think you're getting closer. I could hear explosions." We continued up another staircase, the signal was close now. "I'm in the container on the right. Wait, my right, your left," Vorn informed. We found a store room with just one crate inside, two pirates just shooting at the door. We very easily neutralized them both. "Drack, sir? Pathfinder?" Vorn called from inside the crate, banging on it. Drack pressed his fist on a button on the side of the crate, and Vorn fell flat on his face. He was wearing an outfit that was mostly a dark red with a yellow trim, and he rolled onto his back, grinning. His skin was a blue tint, a clear youth in his eyes, and his forehead plate had been painted with a yellow design on the top and sides. "Hi guys!"

"Let's go," Drack sighed, he and I offering a hand to him. He stood, and turned to way we came in from. A look of panic washed over his face.

"Watch out!" he called as he dove in front of Drack. A shot ran out, striking him in the side, he grunted in pain as he hit the ground. One of the damn exiles was still alive, holding a carnifex.

"No!" Drack roared, shooting the exile in the chest with his Ruzad, then ensured she was dead. I moved to help Vorn. He was bleeding, the wound hadn't exited, but it would take a lot more than a wound to the side to kill a Krogan. With or without medical attention. Vetra handed me a first aid kit. While I sure as hell ain't a medic, dad ensured my sister and I knew how to extract a bullet. Normally, I'd do something like wrap some cloth around the wound, but Krogan regeneration should handle that. I took the proper tools out of the kit, already sterilized, gently poked them in, even with his grunts of pain, and gently pulled the bullet out, the shard of metal it was. I threw it to the side and put the tools back in their sealed section of the kit to be sterilized again later.

"You ok?" I asked Vorn. He let out a breath.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks, wound should heal soon," Vorn nodded, still grunting in pain. Drack turned back, angry, pointing a finger at Vorn.

"What were you thinking? Why would you do something like that?" Drack demanded.

"He was going to shoot you," Vorn defended, surprised at Drack's reaction.

"I have shields damnit! And even if I didn't, this armor isn't for nothing! Either way, the colony can survive just fine without me!" Drack exclaimed. "But without you and what's in your fool head, there's no future for our people!" Drack turned and began storming to another wall. What was he planning? Vorn shook his head and rushed to his feet, not even clutching the side.

"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 lot because you lived it! The stories you tell, those are our inspiration to do better!" Vorn shouted at Drack. Drack grumbled, not turning from the wall. Vorn threw his hands into the air in annoyance. "I need to get some stuff before we go. You talk to him."

"You do tend to get a little reckless in combat when things get personal," I remarked, making the connection.

"I won't let ANYTHING happen to my clan, Scott," Drack muttered.

"And you won't be much good to them dead," I retorted.

"Quads, not you too. We don't have time for this. We have a transport to get," Drack grumbled.
"I'm ready to go," Vorn called out, returning from the crate, holding a green fruit.

"You. You stay right here. I'm not telling Kesh you died like an idiot," Drack ordered. Drack stormed to a wall in the other storage room. We just glanced at one another for just what he was planning. He studied the wall. "Yeah, this'll do." He began stepping back, slowly. Drack… are you? He was at the door to the storage room we found Vorn in. He stopped, dug his feet into the ground. "Incoming!" he shouted. Drack no… He broke out in a sprint. DRACK STOP! He slammed his shoulder into the wall and broke right through, collapsing the entire panel. There were two exiles who likely just shit themselves that fell to the floor in surprise, their backs to Drack. He stood straight and laughed heartily. "Hi." He blasted both to pieces with his shotgun.

"Uh, Drack, the seed vault is still on the transport. I hit the locks before they caught me," Vorn informed. He was following us, though stayed in cover a ways behind us. All we had left was a loading bay with plenty of exiles and a cargo ramp up the landing pads and docking clamps themselves.

"Good thinking with those locks, Vorn," Drack actually complimented him.

"Thank you, sir," Vorn responded as Drack ran up and smashed his hammer into the head of a lone exile stupid enough to take cover five yards from our door, and ten yards ahead of everyone else.

"Don't get too cocky," Drack grunted. "You still got caught."

"Yes sir…" Vorn murmured. Using our rifles, Jaal and I took down another pair of exiles. I don't think many more are left in here.

"Thirty-thousand credits! The bounty is now at thirty-thousand credits!" Aroane shouted into the loudspeaker yet again. We killed another pair of exiles. Think two were left. "Forty-thousand! Seriously! Please! Why aren't they dead yet?" Aroane shouted, obviously nervous.

"Ah, the cries of a desperate man," Vetra remarked.

"Yeah, well, it kinda sucks to be him right now," Drack replied. I cracked a smirk at the casual remark of his.

"Sure does," Peebee chuckled. The last of the exiles fell and we ran to the cargo elevator, immediately hitting the controls for it to take us up. The transport was still warming up, so we still had a chance.

"Vorn, override the controls, try and keep those docking clamps shut. We'll cover you," I ordered.

"Got it," Vorn nodded. The cargo elevator reached the top and we formed a line in front of Vorn, and covered him over to the console. It was already very well protected, back behind several crates. And anyone trying to get to him would need to cross through a choke point we could easily defend from crates already placed along the landing pad. So, that's exactly where we moved to set up. Vetra with her tech armor glowing, her Cyclone on its bipod on her crate, Peebee with her biotics flaring, Jaal, Drack, and I all locked and loaded.

"Never mind the bounty, just kill them all!" Aroane exclaimed. The fuck, taking away the bounty now? The exiles began charging. Trickling in, more like. A single human pirate with a pair of Adhi. Slaughtered. A Turian straggling behind? Riddled with bullets. An Asari with another Adhi? Only lasted longer because of her barrier. Oooh, this time, a human pirate got smart, and went behind cover farther away. How clever, get him a metal. Jaal shot him in the head, the energy round burning through and melting half the head. A laser sight flickered onto the crate I was
against for a moment, and I ducked my head as a round zipped by. Sniper to the left. I called it out to Jaal as the others focused on another splintered wave of exiles, and we put an end to his marksmanship. No other exiles came to confront us.

"Think their letting up?" Peebee theorized.

"That or we killed em all," Drack grumbled. A shuttle flew by, and its doors opened. I could see a pair of pirates, armed with Avengers, at the door. Likely another of the same at the other end. Not sure if anything else could fit in a tiny shuttle like that. Then rounds impacted our shields from both sides. I just saw more common thugs for the moment though. With biotics, rifles, or even explosives, they were still going down like flies. The last exile fell just as two large metallic constructs crashed onto the landing pad. Their gyroscopic laser sights flickering on, and they began to stand.

"Great, Hydras," I muttered.

"Ah, they'll be broken soon enough," Drack reassured. Jaal and I focused fire on the gyroscopes before they could get a missile lock, and thankfully, it worked. Their missiles would be next to useless now, but they still had their main cannon, and they were closing in. And, closing in on each other. I looked at Vetra, and nodded. She primed the particular explosive and raised her arm to aim it, and fired. A direct hit on the left Hydra, obliterating its central body and its left arm became embedded in the body of the other, while also blowing off the arm it used for its main cannon. The arm must have killed the pilot, as the mech fell down and onto its side.

"Hell yeah!" Vetra laughed. As did we all.

"Over here, guys!" Vorn called out. We quickly returned to him at the console he had been working the override on. He stood, and we heard the engines deactivating, the hum fading away. We had been distracted by the noise, looking up at the ship, so clearly, we must not have seen Aroane slink from…. Wherever he was, behind Vorn, and extend a pistol. Though that, I heard. I turned just to see Aroane there, holding a Carnifex to the back of Vorn's… hump.

"Don't move," he demanded. We were all facing him with our weapons raised, aimed.

"You…" Drack growled. I could see the snarl on his lips.

"I'm taking this transport," he stated, his hand shaking slightly. Not sure if that was the rain, or sweat trickling down his face.

"You don't know what you're starting," I warned.

"Oh, I know, Pathfinder. Don't you worry," he smirked. Vorn's head straightened and I saw him pull that fruit he grabbed earlier from a pocket. But Aroane didn't notice.

"We're not the one you need to worry about right now," Drack remarked. Vorn crushed the fruit in his hand and a kind of gas spewed out.


"Just wait." he coughed again. "Oh my god," he pinched his nose. His gun was lowered, and he fell to the ground, still coughing. He seemed to pass out and we moved to secure him.

"Wait, wait, stay back," Vorn warned. Drack holding his hand out to stop me, and I held my hand out to stop Vetra. Collectively, everyone was stopped. "Don't come any closer. It'll affect anyone who isn't Krogan. It's pretty strong stuff."
"Time to take out the trash," Drack chuckled, and strode forward. He began by throwing Aroane's Carnifex off the landing pad and down into the chasm below. We couldn't even see the bottom, what with the mist. He then grabbed Aroane by the ankle and dragged him to the edge.

"My first live specimen test. Doesn't last long. But it sure works fast," Vorn grinned. Drack now held Aroane's ankle up by his head, so that Aroane was dangling, upside down, over the edge. Soon, his eyes fluttered open, his mouth taking in air. He groaned as he orientated himself, turning his head slightly. He looked down into the chasm. He whimpered, trying to reach out for the ledge that was so close, but out of arm's reach. I kneeled down in front of him.


"Did you really just say that?" Drack questioned rhetorically.

"No, no, no! Wait! Don't let me go!" Aroane cried.

"Well, Drack is the one you need to convince. Personally, you haven't done anything to me. But, Drack, you say this shit head has targeted Krogan before?" I asked.

"Yep. Only reason he lived is because he ran like a bitch. Honestly, I didn't even know he was in the Initiative until after the mutiny," Drack answered.

"Oof, you see? Now that, I don't like," I shook my head in a pouty face. "Now, still, while you're useless to us," Aroane began to cut me off. "Don't bother. I don't need you or anything you know to accomplish my goals. Any of them. We can get to Spender on our own. And yet, personally, I'd let you go for a second chance. Well, I just wouldn't kill you. What I would do, however, is this. You've wronged the Krogan. Only seems right that the Krogan decide how to deal with you," I explained, making a show of not having much interest. "So, I'm not the one you need to convince. Convince him," I gestured my head towards Drack. "I'm not his boss."

"No, no, no, no!" Aroane pleaded as Drack formed a toothy grin. "I'm sorry! I-I swear, there ARE things I can tell you! Please! You can't do this!"

"I can do whatever I want to do," Drack spoke quietly.

"No! No! No! Ple-" Drack released Aroane's ankle. "NOOOOOOOOOOO..." We heard him scream as he plummeted down, and down into the chasm below. I could faintly make out a support bar down there, and Aroane's silhouette getting closer and closer, Ouch, his body slammed against it and went spinning off to the side, a solid DUNK echoing its way back up.

"Well, that's that," I remarked. Drack chuckled for a good five seconds as he walked back to Vorn.

"Let's get this transport back to where it belongs." We entered the colony transport, notifying the Tempest to simply return to its previous landing zone on Elaaden, and that we'd return to the colony. Drack and I were in the bridge with Vorn as he began lift off once the engines had warmed up.

"You're not expendable, Drack," Vorn repeated gently. Drack sighed.

"We are NOT having this conversation."


"I hate you all. Let me be old and cranky in peace already," Drack grumbled. Vorn and I both chuckled at the old man. He left the bridge and I followed, into the hold where everyone else was.
"Thanks for helping with this, Scott. Of all the stupid things…"

"Suppose that's frontier life for ya," I grinned.

"At least we don't have to worry about Aroane anymore," Drack smirked.

"I think gravity took care of him for us, yeah," I remarked.

"Heh, yeah, it sure did. Can't wait till we get to Spender as well."

"We'll take him down as well, don't worry," I reassured. "But, since we're trying to improve Nexus-Krogan relations, think it should be non-lethal?" I suggested. Drack sighed.

"Yeah, yeah I know. Common expression for Krogan though. Say all the shit we are going to do, but don't do as much or any of it. Helps it from bottling up," he shrugged. "Look, kid, I know you may not agree with what I did, but thanks for not standing in the way. You don't know the shit he's tried to pull. He wouldn't have changed, and I needed to end his threat to my people," Drack stated calmly, quietly. Completely serious and respectful.

"Like I told him, Drack. I'm not your boss. I don't sign any paychecks. Sure, in the heat of combat, my orders are orders and that's final, but that wasn't combat. I may chart the ship's course, but I don't chart what you all do," I reassured.

"You're a real good kid, Scott," he grinned. "Vetra got lucky with ya." He patted me on the shoulder. He sighed again. "Listen, kid. You've been around me long enough to realize this...The fact is, I'm a relic, a symbol of the past-when Krogan were bent on destroying themselves. Fighting, killing... it's all I know. For my clan, for Kesh, to have a real future? Maybe it's best I'm not part of it..." Well, shit, that's fatalistic. Does he not see how much he means to Vetra and Sid? I have. And I've heard from Vetra just how much happier Kesh has seemed knowing that Drack is in good hands. And there's what Vorn said.

"Don't talk like that, Drack. Your clan needs you. Vetra and Sid need you, the crew needs you, hell, I need you. Plenty of shit you can teach me, teach ALL of us. Besides gramps, you've grown on us. We like having you around. And..." I began to whisper. "You know what Sid and Vetra have been through. Haven't you seen how much you mean to them? And, hell, gramps. Your own granddaughter. Vetra tells me she's never seen Kesh happier than after you first came back to the Nexus with me," I reinforced.

"You say that now..." Drack sighed. Then shook his head. "Just remember who you're encouraging." It was a joke, but it still felt like a veiled joke. Still, I could see the look in his eyes. He had a lot to think about.
The transport arrived back at New Tuchanka safe and sound. Vorn's wound had healed all on its own, and Hark was incredibly relieved to have everything back. Before finally going to see Morda, Vorn asked me a favor. One that left Jaal smiling, Peebee and Vetra cooing teasingly, Drack rolling his eyes, and myself, resisting the urge to laugh. Vorn had named a flowering plant after Kesh, and wanted me to give it to her for him. It was kinda cute, just… very not Krogan. What's more, he had a message to go with it. "This flower couldn't grow on Tuchanka, but has a new life here. Just like us." I don't know if this is a never before seen side of the Krogan, or if Vorn is a mutant.

We knew we wouldn't have room for Jaal in the Nomad, so Vorn was happy to arrange a shuttle to bring him back to the Paradise, and thus the Tempest, as thanks, and that Jaal could wait in the back room of the botany area to avoid any trouble with the Krogan. Certainly not that he'd start anything, but just in case there's any particularly unfriendly ones who come by. Peebee offered to hang back with him until either the shuttle was ready, or we were leaving the colony. I think I might have embarrassed her a bit with my joke that it would be fine, so long as the two of them kept their clothes on. I knew it wouldn't have embarrassed her on the ship, but perhaps that people who hardly knew either of them had THAT as the first bit they heard of their relationship.

We entered the throne room, a cavern that had a stair case carved into a rock platform, and some other rocks arranged into a throne. Morda was standing in front of it, giving orders to her people. She clearly saw us enter, and the lone eye looking at us narrowed. Well, great sign. We began to approach, but a Krogan male stopped us. Gun was lowered, but clearly urging us to stop.

"Ravanor Brenk?" I asked, figuring that may be why.

"Hey," Morda called out. She stepped to the edge of her platform, peering down at us. Brenk shook his head to the side.

"Find me later near the fighting pit," he whispered.

"Nexus! I'm the one you talk to around here," Morda snarled. She was wearing armor. A tan color on the shoulders and chest, black everywhere else. She had an adornment of bones sticking outwards around the collar of her armor, and her forehead plate was painted a tan color same as her armor in a pattern that likely symbolizes her authority.

"Take it your Morda," I remarked, keeping my tone neutral.

"I'm Nakmor Morda. Overlord of the Krogan in Heleus," she corrected. Overlord. Not a term that makes me feel too great. She began stepping down to be face to face with us. Drack made sure he was right at my side.

"Overlord?" The question itself sounds like I'm asking for clarification. But the tone implied I was asking about that term itself. Well, perhaps it sounds more ornate in the Krogan language.

"Drack. Kesh said you had a new job," Morda turned her attention to the old man.

"Didn't tell me you did," Drack stated coolly in reply. She turned her attention back to me.

"And you're the celebrated Pathfinder from the Hyperion, found at last," Morda spoke both...
dramatically and mockingly.

"Scott Ryder," I introduced.

"This is thrilling," Morda sounded anything but. Closer to bored out of her mind. "I've never stood so close to a Pathfinder before… mostly because the Krogan never got one. Welcome to New Tuchanka…"

"You know, I have this really weird feeling that you don't really mean that," I mused.

"You're right. I don't. You weren't there when the council species on the Nexus banded together to screw over the Krogan. Again!" Morda exclaimed. "New galaxy, same shit."

"You're right, I wasn't there. Which is why I'd like you to give me, personally, the benefit of the doubt. Hear us out. Drack can tell you about how much of a pain in the ass I've been for Tann, how I'm on the cusp of exposing Spender, et cetera," I requested. Morda scoffed, not believing.

"Why are you here, Pathfinder? To see what a successful colony looks like?" Morda questioned.

"We have successful colonies now. Sure you've heard. Don't get me wrong, it's impressive what you'd done here, especially without the Remnant Vault being online. Now that it is, only gonna get easier for you now," I answered.

"The what?" Morda continued questioning.

"Ancient technological crap that changes the environment. Seen the shit all over the cluster. Before coming to the Colony, we activated one on Elaaden. Temperature is going down, humidity is going up," Drack explained.

"And you activated it to try and get on my good side. Your manipulation is so transparent," Morda retorted suspiciously.

"No advice for you. No thanks. No regret. Watch, the Krogan will thrive, and the Initiative will pay. Get out of my face before I smash it," Morda threatened. Drack shook his head back and forth.

"What a treat, absolute pleasure to meet you, Morda," I bowed dramatically, like I did with Sloane. She stared me down as I casually turned to walk away, the others following.

"Morda's a hard ass, but that surprised even me. Not good," Drack muttered.

"She said the Initiative will pay. That's us. That's scary," Vetra whispered.

"Shit…" I mumbled. Drack began leading us to the fighting pits to meet with Brenk. Down deeper into the Colony.

"Drack ya old wreck! What are you doing back here!" A voice greeted. A flare of recognition crossed the old warrior's eyes, and a grin. He turned to face the voice. The Krogan's plate was black and rugged, his skin an older beaten gray like Drack's, and even close to as old. They clasped each other's forearms, laughing.

"Scott, this is Grot, an old friend. Practically built this whole place," Drack introduced. "Don't let the fact that he's Urdnot bother you. He can't help it."

"What do you think of the colony? Pretty great, huh?" Grot asked me, ignoring the jab.

"It's… rustic," I answered, having come up with a decent term.
"That's what we're going for. Rustic," Grot chuckled.

"How do you know Drack?" I questioned.

"We mined together back when our quads had barely dropped." Well shit, they're both old.

"Now I just can't seem to get rid of him," Drack laughed.

"You seem at home here, Drack," I remarked. The old man had been in a much better mood since we came here first. Though, less so after the meeting with Morda.

"And you're not getting any younger," Grot continued. "Ever think of retiring?"

"The day you dig my grave, old timer," Drack smiled.

"Sad honor that'll be," Grot smirked.

"So, Drack, mind giving me some context? Why tease Grot with the Urdnot bit?" I asked.

"Remember that old friend I told you about? Urdnot Wrex? That clan has always been large, and Wrex's story, and why I made a joke like that, are virtually one and the same. Wrex could be a softy by Krogan standards. Brutal son of a bitch by yours, though. Back after the Rebellions he took the younger side of Clan Urdnot from his dad in advocated to change tradition, reconcile, not revenge. His dad, Jarrod, was a warlord set in his ways. Wrex was making progress too. But Jarrod called him for a meeting, try and change his mind. Didn't work, so he ambushed him. In the hollows. Sacred grounds where fighting isn't permitted. Wrex killed his father, and gave up. Became a merc for all those years. Ah but then, remember when that Shepard guy became a Spectre? Wrex signed on as part of his team. I shit you not, but somehow, this Human INSPIRED that son of a bitch to go back to Tuchanka, and try again. He felt friendly with a Turian C-sec officer, felt like this little Quarian girl was a niece to him, it was so mushy," Drack laughed. "So, he goes back to Tuchanka, takes control back from his dumbass brother, Wreav, and tries again. Seemed to be making progress, good progress before we left."

"So, if things were looking up, why DID you leave?" I asked. Grot and Drack looked at each other and sighed.

"We may have liked what Wrex was doing, but… a lot of Krogan are cynical. We expect that either someday, someone would stab Wrex in the back and bring em back to the old ways, or that when he did unite everyone, the council would shit themselves and start killing Krogan," Grot answered sadly.

"Well… I hope the cynicism was wrong. For once…" I muttered.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Brenk was not full of great news. Morda's been hunting down the drive core of the Remnant starship. He told us she wants to use it to build a bomb. SAM confirmed that it was very possible. Figuring it couldn't hurt, we picked up a few favors before heading to investigate the crash. The Shaman of the clan wanted help dealing with a clan feud brewing. Between a woman named Varka, and a man named Gren. How we would help? A rite of union. Simply shove them into a ring with a beast, make them fight as a team. But what would the beast be? That's where we come in. He gave us a lure to attract a beast. It would either be a stray Kett Fiend, or an Eiroch. Probably just latch the lure onto the Nomad and drive back to the Colony with it following us, and they'd take care of the rest. Additionally, a Krogan Geneticist lost a terminal filled with research from a
Krogan doctor, Doctor Okeer. Specifically, about Krogan Physiology and the Genophage. Should help the Krogan cure themselves of the Genophage. Which, here in Andromeda, they need. Even with the slow genetic mutation. They sent us the nav-point of the Junkers who took it. Finally, a Krogan, one very different than the others we met, asked if we could help find an Angaran woman he was friends with, and to my own perception, on the brink of being more than friends. She was a salvage runner who used to come by and spend time with him, but one day she stopped coming.

Peebee re-joined us, a shuttle carrying Jaal back to the Paradise, and we filled her in as we began heading to the Derelict. We'd do the other favors after the drive core was secure. We began searching the south end of the starship to find a way in, managing to find a gap in a low point against a massive sand dune, the entrance more than big enough for the Nomad. Peebee was already giddy. It brought us into one of the 'wings,' though it didn't seem like the interior of the ship itself, as there was sunlight coming from the center. There were pockets of scourge energy scattered, and exiles beginning to shoot. The exiles themselves were scattered, their fire unfocused as we parked the Nomad and began taking them down. We were not disappointed to see a Remnant turret in the distance obliterate an exile firing at us. Depending on the range of those turrets, we may just be able to take down the turrets from a distance without getting shot at ourselves.

With their attention divided, the exiles fell quickly, and the turrets weren't shooting at us. I took out my Black Widow, and it took two full clips each to destroy the turrets in our range. Fortunately, Vetra still has plenty of clips. We took the Nomad down a side route, but coming to an area too narrow for the Nomad. But the gunfire that greeted us told us there were exiles, and maybe the way we need to go. I primed a grenade and counted to three before throwing it, hearing an exile cry out in fear before it detonated. Drack charged right in, firing off a pair of shotgun rounds.

"Nothing down here, go back, head in deeper," Drack shouted. Ugh, hope this place isn't that much of a maze to find the core. We pushed forward in the Nomad, finding something more promising. There were ramps leading down into the ship itself, handfuls of exiles not eager to see us, evidenced by the bullets pinging off the Nomad shields. Fortunately, once again, their attention was divided between us and Remnant. I watched as a Breacher wrapped its arms around a screaming exile as a panel in its front opened, revealing a collection of gears or some other method of shredding. The exile resisted, but it wasn't enough, and the Breacher pulled the exile's face into the gears, shredding through the armor and their head, and the Breacher released the limp body as another exile destroyed it. We opened fire on the exiles first, and being pressed between a rock and a hard place, once more, they fell. The Remnant, already largely damaged, didn't put up much resistance themselves. At the end of the room, there was a door, and a mining drill hooked up to its side, currently offline, and a few Krogan corpses surrounding it. Fortunately for us, there was an active console just in front of said door. Shit, Remdoku, needs some glyphs. But that's hardly an issue, scanned to find the wires, led me to the glyphs, Peebee and I solved it. The door opened, and we ventured deeper into the ship.

Another door opened for us, the room was slanted slightly, likely thanks to structural damage when the ship crashed. There were… poles still faintly glowing green, and even electricity sparking between them in the dark corridor. It was significantly cooler in the ship, almost as if there were environmental controls active, like an AC unit. Peebee was absolutely mesmerized. Scanning everything with her Omni-tool, even taking pictures with it. There was another Remnant console at the edge of a gap, another platform on the other side of said gap. The console was activated, and a bridge began to form in front of us as we traversed the gap.

"So, theories about the ship?" I pondered.

"Like why it crashed? Guessing the scourge fried the guidance or… well, everything," Peebee remarked.
"But what about the crew? Not seeing any bodies," Vetra brought up.

"And where did they come from? Ship this big, probably not from Heleus. If they were native, I'd think we'd be finding more worlds with more ruins. As in, massive abandoned cities," Drack remarked.

"You're right… Goddess, all these questions…" Peebee murmured. We continued following the path, seemed like this might have been maintenance back when the ship was active. There were more of those pillars, but damaged. Smoking with a kind of electrical cloud. I could feel my hair standing on end from the static. We came to another door and… I felt a bit devilish. I grinned to myself, as Vetra came to my side, and I reached my hand around and to the back of her head, without her knowing. ZAP! Damn, enough charge that I could hear it, and my hand had yet to even touch her.

"FUCKING HELL!" Vetra exclaimed after an immediate, partial scream. I began laughing, and my hair was no longer standing on end. "Oh you son of a bitch," Vetra muttered, and immediately jabbed her own finger out at me. While my eyes were closed from laughing. Oh but they opened quickly when I felt the static hit. I stood a lot straighter.

"FUCKING SHIT FUCK!" I exclaimed, beginning to laugh again after the immediate… shock factor, went away. Yeah, an odd string of curses. Peebee and Drack began laughing to, but Vetra continued to glare at me. With the ghost of a smirk forming.

"Scared the shit out of me… jackass," Vetra muttered, before starting to laugh herself. I noticed Peebee beginning to reach her hand out to Drack.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Asari," Drack warned without even looking at her. Her hand immediately returned to her side. The laughter subsiding, we continued through the door. A very large chasm in a large, empty room. And a console. The console brought up many large, glowing pillars in a steady bridge for us. And then some fell all the way back down.

"Well… watch your step," Peebee muttered.

"If the killer bots are working as well as the bridge, I won't complain," Vetra remarked as we began crossing the gaps in the bridge. Maybe this is engineering. We crossed the bridge, a console again, and a large, bulkhead type door ahead.

"Thinking this is the drive core," I suggested, and interface with the console. The bulkhead opened and…

"Nothing?" Peebee exclaimed.

"I can confirm that this is indeed engineering. The drive core should be present," SAM stated.

"Shit, it's not here, so someone took it. Morda? Someone else?" I questioned.

"The ship has to be cracked somewhere. No way they came the way we did," Vetra mused.

"That's what we get for coming in the right way," Drack grumbled. "Morda still had people trying to drill their way in, gotta be scavs."

"Then let's find em."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder
We had found the entrance the scavs used, it was marked by flares they had left behind. Left a nice trail back out. SAM brought the Nomad to us, and tracked down the drive core's radioactive signature. To a Remnant site just up a dune. We got there, there were crates stacked around. And two fiends. We managed to fight them off, starting our fight from a distance to take them down relatively quickly. Scanned the crates, and the damn thing wasn't there.

"Of all the shitty luck," I grumbled. "You know, sometimes, I think I'm unlucky. In general. Come on, you can be honest. Might even be genetic, right?"

"You should talk to Lexi about that one," Drack chuckled.

"What, you uh… haven't gotten lucky, recently? At all?" Peebee teased.

"Nope," Vetra answered for me. I shook my head, chuckling.

"Huh, well, then guess you are actually lucky then," Peebee joked.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?" Vetra retorted, laughing. Against my own better judgement, I laughed too. "And why are you laughing? You don't agree with her, do you? Maybe I'll just help you keep this lucky streak going?" Vetra playfully threatened me.

"Not lucky! I'm not lucky!" I exclaimed through my laughter.

"Damn kids…" Drack muttered, shaking his head, a smirk on his face. We continued hunting the signature. This time, to a shuttle crashed a ways down south. It was still burning. Krogan and exile bodies, a firefight. According to Drack, these Krogan weren't with Morda. The drive core was once again, nowhere to be found, and SAM had unknowingly been sarcastic. A data pad had also survived the crash, that it be taken to their ops center, high priority, high security cargo. And they wrote down their password. "Password123."

"Password. Why would you ever write down your password?" Drack muttered, confused by the idiocy.

"Not to mention it's one of the most common passwords out there," Vetra remarked.

"Damn idiots," Drack grumbled. The data pad had coordinates. And would you look at that? The Flophouse!

"I'm not leading an assault there without the whole team," I murmured. I keyed my Omni-tool to call Cora.

"Scott? Need reinforcements?" she questioned, her tone serious.

"Yeah, but not immediate. Remnant Drive core is at the Flophouse, place where a bunch of violent scavs gather. Get the others ready, and try and see if you can rent a land vehicle. Try talking to a scrap trader, Velonia. Turian woman, may be hanging in the main building at the Paradise. Either she can point you to a reliable deal, or might even offer to drop you off over there. Tell her I'm fine either taking a favor or trading," I explained.

"Understood, I'll let you know when we're en route," Cora answered.

"Sounds good to me. If you're not having any luck, I MIGHT be able to get a transport from New Tuchanka, but can't confirm," I informed. "Scott out," I ended the call. "Alright, in the meantime, let's go grab that genetic data. If there's time, maybe even drop off a beast at the colony."
The genetic data had all been transferred onto my Omni-tool. While plenty of data was encrypted, several key phrases stuck out: Krogan Super Soldier. Pure Krogan. Tank Bred. I don't think Okeer was trying to cure the Genophage…

We had also managed to lure a stray Kett fiend to the colony. We had strapped the lure to the back of the Nomad, and drove in the general vicinity of New Tuchanka until we found one. We just kept pace ahead of it as it lumbered along, wanting a meal. We brought it to the colony, and the Shaman was there with several others, who threw a kind of electric spear at the beast, shocking it into unconsciousness. They had it from there, and we waited for the others outside the valley that the flophouse was built into. From a distance, I could see structures built into the side of the valley, like a gash was cut into the side of the rock. Reminiscent of old Native American towns out in the west. Finally, we got word. Cora and the others were on a shuttle, inbound to our position. It took about two minutes for them to arrive, the shuttle setting down just beside us. Cora, Jaal, and Liam stepped out, fully armed and armored, even with our helmets too, and followed by Velonia. She stepped forward to me.

"Wasn't easy for them to convince me. Felt like it was a death sentence for you all. Not to mention those are customers," she remarked, taking a more casual tone than the somber one she began with. "But… I know the kinda shit they do. I don't like having customers I can't trust to not shoot me. Or eat me. Or worse," she shuddered. "If you somehow make it, call, and I'll take your people back to the ship. Good luck." Vetra stepped a bit closer to me, placed her hand on my shoulder. Ah, a bit defensive, I see.

"Hey, we've assaulted Kett bases, and those assholes put up a bigger fight than exiles ever have. We'll be fine," Vetra reassured, then tapped her forehead against mine. Velonia's mandibles flared just slightly, her eyes widened, and then a very light chuckle.

"If you say so. Still, good luck, all of you." She returned to her shuttle, and it flew off.

"Getting a bit protective, I see," I teased Vetra.

"What can I say? I'm competitive," Vetra smirked.

"Well, you've already won, trust your boyfriend," I chuckled.

"Ooooh, my boyfriend, how presumptuous of you. Bold to speak for me like that," Vetra began teasing me.

"Did we or did we not make out and then snuggle?" I retorted.

"Maybe. Maybe I need to refresh my memory," Vetra remarked in a sultry tone, raising a brow.

"Fucking hell, you two make me sick," Drack chuckled.

"Oh. Right. We're not alone. Kinda forget that sometimes," I muttered. "SO! Vetra, you said you were competitive. How bout this? We compete as to who gets more kills," I suggested.

"What does the winner get?" Vetra asked playfully.

"We'll…" I glanced at the others. Couldn't see their facial expressions, but Cora was holding her head in her hand, shaking it. "Discuss it later." I turned my attention to the Flophouse. The heatwaves made it difficult to see much at this distance, but I made do. The side on our left had the largest concentration of buildings. Most cover, but also likely the best defended. Not a great place
to insert. The right side seemed to curve around the walls of the valley. Fewer buildings, and a
natural slope. Might just be the best place to start the insult. I conveyed the info to the others. We
had a long walk ahead of us, however, and the Nomad wouldn't house us all. I'm hopeful that the
scavs won't see us, or know we're here until we're in position. We all took a good swig of our
canteens and began the trek. I didn't like at all that we were trekking over open ground. If these
guys have anyone watching the approach, well…

We had some luck, however. I had been taking us along some higher ground on the ridge line, and
right before the bend that would have put us in plain sight of the entire flop house, there were some
ledges our jump-jets allowed us to climb. It wouldn't take us up all the way, but it would put us in a
slightly better position. We kept as high as we could, but still needed to slide down a slope to keep
moving. I heard no gunfire, no alarms so far. Climbed another slope, and went back down. An
open plain that was still above where we were going to start our assault. And to make it even
better, we were just higher than the flophouse buildings. Perfect! We were on the ledge just above
the farthest building on the east side. An empty sniper perch to make it even better, and no assholes
on patrol over here! There was no slope to slide down, but we still had jump-jets. We jumped
down, and quickly moved into the first building, starting at the second level by once more, using
our jump jets. Just what exactly did we find? It was a storage room. There was a human man and
woman, their armor, their clothes, tossed over the floor. The man had his back turned to us, and the
woman? Well, we could hear her, and see the back of her legs. They didn't hear us enter. Ok, given
that we're behind the guy, that word choice sounded very poor.

"Hi there," I remarked, rifle raised. The woman and man turned back to face us.

"Who the fuck are you!?!" The man exclaimed.

"Who gives a shit? Fucking get your dick out of me and kill them!" The woman retorted, standing
straight and beginning to scramble for her weapons. Both quickly found a bullet in their head. To
clarify, for the man, I do mean the one on top of his shoulders.

"Hey, Liam, think the guy's name was Bruce Willis?" I asked. Liam tilted his head to the side,
before it clicked, and he snorted, and began dying of laughter. "I mean, he did die hard." Liam's
laughter grew even worse.

"Scott, what the fuck are you talking about? He's dead and his dick is still up, so what?" Vetra
questioned.

"Heh, Bruce Willis is an old actor from over a century before we left. One of the movies he was
best known for was, 'Die Hard.' Which is exactly what he did," I explained, snickering. Peebee
broke out in laughter herself, and I could hear the collective groans of the rest. "Your pain only
fuels me, makes me stronger," I laughed.

"Let's just move the fuck on before I shoot you too," Drack grumbled. Surprisingly, they still had
not been alerted to our presence. We moved in formation towards the rest of the Flophouse.
Unfortunately for us, the exiles mulling around there were less… distracted than the ones in the
storeroom, and saw us. Calling out that there were intruders and starting to shoot.

"Jamming their communications," SAM informed. Good, won't be able to call for backup, but it's
not like there's anyone still here unaware of our presence. At the very least, we had plenty of cover.
Vehicles, cargo, rocks even. And with all seven of us against exiles still scrambling to start a
defense, we pushed in quickly, leaving only corpses behind. Across the 'street' a Hydra came into
view. Now that could be problematic. For a time, at least. Jaal and I immediately took out its laser
guidance system, so at least we were at less risk as we just began shooting at the damn thing,
putting as many shots as we could into the top of the fuel tank was still exposed. That's it! It must
have taken enough gunfire, as the top of the damn fuel canister just seemed to pop right off. There's my chance. With a little help from SAM, I primed an incinerate round, and it struck the Hydra right in the fuel tank. It exploded violently, the entire torso of the mech exploding outwards and its arms being blown clean off.

"That still only counts as one!" Vetra exclaimed. I laughed heartily.

"Whatever you say, Gimli."

"Who the hell is Gimli?" Vetra questioned.

"Character from a movie series we all need to watch. Come on, let's move," I answered. We pushed forward to a large, three story building. Its windows were all plated down, and there were a lot of exiles dug in. That would provide some problems. Or perhaps, rather, a simple delay. We got to work. I was making precise shots with my Sweeper, plenty of my rounds meeting a hostile's head, and launching an incinerate round against some fully armored Turians part of the defense, or I simply plucked someone out of cover and into the air with my biotics. Either way, I was racking up kills.

"Hey, Scott, my visor counts twelve so far," Vetra called out. Heh, not surprised she must have a VI keeping track.


"Your kills total at twenty-four," SAM stated. I pulled the trigger again. "Twenty-five."

"Ha! Double! Eat it Nyx," I laughed.

"If that's what the winner's prize is, I'm about to take a LOT more risks," Vetra teased. I know I was blushing under my helmet. Not what I was thinking, and I think she knows that.

"Will you two PLEASE give it a break?" Cora groaned. Vetra looked at me from across the 'street' and from behind the crate she was using as cover. She gave me a mock salute, and fired up her tech armor, and turned off her weapon's safeties. Shit, Nyx what are you doing. She ran out into the middle. Damn it your shields won't hold!

"NOT THIS FUCKING TIME!" I put everything I had into a barrier to protect her. She laughed as she swept her rifle from side to side, non-stop. And then, the sound of all gunfire stopped. Vetra's stance relaxed, and she held the smoking barrel of her Cyclone up by her helmet, the sound of her blowing out air in the comms.

"Visor says… twenty-six," Vetra remarked.

"What the hell were you doing!?" I exclaimed.

"Trusting you. Told you I'd take risks. And I knew perfectly well you'd protect my ass. Thanks, by the way," Vetra teased.

"Look, just… please, do not do something that ballsy again," I requested. "Almost gave me a heart attack," my tone lowered.

"Pathfinder, your vitals were far from-" SAM began.

"It's an expression, SAM," I cut him off.
"Alright, alright, sorry. I'll tone it down a bit," Vetra reassured, her tone softer, and a hand around my back. I nodded, and she patted me on it. I readied my weapon again, and led the others to check out the building. "Gotta admit, it was kinda badass though," she remarked.

"Yeah," I chuckled. "Yeah it was."

**Vetra Nyx**

Scott had checked the door, locked down tight. Fortunately, SAM seemed to have an idea of how to fix that. Find a security terminal. Given where the exiles were now beginning to mass, it was a building on the ridge above where we had begun our assault. So we'd go up through the Flophouse and fight our way through to the far side of the 'town.' But that's not what my mind was occupied by now. And no, not the little competition Scott and I had going on.

"Not this fucking time," he had shouted. What did he mean by that? I haven't been wounded as part of his squad. Nothing serious at any rate. Flesh wounds, my back plates cracking from that Destined at the ice cave on Voeld, but nothing bad. I resolved to ask him about that later on the ship.

Another part of me was concerned that the jokes we've been making would lead Scott to assume that we were about to go as far as those jokes implied, that he would make the winnings of our competition be… private. Either way, I wouldn't follow through, I just hope that he doesn't urge the matter. At best, that he doesn't even bring it up. I shook these thoughts out of my head to focus back at the task at hand. We climbed a staircase and around a bend. A handful of exiles waiting. I opened fire, alongside everyone else. Got another three kills. Maybe I should win the competition, just to be safe. Or maybe I should lose on purpose, see what Scott does. I don't know. Logic tells me that he would never do anything like that, he's a good man, I've seen it. But past experience? That doesn't paint a pretty picture. We kept pushing forward. There were pockets of exiles trying to hold us back, but those felt more like reckless stragglers disobeying orders because they think they're hot shit. The ones we fought outside the main complex? Those were the smart ones. The ones bogging us down. The ones up here could have easily opened fire on us from above and behind, that may have genuinely fucked us. But they didn't. These ones were stupid.

One group tried to stop us at a two story pre-fab we'd need to pass through. A Krogan jumped through one of the empty window panes and let out a battle cry. I was about to unleash hell on him when his head just exploded, and I saw Scott slapping in a new thermal clip on his Black Widow. I started getting to work on the other few exiles as he put it back on his back. Two more kills. Ah, other side of the two story must be where the security console is. All the remaining exiles had gathered there. Taking cover behind barriers, crates, anything they could find there. I counted… twenty.

"Vetra!" Scott exclaimed. "I want you, Peebee, and Jaal up on the second level! You'll have a good sightline on the fuckers. Jaal can work with his rifle, Peebee, her biotics. We'll push from down here as you clear the way!"

"Got it! You heard him, let's move!" I ordered the pair. Scott and the others were doing what they could from down there, but they were still pinned. Conveniently, there were barriers placed that allowed us to get slightly higher ground. We could see some, but not all, as they lowered themselves into cover. Jaal and I worked on the ones we could see, and Peebee used her biotics to pull the others, helplessly into the air. Scott and the others began pushing across the bridge to the security center. Entering cover, firing some shots, moving out of cover and into the next. Until they finally made it to the door, and Scott waved for us to re-join him. We jumped down from the
second story and ran to catch up. We got into a breaching formation, people at each side of the
door, ready to do a sweep. Scott opened the door. He entered from one side, Drack from the other,
followed by the rest of us. The room was empty.

"Defensive positions, same the exiles had. Just in case the exiles have anything to throw at us,"
Scott ordered. He stayed inside as the rest of us set up. All in all, looks like we had a pretty decent
position. After we moved the bodies aside to make room, at least. There was plenty of blood. The
red of humans, the purple of Turian, the different shades of blue from both Asari and Angara, and
even the green of Salarian. We waited, and waited, and waited as SAM bypassed the locks. But no
exiles joined our party. Everyone left must be inside the locked building. SAM confirmed he
successfully completed the hack, and we returned to the now unlocked building quickly and
without any resistance. Breaching procedure once again. But this time, Scott had a flashbang in
hand. The door opened, accompanied by gunfire as Scott rolled the grenade inside. We heard it go
off with the pained screams of the temporarily blinded exiles, and that's when we stormed. Cora
and Drack were both wreaking havoc in the small quarters with their shotguns, and I was once
more at work with my Cyclone. Thirty-five kills total, when that room was cleared, but we still had
the upper levels.

Up a staircase, watching both above and below so we couldn't be taken by surprise. Two doors,
likely just the same room. We split in two. Scott, Peebee, and Liam on the left, Drack, Jaal, Cora
and I on the right. Scott seemed to divvy us up well, our side was closer to the remaining exiles,
and had less cover. We'd need the manpower. A Krogan let out a fierce battle cry as the firefight
began. His armor had been modified. Painted like there were splotches of blood, and scrap metal
attached to form spikes on the front of his helmet, chest, knee, elbow, and a kind of spiky gauntlets.
And they looked rusty as hell. If they didn't kill you, you'd get sick no doubt. But this world is
levo, so it wouldn't have the bacteria that would get me sick. Still, let's try to avoid getting stabbed
by those spikes. He charged, and Drack to meet him, knife in one hand, Ruzad in the other. We just
focused on the exiles for the time being. Fortunately, we worked fast. But Drack was on the
defensive, just doing what he could to parry or block those spikes from hitting him. And yet, I saw
him still manage to get a few stabs in with his knife, or some slashes from the bayonet on his
Ruzad. Yet no rounds had been fired. The other Krogan was getting angry, blood rage building. He
shouted and moved to slam his forehead right into Drack's, but the old man saw it coming, and
stepped to the side. He jammed the Ruzad's bayonet right into his side as he staggered from the
miss. And he pulled the trigger. It blew a hole from side to side in his body. But the blood rage was
active now. While the Krogan would most certainly die from his wounds, he was still going. He
tried to jam his elbow back into Drack, but he had managed to grab the raging Krogan at the
forearm and hold it back. Drack dropped his Ruzad to the floor and switched the hand the knife
was in. He plunged it right into the helmet, and it was sharp enough to break through. Right into
the bastard's eye. Drack stabbed and stabbed and stabbed until the raging Krogan began to slow.
Drack shoved him down onto his back and plunged the knife deep into the center of his back. No
doubt breaking through the spine halfway, and paralyzing his legs and waist. Drack retrieved his
Ruzad as the last of the exiles fell, pointed it at the still raging Krogan's head, who was struggling
to get to his unresponsive feet, and pulled the trigger.

Drack roared with his success, taking deep breaths once he finished. And then, began to laugh.

"Now THAT was a fight! Crazy fucking bastard, ha ha!"

"Remind me to never, EVER fuck with you," Scott chuckled.

"Eh, don't worry, I'd go easy on you," he smirked.

"Pathfinder, there is a console at the far side of the room. I believe it will open the bunker that
houses the drive core," SAM informed.

"Well, you heard him, ladies and gents, our job ain't done yet," Scott remarked, tilting his head side to side, stretching the muscles. I checked my visor for a kill-count. Forty-two.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Well, I am fucking pissed. We had entered the bunker, and guess who the fuck was inside, and began shooting at us? The very same goddamn Krogan that we saw as Strux's posse when we first met him! And they had the drive core! So now, EVERYTHING was in question. Was Morda looking for the Drive Core? Yes, she was, that was obvious. But now? Why? Ravanor Brenk's intel is clearly falsified. But Morda still said the Nexus will pay! I don't know what the fuck to make of anything anymore!

Still, at least we had the drive core. It was much smaller than I'd expect for a ship that size, but, guess it's just impressive Remnant engineering for something this relatively small to power something that huge. It wouldn't fit in the Nomad, but that didn't mean we couldn't secure it.

"So, Strux and his guys are the ones who actually took the drive core?" Vetra questioned, just as confused as me.

"I feel used. But for what? Damned if I know. Drack?" I asked.


"Think Strux was the one wanting to build a bomb?" Vetra suggested.

"Or sell it?" Peebee added on.

"But then why hide it here?" Jaal pointed out.

"No fucking clue, but I sure as hell can't wait to find out," Drack snarled.

"Oh, I'm super curious. Who can guess the motivations of a crazy Krogan?" I remarked, just fed up with this shit. "Let's keep this quiet until we see them face to face. I wanna see what happens."

"Good idea," Drack smirked, chuckling happily.

"SAM, see if Kandros can spare anyone to pick up a Remnant drive core. Change this bunker's passcode, add firewalls, whatever, and make sure that team and I get it," I ordered.

"At once," SAM stated.

"Can't wait to get off this planet. Gonna have a long shower with some newly procured fancy soaps," Vetra remarked, sounding quite happy with that prospect.

"Waste of water. What you need is a good old-fashioned Krogan dust bath," Drack suggested.

"The dust is what I'm trying to get rid of!" Vetra exclaimed.

"Uh, Vetra, mind letting me borrow some of those soaps?" Peebee requested. Quickly followed by Cora.

"Fuck it, me too if you can. I don't care if I end up smelling like roses, or chocolate, or goddamn unicorn farts, just wanna feel clean and get rid of the stench of sweat," I butted in.
"Oh don't worry, got plenty to share," Vetra grinned.

"Wish we had more showers. That way we wouldn't need to wait for everyone else," I murmured.

"Peebee and I could double up…" Jaal suggested. Peebee giggled.

"Sure, I can shower all on my own, Peebee and Jaal can shower together, and Scott, you can shower with Drack, and the others can go in whatever order," Vetra joked. I think I gagged at that prospect.

"Bah, waste of water, like I said. I can handle the dirt," Drack grumbled.

"'Ugh, but the rest of us can't handle the smell," Liam groaned. Drack just began chuckling. Moments later, as we were returning to the Nomad, Velonia already being messaged about pick up, SAM passed along that a team was en-route. We also overheard an interesting transmission from some scavs who forgot to secure their comms. A suggestion that the water source might be shown in Annea's office back at the Paradise. Having the source of water secured would be a good thing…

We waited with the others for Velonia to arrive. To say she was surprised to see we had no casualties was an understatement. When I remembered to ask about Ljeta, the Angaran woman who was a friend of that Krogan, she didn't take much convincing. And it was not a happy tale. Ljeta had her shuttle jacked and had to walk miles in the blazing heat of Elaaden to the Paradise, dying of thirst. She managed to still be able to make a heavily discounted trade with Velonia to get off world. She was now back on Aya, receiving medical attention. She happily took the Jaal, Liam, and Cora back to the paradise, the rest of us returning to the Nomad.

"So, all in all, forty-six. You, Scott?" Vetra asked.

"Dunno. SAM? You have the count?"

"For the sake of fairness, Vetra, there was an additional kill you had not counted," SAM began. Vetra let out a small cheer. "However, Scott, your total reaches Forty-Eight."

"Shit," Vetra muttered as I raised a hand into a fist pump, cheering.

"Winner, winner, chicken fucking dinner!" I laughed.

"So, what's the prize," Peebee asked, grinning.

"Honestly don't know yet. I'll think about it later," I shrugged. We arrived back at New Tuchanka soon enough, the guards let us in without hassle. I returned Okeer's data to the geneticist, who thanked me profusely. From there, we made a beeline for the throne room, and Morda. We got to her just as Strux stood at her side to speak with her himself, off the stone platform she uses as a throne.

"Hello Nexus. You're back," she 'greeted.' Unhappy to see us again.

"That I am," I remarked, glaring at Strux.

"Strux here tells me you went to get the drive core from my Remnant ship," Morda recited.

"That's true. But-" I began.

"And that you sold it to scavs who took it off-world to make a profit-for you and them," Morda snarled. I began laughing.

"Stay out of Krogan affairs, Nexus! I'll interrogate who I want," Morda growled.

"You should really listen to the kid, he's right," Drack remarked. Strux seemed to grow nervous. And made his move now.

"Clan Nakmor is a joke! The losers of Tuchanka and now the losers of Heleus!" Strux exclaimed. Really? Losers? Where the fuck are we? Middle school? A crowd was forming. "Overlord Morda has lost the drive core and our colony is doomed." Morda's retort? Slam her forehead into Strux's. There was fury in her eyes as Strux was knocked flat on his ass from the blow.

"You're all talk, Jorgal Strux! I made this colony!" Morda shouted. Strux got back to his feet.

"If there's an Overlord, they should be from the oldest Krogan blood, Clan Jorgal!" Strux proclaimed. "Watch, I'll rescue the drive core, and make us so powerful that the Nexus will bow down to us!"

"Except you can't, because we took the drive from your own people," Drack stated loudly and clearly.

"Aw, Drack, I wanted to see how long until Strux hung himself to rescue it from himself," Vetra fake whined loudly.

"What the hell do you mean?" Morda turned to us, demanding an answer.

"Oh I am more than happy to explain. So, first got word to come here from Strux. Sent us a less than inspiring quote from you that was probably faked in the first place. Then, when we meet him, he says you're gonna tear the colony apart. We meet you, less than stellar reception, and guy tells us you're planning to build a bomb with that little drive core. We track down the core to the flophouse, wipe the place out, and enter the bunker the drive core is in. And guess whose cronies are the one's inside? This motherfucker's!" I explained with a bit of flair.

"And I can vouch for it," Drack supported.

"And Strux told me you were planning an attack on the colony," Morda added on. She turned back to Strux. "I'm impressed, Strux. You're more cunning than most Clan Jorgal. Smarter even."

"Nakmor arrogance," Strux growled. "My father lowered himself to join your clan because he admired your grandfather. He was laughed at. Called 'not worth killing.'" I didn't know too much about Krogan society, but Drack had once mentioned that was the worst insult a Krogan could use. "But now I've bested you, Morda. And Clan Nakmor will pay with blood!" Morda launched herself at Strux, a fist slamming into his face with all her might. If a headbutt from right in front knocked him on his ass, it wasn't surprising that this punch knocked his feet into the air, launching him back a bit. But Morda wasn't done. She took the same fist and slammed it down, pummeling Strux head first into the ground, flat on his back, his nose bleeding and his forehead plate cracked. And then, as a final insult to injury, Morda lifted her boot, and slammed it down onto Strux's quad. Made even Drack wince in pain. Strux cried out in pain.

"You put the colony at risk over a grudge you carried across dark space? You really aren't worth killing, Jorgal Strux," Morda snarled. "Get the fuck out. Take your goons with you." Not one of them came to help Strux to his feet. Eventually, he managed to get on them himself, before limping away. Morda turned her attention to me.
"Now where is the drive core? Hand it over," Morda demanded.

"Woah, hold on Morda. I just spent all day thinking you were going to build a bomb with it. I'm not saying no, but I'm not just saying yes right away either," I stood my ground.

"It's incredibly powerful, and we'll use it to power the colony. It will put us ahead by decades, and ensure our self-sufficiency," Morda stood hers. "If you keep it, it's over between the Krogan and the Nexus, forever."

"Give them something for it. S'only right," Drack argued.

"We did get shot at. A lot," Peebee remarked. Morda took a moment to think, then sighed.

"What about… What about joining our colony with an Initiative outpost? Give us the drive core, and we'll share some of its yield with yours. We won't take orders from Tann, but we'll work together. Keep it, and you're creating a sovereign Krogan nation. One that won't abide by any Nexus laws or owe you anything. Even peace," Morda warned.

"Scott," SAM began on our private channel. "I must point out that, historically, unchecked Krogan advancement has been the cause of war and disaster for many—even the Krogan." I pinched the bridge of my nose and thought this through.

"Morda, I really want to believe you. I want the Krogan to do just as well as the rest of us. Your deal is sounding pretty good but… there's one more thing I want. You'll allow a group of engineers, hand-picked by both Kesh and Kandros, not Tann or Addison, to verify the use of the Drive core. Once a month, once a week, I don't know, work that out with them. Agree to that, and I can make the deal," I finished.

"Tann or Spender won't interfere," Morda wanted to clarify.

"Spender's time with authority is very limited. I'm working one more lead to prove the claims against him. Tann? Hardly anyone listens to him anymore. He can bitch and moan all he wants, but it won't do him much good," I answered. Morda took another moment to think. And then held out her hand.

"On behalf of the Krogan, we accept this deal," Morda spoke for the others listening to hear.

"As does the Nexus," I did the same, firmly shaking her hand. "SAM," I spoke to my AI. "Tell Kandros to call off the retrieval mission. Transmit the bunker codes and coordinates to Morda."

"This is a great day, Morda," Drack smiled.

"We'll contact Addison and give her the news," I nodded.

"Tell her to set up at the North end of the western sinkhole. It's clear and has direct sunlight for solar panels," Morda stated.

"Will do. Oh, want me to call Tann, record his reaction?" I smirked.

"Now that would actually make me smile."
Thank You

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The outpost was being prepared for Elaaden, and all in all, their trip should take about twelve hours, including their setup. Our to-do list here was growing short. I still wanted to check in with the Shaman about the fiend we helped him capture, and to see if we couldn't find Annea's water source for ourselves. Can't say I'm a fan of the idea of a single person choosing to play god amongst everyone on this planet. She can deny people water on a whim, and has been known to do so simply when in a bad mood. Not to mention the exuberant prices. My thinking? Find the water source. If Anne's tries to stop us, we take her down. Then, the Initiative takes over the Paradise. Keeps the rules of no-violence, but gives out the water for free. It would foster better relations out here, and I'm sure something could be thought of that would help make the common scav less deadly out in the wastes. The vault may be raising the moisture content in the air, but it'll still be a long time until there's an alternate, reliable source of water.

But that's for a bit later. First, the shaman. They were still preparing the fiend for the fight, and the Shaman had managed to convince Varka to grudgingly accept the challenge. Unfortunately, Gren was refusing to fight with her. Annoyed, I took Drack to go sort him out. Expectedly, he wasn't much willing to listen to me. Drack, however, explained that Gren had two choices. Charge into the arena, or have Varka call him a "quadless coward" for the rest of his life. And that managed to convince him. Partially. He didn't trust Varka to not gun him down when the Fiend was dead. So, guess who's getting dragged into the arena too? That's right, me. Without any of my squad. The things I do for people…

The shaman led Gren, Varka, and I, all armed and armored to a door deeper in the colony. A cave. I could hear the beast. The shaman stopped us at the door.

"Have some… interesting news, for you all. Turns out that fiend the Pathfinder lured here was a female. In heat. Two males followed her scent, and we captured them in here too," he explained.

"You have to be fucking kidding me…" I grumbled.

"Now this is a fight!" Varka exclaimed as Gren burst into laughter, both of them gripping their shotguns with enthusiasm.

"It'll be a challenge. Watch each other's tails in there. This is being recorded and broadcast throughout the colony. Make sure they remember it," The shaman remarked. My comms came to life.

"I was alright with the three of you fighting ONE fiend! Not three! Get out of there!" Vetra demanded.

"I'm not any happier about it than you are, but Gren won't fight unless I do. And unless this rite happens, a clan war could break out. I'll be fine, have a few… ideas," I reassured.

"Just… stay safe, alright? Let the Krogan be the psycho ones," Vetra's tone grew soft.

"Shouldn't be hard. I'll be done soon," I stated, and the call ended. "Let's get this shit over with." The shaman nodded and opened the door.

I began walking slowly with my weapon raised, but Varka and Gren just ran right out, roaring.
Muttering curses, I followed.

Wait… what's that slapping sound?

Oh you gotta be fucking kidding…

We reached the back of the cave while one of the males was in the back of the female's cave, and both let out a roar before even noticing us. Jesus, I need to bleach my eyeballs. Varka and Gren began laughing as the two remained stuck together, like dogs, and the Fiend that seemed to be waiting it's turn moved to face us.

The female tried to move towards us, but it had a slightly smaller male that was latched onto its back. She was carrying the weight of two full grown fiends. The other charged towards Gren, and smacked him to the side. He rolled to his feet, fortunately.

Varka shook her head, chuckling, opening fire with her Ruzad. I was still at the front of the damned thing. It roared again and I quickly primed an Incinerate, launching it into the back of his throat as, with a combination of biotics and the jump jets, I flew over the Fiend as it charged towards me.

I began aiming at the flesh flaps on the side of his back, seeing blood spurt out, and the beast roar in pain. The Krogan and I had to keep inching back the way we came as the female still lumbered towards us with the male on her. Roaring in anger, Gren charged its side and latched on, pulling a knife from his belt. He jabbed it in and in repeatedly into the weak spot, twisting the knife. The beast tried to grab him, but it's arms couldn't reach back there. Seeing her own opportunity, Varka jumped onto its other side and jammed her Ruzad in, pulling the trigger until the clip overheated. The fiend let out another roar, and collapsed, Gren and Varka both getting off its sides, laughing.

We turned towards the female who was getting closer. She growled, and began moving faster and faster. The male seemed to lose his grip and fell back, but was now being dragged behind her, struggling to get back up, or just back out. Gren and Varka continued laughing, and I'll admit, I did too.

"Keep her focused on you, I'll finish off the male," I suggested. Varka and Gren both nodded, shouting various curses, few of which translated, and firing off shots at the female.

Most just seeming to impact the bone armor. I stood behind the male now, Black Widow in hand. But first, I let the Flamethrower roar on the beast's head, trying to melt away the natural armor.

The Fiend roared, both in pain from being dragged along by its dick, and its head being engulfed by flame. It tried to reach back and grab me, but I used my biotics to keep his hands down on the ground, getting close with the flame. It wasn't easy keeping that kind of focus, but SAM helps. I held the fire for five whole seconds before extinguishing it, seeing a bubbling mass of the bone, some even starting to drip onto the floor. That should do it. I unloaded the whole clip from the Widow into his skull, for good measure, and the beast was dead.

The female was now, literally carrying dead weight.

I ran to return to the others in front of the female, and just as I had, the female roared out, and then charged Varka. Oh, I see why. Guess part of the fiend now being dead is that it sort of… detached from the female. It caught Gren and Varka both by surprise. The female grabbing hold of Varka, who was unable to move her arms, just kicking her legs, struggling.

"Oh no you don't," Gren roared, charging towards the Fiend as he roared, spraying spittle all over
her. She was about to clamp her powerful jaws around Varka when Gren jumped and lodged his Ruzad between said jaws, the bayonet stabbing through the top of the mouth. Gren, still holding on to her shotgun, pulled the trigger. Blowing blood, bone, and brains up into the air. Gren roared triumphantly, shifting to laughter as he helped Varka to her feet.

"Three fiends, and one stuck by his dick to the other," Varka laughed. "They'll be talking about this for years."

"You're a tough one, Varka. That fiend should have killed you a few times over," Gren complimented. Guess I didn't see all of their part of the fight.

"Almost did. You're quick shooting saved my hide," Varka nodded. Think that puts an end to this clan war.

"Yeah, well," Gren shrugged.

"Was that a compliment I heard?" I teased.

"Don't look so smug," Varka rolled her eyes.

"You're pretty impressive yourself, Pathfinder," Gren slapped me on the shoulder.

"Too bad you're not a Krogan. You'd make a good warlord," Varka joked.

"Warlord Ryder does have a ring to it," I mused. Of course, I would never take up that offer, but hey, banter with Krogan. Gren certainly seemed to appreciate that, laughing.

"Spoken like a Krogan," he remarked as the laughter subsided.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

That was… an event. Upon my return to the others, Drack was booming with laughter and slapped me heartily on the shoulder. Vetra just put her arm around me in a half hug, glad I was alright. Peebee just couldn't stop laughing about the male stuck to the back of the female. Vetra had to admit, she had a hard time not laughing when that came onto the screen. But now, we were on our way to the Paradise to sneak some intel on Annea's water source.

On our way there, Lexi had called. She finished her research on what the scans of scavengers told her. Their neurons were all firing abnormally, lining up with increased aggression. Essentially, some people were more vulnerable to that than others, and Lexi had concocted a serum which should help treat it. She had a candidate, and I helped her convince said candidate to agree. At the end, his term was just that we go fuck off.

As for Annea's office, it was surprisingly, unguarded on the upper floor. Locked, but SAM took care of that as the others watched for guards. A data pad inside described an underground lake, and had a nav-point. The coordinates led us to a small "oasis" in the north. Still hard pressed to call it such, but it was a rocky outcrop with plenty trees and plants growing. And beneath the outcrop, I could see a wall and door, clearly artificial.

"Well I'll be fucking damned," Drack mumbled.

"Something here catch your eye, old man?" Vetra asked.

"Putting it damn mildly. I still get reports from my scouts in the Colony. Before I left I gave them a
mission to go and find a water source. Sure, Morda still gives them plenty others, but it's a mission. I've gotten reports of this place before. They saw the same damn door down there, but wrote it off as being an exile cache," Drack explained.

"Well, in a sense, it is a cache. Just not exile, and filled with water," I remarked.

I led the team down to the not-so-hidden door. It was locked, but the encryption was no issue for SAM. It was a cave, lots of bioluminescent mushrooms, lighting the way, and even a pipe that must lead to the water source. We followed it, expecting to find guards, yet encountering none. And then, we entered a much larger section of the cavern. Supply crates, water tanks everywhere. And the pipe? Stretched down into an absolutely massive underground lake. Wasn't sure how far out it went, but it was far. And who knows how deep.

"That's a helluva lot more water than I was expecting," Drack murmured.

"Wait, what's that, just on the end of the dock?" Peebee pointed out.

A dock had been placed over the lake, stretching out to meet a construct that was clearly Remnant. And spewing out water. I scanned the water. It had a ninety percent purity. In addition to the machine, SAM had evidence that deep, underground aquifers were partially to thank for this body of water.

"And Annea kept this all for herself," I muttered.

"You say that as if no one else would do the same." Well, well, well. Guess there must have been a silent alarm with the door.

The four of us turned, rifles in hand, to see Annea, with a posse of guards behind her. Child's play to deal with, as far as I'm concerned. "I'm disappointed, Pathfinder. I thought you were someone I could trust. I welcomed you into my home, and you repay my kindness by robbing me."

"Hey, I didn't take anything. Left every single drop of water where I found it," I raised my hands defensively. "You can count if you want." I could hear my squad suppressing laughter.

"Very glib," Annea rolled her eyes. I'll be honest, no idea what the hell glib means, but I can assume it's synonymous with smartass. I could ask SAM to define it for me later, but first, I'd have to care enough. "Do you know why I do this?"

"No, but you're going to tell me," I shrugged. Annea rolled her eyes again.

"My brother tried to help your people when they first came here. He showed them where to find shelter. Allowed them to take freely from our water tanks. He was killed for his trouble. I won't be as foolish as Asgaar," Annea explained.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Annea, I know what it's like to lose someone, but you're punishing everyone else for the actions of the guilty. Is this what Asgaar would want?" I questioned.

"You don't get to say something like that. These scavengers have no sympathy. Not me, not you. But they do respect the planet," Annea argued.

One reason they lack sympathy is because they're running purely on survival instinct. She's made their first concern be to survive, to get water, to be able to pay for the water. Not helping others also survive.

"As long as they need me to survive, they live by my rules." Annea gestured back to her guards,
who since they arrived, had casually leaned against a wall, sat, or whispered amongst each other. Now, they faced us.

"So, let me forget this, huh?" I remarked.

"Exactly. Forget it all, allow me to protect myself and my home how I want. I will share what resources I gather on Elaaden," She offered. I mulled it over a bit myself, but looked back at Vetra. She has a better grasp on what we need in the way of resources. Eos is rich in resources. Kadara is rich in resources. So is Voeld, if the Angara allow us to mine there.

Vetra shook her head. She didn't like the deal.

"The offer doesn't work, Annea. No one here can have a real home so long as they need to keep working on a way to pay for water. This planet isn't yours. Not anyone's. It's a planet with a whole lotta separate people living on it," I spoke.

Annea grimaced, her eyes narrow.

"So now I have to sit by and watch you destroy everything I've built?" Annea questioned rhetorically. Her men began unholstering their weapons. She stepped closer. "I will hound you every step of the way! This isn't over! Get them! Kill them if you can!"

Annea began running back to the exit as the Exiles moved to open fire. Oh no you don't. I grasped the hilt of the sword I picked up on the Asari ark, and used a move I haven't gotten the chance to in a while. Biotically, I charged Annea, hearing Vetra's Cyclone open fire, Drack's shotgun, and Peebee throwing out biotics.

Annea was knocked face first onto the ground, and the sword was removed from its sheath, plunging into the back of her skull, killing her instantly. I stood and turned to the others. Only one exile was left, a human man. He began moving back, still firing and then turned to ran. Not knowing I was behind him. I grasped the sword's hilt with both hands, and swung the sharp end like a baseball bat right to the neck. I know the form was certainly way off, but I hadn't had any training sessions with Cora yet. And hey, what works, works. Like the poor bastard had been clotheslined, the head came tumbling off, tripping his own body as his leg's muscle memory would have been keeping it going for JUST a bit longer. Blood spurted out of both his head, and neck. Well, that's that.

"Drack, you go ahead and call or message Morda, let her know about this. I'm gonna call Kandros and Addison, see if we set up shop at the Paradise. Free water, same rules of non-violence," I ordered.

Drack nodded and activated his Omni-tool, moving away from the others to talk. I did the same, getting both the trusted Turian and the bitch. Both answered around the same time.

"So! Great news for the both of you, we now have the location and access to the only reliable, known body of water on Elaaden, at least until the vault helps to make more," I began.

"So, you called for me here to assign a militia team to protect it?" Kandros questioned.

"Partially. Originally, this water source was only known to a woman named Annea, who also ran the Paradise south of here. It was a cease-fire zone and where people would go to pay rather large prices for just a bit of water. Annea, however, is now a corpse, as she tried to kill us. So! What I was hoping, is that we continue keeping the Paradise a cease-fire zone, but we give out the water for free. We and the Krogan still keep the source a secret, but we distribute it freely. It'll give the
Initiative some good publicity, help bring back relations with exiles here, and generally just make Elaaden a better place. Whether that includes outreach programs, or people not worrying about how they're going to pay for their next drop of water, that's not for me to decide," I explained.

"Why not sell it with a lower price?" Addison suggested. Of course she did.

"Because we don't NEED to. We can afford the charity. We won't be losing out, especially not with the benefits I just listed," I argued. Addison sighed.

"I'll see what I can do about guards, and maybe those already guarding this Paradise won't mind the change of management. Addison, I trust you'll see about the required transports and people for the transfer of the water and management of the Paradise?" Kandros questioned. It was a subtle move, putting her in a box like that. Nice work, Tiran.

"Yes, I'll see that it's done." Addison got off the comms.

"Good work, Scott. Just made Elaaden a lot easier for us. I know you have a habit of waiting for the Outpost, so I say, go take a break, you earned it."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Gotta admit, the idea of a break sounded quite appealing to me. And I had quite a good idea for what to do. We returned to the ship, the Paradise not seeming to even recognize Annea's absence, as there was a replacement aide working the counter for trade currently. Would likely stay that way for till the Nexus representatives arrived. Those in the Nomad with me, I had told my idea to. Drack wasn't up for it, said he'd be bored. Peebee would if Jaal wanted to, but Vetra was game.

Thought Sid might want to join. But first? Well, there was one more thing I wanted to see about. Discreetly, I had sent the message describing it to Drack before we began heading back to the ship. Rather, New Tuchanka first. He replied. He could get it done. The Nomad came to a stop outside the Colony.

"Peebee, mind staying here, keeping the car cool?" I requested.

"Sure," she shrugged, curious what we were doing, but happy enough to stay in the Nomad.

"Thanks. Come on, Vetra," I nodded my head towards the Colony as Drack and I got out.

"What's going on?" Vetra questioned.

"Someone you may want to meet," was my vague answer.

Vetra certainly wanted to know more, but remained quiet. We continued following Drack down into the colony. Down into what seemed like a residential area, though different from the section the Krogan babies or the clutches of eggs are. That is under more protection. Drack finally stopped at one door, knocking on it.

"Come in," a Krogan answered.

Drack opened the door, a small, spartan, apartment. Kitchen and bedroom in the same relatively large room, and a door I suspect was the bathroom in the back. The Krogan had his back turned, putting something up into a cupboard. "Got your message, Drack. Was more than a little surprised, I didn't think I had ever caught your-" The Krogan turned, his eyes locking onto Vetra. He dropped the container he was holding. "Attention…" Vetra tilted her head to the side, leaning back, arms
across her chest.

"Do… I know you?" Vetra asked, rather confused.

"Do you not recognize me, little one? Wait, your colony markings are the same, but the one I remember had red, not purple. And she was younger," the Krogan explained. Vetra appeared confused a moment longer, but then… the connection started to form.

"My name is Nakmor Straxx. And you are?" He held out his hand in greetings. Vetra's mandibles began to flare, and I saw a tear streak down her eye. She rushed forward and wrapped her arms around the Krogan in a bear hug, it surprised him, but he didn't push her off him. She began to cry.

"Thank you," she repeated, over and over. "You saved my little sister."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Well, that was… emotional. And now? Well… Straxx agreed to wait to meet Sid again too, after we went out for the little endeavor I had planned. More emotions on the way. We had stayed to speak with him a small while longer.

He asked about Sid. How she's been, her… recovery. His heart went out to her, keeping such a terrible event hidden for almost a year. That we only found out because I heard her having a night-terror.

But he was glad to see that Sid had a sister that cared for her as much as Vetra clearly did, tears still streaming down her face twenty minutes after she learned who he was, though she had herself otherwise under control. Eventually, knowing we still had Peebee in the Nomad, we left, knowing we'd be back shortly, with Sid. Peebee was wondering what had taken us so long, but seeing Vetra was still shaken up, and the look Drack gave her, remained quiet. The entire way back, Vetra had taken my hand in hers, grasping it tight. I simply squeezed her hand in response as I drove back to the Tempest. I parked the Nomad outside the ship, Peebee was the first to get out to go check in with Jaal. Drack simply patted Vetra on the shoulder as he went up the cargo ramp. We were still holding hands as Vetra walked us up the cargo ramp. Once inside the ship, she wrapped her arms around me.

"Thank you," she whispered. I returned the hug. I didn't really know what to say, so I just held her. Feeling her take several deep breaths. She moved her head in front of mine, and pressed our foreheads together. This really meant a lot to her.

"I'll start getting the supplies ready. You go get Sid, and yourself ready," I suggested in a whisper. Vetra removed her forehead from mine, opening her eyes.

"Yeah… ok. See you soon," Vetra nodded. She tapped her forehead to mine again in parting. She turned to her room, the armory, Sid most likely within, while I took off my armor and turned to go upstairs to the tech-lab, and the fabricator within. I had knocked on the door, Jaal wasn't present. I commissioned the required materials for several beach towels, a decently sized cooler, a few folding lawn chairs, and an umbrella. A big one. I quickly folded the towels to the side, then took the chairs and dropped them off in the Nomad, and left the cooler in the mess hall, and returned to my quarters. I changed out of my under suit, and set aside a change of clothes. Tank top, gym shorts, fresh underwear, and I grabbed a bath towel to rinse off the sand in the shower. It's rough, coarse, and gets everywhere.

Feeling clean, I got dressed, and threw on some flip-flops, returning to the tech-lab. I knocked
before entering, Jaal was now inside. He was about to start getting ready to join us, thought that if
nothing else, it could be a relaxing little getaway I had planned. It occurred to me that I could
change our game plan to go swimming in the reservoir, but... that is going to be drinking water.
Not a great idea to go swimming in that. Especially because SOMEONE is going to piss in it. It
occurred to me I didn't have a pair of sunglasses, so I had the fabricator finish its work for the day
by making me a pair. Having the sunglasses clipped into my tank top, I carried the Umbrella down
and strapped it to the top of the Nomad, not bothering to return for the towels as I had asked Jaal to
bring those down with him. I knew we wouldn't have to worry about additional transport, at least.
Gil would rather tinker, Kallo still thought it was too hot, and Suvi wasn't much for the outdoors
for outdoors sake. Can't say I'm that outdoorsy either, but I'm a Floridian. If there's water, or just a
nice, sunny day, we enjoy that well enough. Even if it does get us sweaty. Other than them, Lexi
would rather watch the progress of the serum on the mentally unstable scavenger, Liam made up
some excuse I hadn't bothered to remember, knowing internally he just didn't want to hang out with
Vetra, and Cora was actually speaking with Vedria who was still training on the Nexus. So, just
left Jaal, Peebee, Vetra, Sid, and I going out on the trip. I only bring four on ground missions, but as
shown before, it can squeeze in another.

I took the cooler to the fridge and loaded it up with beers, Dextro and Levo, some dextro sodas for
Sid, some water, filled it with ice, and told Jaal to bring any Angaran drinks he had if he wanted to,
and stored the cooler in the back of the Nomad. Vetra and Sid both emerged from the armory, both
wearing tank tops themselves and shorts, a kind of boots on their feet. Maybe it was lighter than it
looked, though. I ran them both through what was in the cooler as Peebee and Jaal came down to
join us. Both were currently dressed normally, but that's not to say they don't have something more
fitting underneath.

"Hey, Sid, why don't you get shotgun?" I suggested.

"Sure!" She grinned, happily taking the passenger seat.

"And for a moment, I thought you were about to give her an actual gun," Vetra laughed.

"Come on, couldn't be that bad, I know all the gun safety. Always leave the safety off, finger
always on the trigger, look straight down the barrel to make sure it's loaded," Sid joked, listing off
plenty of very unsafe practices.

"And you wonder why it's taken this long for me to agree to teach you," Vetra chuckled, shaking
her head.

Part of the reason I suggested Sid take passenger, was that one, she wouldn't be squished between
the others, and two, while she's handling Peebee alright, I know she's still not the most comfortable
around Asari. Though she seems able to handle it with Vetra and I around.

"So, remind me, what exactly is it we're doing?" Jaal questioned.

"Nothing special," I remarked as I began driving towards the soon-to-be colony site. "Just gonna sit
out in the sun, hang out, relax. Get a tan. Too bad there ain't any beaches around here," I shrugged.

"Turians don't tan," Vetra pointed out.

"Neither do Asari," Peebee smirked.

"I don't believe Angara do either but... it sounds relaxing," Jaal murmured.

"Ok, so I'm the only one getting a tan. Whatever. I'll be out in the sun a bit more, umbrella is for
anyone who doesn't like the heat as much, and to help keep the cooler cool," I explained. "The
towels will let us lay out in the sun without laying right on the hot sand, and the chairs are, of
course, for sitting." Didn't seem like anyone else had many questions as we drove along to the
destination. No hassle from exiles, no hungry looking wildlife. Just drove past the colony, and to
the outpost site.

"Hey, guess we won't need the umbrella, plenty of shade and flat ground right over there," Sid
pointed out. She was right, by the mountain on the north side, exactly what she described.

"Oh, guess we could leave the umbrella for the colony then," I shrugged. I parked the Nomad back
in the shade, put on my sunglasses, and laid the towels out at a good spot. Peebee had used her
biotics to life the cooler out and set it down on the ground, able to pull it along as it had wheels,
while Vetra and Jaal carried two chairs each. I laid one towel out flat in the shade, before reaching
down and pulling off my tank top, I might have tried to make it a subtle display for Vetra. I placed
three towels down flat, one for Vetra, Sid, and I, and gave the last two for Peebee and Jaal to place
where they wanted.

"How'd you get that scar on your chest?" Sid asked. I looked down, confused for a half a second,
before seeing the burn scar still in the center of my chest, a patch void of any chest hair. Which I
had a decent amount of. Not enough to warrant waxing, but impossible to not notice.

"That the one you got from Voeld?" Vetra mused, taking a closer look at it.

"Yeah, should be. Unless I've taken another Kett energy round I didn't know about," I joked. "Got
it while we were rescuing the Moshae. This Kett leader called the Cardinal got a shot off on me.
Least I managed to get a barrier partially up, but it broke through that and my shields, started
burning through my armor," I explained for Sid. "And, it was your sister who pulled me out of the
line of fire when I went down."

"Ooh, been going on for a while then, huh?" Sid teased.

Jaal took off his Rofjinn and rolled up his sleeves. At least it seemed like he wouldn't be shirtless.
Peebee on the other hand, unbuttoned, and threw off her own shirt, then taking off her pants. I, of
course, made an effort to not watch. I would never be unfaithful to Vetra, but like back in Tartarus,
it's still hard to avert your eyes sometimes. Jaal on the other hand? Wasn't able to take his eyes off
her. Fortunately, for all parties involved, likely except Jaal and Peebee themselves, she wasn't
naked under there. Instead, she left herself in, of all things, a bikini.

"So, among all that crap you moved onto the ship when you first joined, one of them was a
bikini?" I asked, laughing slightly.

"Of course not, got these out of the fabricator before we left. Jaal helped with the measurements," she
answered. Jaal got rather flustered when the measurements. Hm, wonder just how he helped
with that. Were they this much of a handful, or this much? Chuckling, I set myself down on the
rightmost towel, beer in hand. Vetra laid herself down to my side, and Sid, to her's. Didn't see
where Jaal and Peebee set up shop. I let out a satisfied moan as I felt the heat envelop my body.
The nice, wonderful, soothing heat.

"Been too fucking long," I smiled as I felt the muscles in my body relax.

"This really has an effect on you, huh?" Vetra chuckled.

"Oh yeah, Florida boy is a happy boy right now," I answered, eyes shut, just feeling in bliss.
"Florida man strikes again!" Sid laughed. I broke out in laughter at knowing that Sid, of course, knew of the adventures of Florida man.

"Something like that. So, Vetra, riddle me this. I know Turians, male or female, don't exactly have anything on their chests. Why haven't you taken off your shirts for more sun?" I asked. I genuinely was simply curious.

"Uh-huh," Vetra teased. "Well, among Turians, being shirtless, regardless of which sex you are, has an intimate connotation. Kind of thing you only do with your partner," Vetra explained.

"Fair enough. Oh, should I go put my shirt back on then? If it has that kind of connotation with you?" I asked, turning to look at her.

I smirked as I saw that she had her own head already turned to its side, staring me down, looking me over. I'm not the buffest man I've ever seen, but I do know I'm fit. The Alliance, dad, saw to that. Abs, visible, toned muscles, broad shoulders, the works.

"Not if you know what's good for you…" Vetra whispered. Then snapped back to reality. "Uh, no! No, you're fine," she mumbled. Sid, Jaal, and Peebee broke out in laughter. As did I. I just grabbed hold of her hand and gave it a squeeze. "We've learned to temper it so that we don't take it the same when a non-Turian is shirtless."

"Though it seems some don't do as well as others," Sid teased. Without looking, Vetra launched one of her legs back, lightly striking Sid in her own leg, which simply led her to laugh louder.

"Scott, did you do this a lot, back in the Milky Way?" Jaal questioned.

"Sunbathing? No. My mom did though. Sometimes Sarah would join her, other times she'd join me. Still outside, still getting a tan, but in the water," I answered.

"Oh? Like, an ocean, or lake, or…?" Jaal trailed off.

"Normally an ocean or pool. Back in Florida, going swimming in ANY lake isn't the best of ideas. It's different if you know, or if a lot of people are swimming in it, but it's not unlikely that Gators made their home in a lake or pond. Not to say you should never swim in the same body of water as a gator, just be careful," I explained.

"A gator?" Vetra asked.

"Alligators. Reptilian carnivore. They're kinda prehistoric left overs from the Dinosaur days, where absolutely massive reptiles were all over the Earth, and mammals were mostly just little rodents. A gator more likely to just leave you alone, as most of the time they're smaller than you, but bug one, and they'll bite down. And they have very powerful jaws. I kinda miss seeing them, honestly. And baby gators are cute."

"I'd like to see a picture, sometime," Jaal remarked.

"Sure thing. You know another thing I miss about gators? They taste great," I chuckled. That earned some surprise from the others. "Taste just like chicken."

"There's that phrase again! Tastes like chicken! What's a chicken, and why does apparently everything in the galaxy taste like it?" Vetra exclaimed. I continued laughing.

"It's this little bird from back on Earth, we use it for livestock. Easy to breed and produce for food. And we often eat the eggs they lay. The unfertilized ones, that is," I hastily corrected.
"Wonder what was going through the mind of the first human to try that," Peebee laughed. "Hey, this shelled thing just came out of this little bird's ass, wonder what it tastes like?" Sid got a giggle out of that.

"Milk certainly ain't any better. Some guy, ages ago, looking at a cow. Sees the udders on the underbelly, and wonders what will happen if he squeezes them. A white liquid spurts out, and he thinks, 'I should drink that.'" I joked.

"Wait, udders?" Jaal got confused.

"Basically, cow tits. Big pink spot on its underbelly with, well, guess they're basically big, long nipples that you can squeeze and pull to get milk out.

"Humans are a… strange people…" Jaal murmured.

"Understatement of the century," I chuckled.


"You've never gotten the chance? Damn, we gotta find a way to fix that. Well, I've been swimming since I was six months old, so it comes as natural as walking to me. Is it easy? Very, just keep kicking your legs, pushing down with your arms, and you stay afloat. Get tired, float on your back. I have fun swimming whether it's for leisure, or for a workout. And it's the only workout I can do where I don't feel like I'm working out, despite the burn. I have fun doing it. Just playing around in the water," I answered.

"Six months old? Could you even walk then?" Vetra questioned.

"Nope. And maybe it's not fair to say I could swim since I was six months, but I have been in the water since then. Just had floaties for a few years. Can't remember if it was until I figured out how to simply keep myself afloat, or until my mom was willing to let her baby boy go without them," I smirked.

We stayed there for a while. Lost track of time talking. The fact that the sun's position in the sky never changed didn't help. We shifted to and from shade as needed, getting drinks, cooling off, whatever.

Eventually though, we decided to start heading back. But first, we had to stop at the colony. One more time. Peebee understood that she should wait, and I suggested Jaal might want to come along. But, he thought he'd give Peebee some company.

So long as they ain't fucking in my car.

I'll tell Jaal about this later. The mood in the air between the three of us had changed. Vetra and I both knew, Sid didn't. We were both preparing ourselves so that we'd stay intact. Sid was curious why we had stopped at the Krogan colony, her eyes darting all around, studying everything. We got plenty of looks from the Krogan, no doubt uneasy at seeing two Turians walking around, but none said or did anything. We ventured to the residential district, and to the same place Drack had led us before. I knocked on the door. No voice answered. Instead, the door opened. Straxx smiling, gently. Sid's eyes widened, she gasped, barely audible. And her right hand, shot in front of her mouth, covering it in surprise and shock.

"Hello, little one. It's good to see you again," he greeted softly. Much like her sister, Sid crashed into Straxx, wrapping her arms around him, and cried. Vetra and I both stepped forward, gently rubbing her shoulders. Soon, the crying subsided. We heard two words whispered.
"Thank you."

**Vetra Nyx**

Sid held herself together worse than I had, but that's far, far from unexpected. Sid lived it. She had tried to apologize to Straxx that she never thanked him when he saved her, but he wouldn't hear a bit of that.

In fact, it had never occurred to him until now. If anything, Straxx felt that he should be apologizing both that he didn't arrive sooner, and that she kept it hidden for as long as she did. But in the end, Straxx was just happy she was alive, and doing better. That she had someone like Scott, Drack, Jaal, and I looking after her. Being there for her. Before we eventually had to leave, so that we wouldn't keep Jaal or Peebee waiting in the Nomad too long, Straxx told us that his mate had laid her clutch of eggs, and that he'd like for us to come visit, with Sid, once they've hatched. Sid was more than eager to accept the invite, and Scott and I were both fine with the prospect of an eventual detour.

To be safe, Scott had given Jaal and Peebee both a heads-up that we were on our way back to the Nomad, so one can hope that means we won't walk in on anything we don't want to see. With that, we returned to the Tempest, noticing that the Paradise was still business as usual. We parked the Nomad inside the Tempest for what is likely going to be part of our rest cycle. Peebee and Jaal went their separate way, thanking us for the little relaxing trip we had. Sid felt tired and wanted to get some sleep. Though not before hugging the both of us. Thanking us for arranging the meeting.

I, on the other hand, while worn out, wasn't ready for bed just yet. I had something on my mind. And I think Scott knew it.

"Can we talk?" I requested. Normally, that's the kind of phrase to make a guy shit themselves in fear. But, I managed my tone, and the look in my eyes. Not in a sexual way, no, but to show that something was unsettling me. There's some questions I need answered.

"Course," he nodded my head in the direction of his quarters. He led, I followed. Once inside, he sat himself down on the couch, as did I. Not next to him, but in a position where I could look right at him. "Something wrong?" he asked, concerned.

"No, no," I sighed. "Just…. Well, first, thank you, for everything with Straxx. It meant a lot. To Sid and I both. But, that's not why I wanted to talk. Back at the Flophouse, during our game, and I stood out in the open, when you made that barrier, you said 'Not this time.' What did you mean by that? I haven't taken any serious hits here. Just… curious, I guess." Internally, I chastised myself. That's not what I was really going to ask about. But I saw the look on his face. It seemed like a bad memory.

"I did say that, didn't I? Hardly even realized, if I'm honest," he chuckled lightly. It was a hollow one. "Well, it's a bit of a story. But… it's long buried, and I can handle telling it," he let out a deep breath. I felt bad for bringing this back to his mind.

"Back in the Milky Way, when I first enlisted. There was a girl at the same boot camp, the same class, named Laura. We hit it off. Became damn good friends. Eventually, it became more. We continued serving as part of the same squad, keeping the relationship quiet because those stupid Alliance rules against fraternization. The family knew, though. It lasted a few years, was getting pretty serious. In fact…" Scott shifted his hands awkwardly. "Before my mom got diagnosed, I had begun saving part of the money I got for a ring. But… when she was, we funneled almost every dollar we had to helping her, or funding SAM. Laura knew, she was there for us as much as she
could. Given that I was now out of the Alliance to help mom, the fraternization rules didn't apply, allowed her to help a bit more." Wait, a ring? What does that have to...oh. I remember a few old human friends explaining that. Shit, they were close. But obviously something happened. I don't need to be threatened or anything.

"Hell, when the Alliance found out about SAM, virtually everyone we ever knew cut themselves off from us. Completely. But she didn't. She didn't even bat an eye. She was well liked by my family, and she liked them all well in turn. Aside from Mom, and having an extremely difficult time getting a job almost anywhere, things were still well enough. Then, she got reassigned. To the 212th, on Eden Prime," Scott continued. Shit... I think I know where this is going... "I still remember how excited she was. To serve with the granddaughter of General Williams from Shanxi," Scott allowed a ghost of a smile to form. "And the dig? She couldn't say anything, except that Sara would love it. The next I heard of her? News reports after the Geth attack. I..." Scott choked, I could see tears forming. My heart went out to him. "I saw her... impaled on one of those Dragon's Teeth. Her hair starting to fall off. Her skin turning pale. And... god, her face. The pain, the shock, the horror frozen on her face, in her eyes," he struggled, beginning to cry. She meant a lot to him. And it hurt me to see him hurting like this. I moved myself next to him and wrapped my arm around him, holding him tight.

"It's ok, it's ok," I murmured.

"But," Scott wiped the tears from his face, then his nose, sniffing. "It's over and done. Long ago, buried, and behind me," he took a deep breath, calming himself. "Thanks," he leaned himself into me.

"I'm sorry that had to happen, Scott," I muttered.

"Yeah..." the emotions had not yet worn off. "Well, I guess a good thing or two came of it. If she never got reassigned, I probably would have stayed back in the Milky Way. Never would have gotten to see Andromeda. Meet the crew. Meet you," he gave a half grin.

"Scott-" I began. I was... surprised, yet reassured.

"I'll always mourn her. How could I not? But, I've moved on, and I know that, if she's still, you know, somewhere. That wherever she is, she's happy, and cheering me on with you," he chuckled.

"You're sure?" I questioned, still unsure myself. Scott confidently nodded his head.

"Absolutely. I loved her, she loved me. All either of us really wanted, was for the other to be happy. She wouldn't want me sulking for the rest of my life. To never move on," I leaned my head against his. Letting out a relieved sigh. We sat there in silence, for a while. I had completely forgotten the real reason I had wanted to talk with him. Eventually though, Scott spoke.

"You know, I think I know what I want my prize to be for winning," he grinned. Oh. Please don't let it be what I'm afraid of it being. I'm not ready for that.

"And that is...?" I asked, holding back the nerves.

"I want you to... cook me dinner sometime. Not tonight, doesn't have to be anytime that soon, but at some point, I want you to try and cook me a real human dinner. Not something easy like, say, a burger, but something unexpected," Scott answered. Well, at least it's not what I was afraid of. And it answers the question I had been too afraid to ask. But, I can cook. I've cooked for Sid and I. Had to, taking care of her and everything. But I've never cooked anything Levo. And what I have cooked has never been exactly... complex.
"You want me to cook you dinner?" I asked, chuckling.

"Yyyep, surprise me," Scott smirked.

"Well, it's your funeral," I remarked.

"It's the thought that counts," he retorted.

"Whatever you say," I laughed. "Well, it's been a long day. I'm gonna get some sleep, alright?"

"Sure. And, Vetra?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. I know I said that memory had been buried, but… never really talked with anyone about it. Now it really does feel like it's behind me now," Scott explained. I gave him a small smile.

"Well, I'm here for you. Night, Scott."

"Night, V."
The outpost had arrived, as have Annea's replacements. Led by a man named Collingwood. After an explanation as to how Annea left us with no choice, and that now only we know the location of the water source, AND adding on that we'd give the water freely, while still willing to employ the current security and workers, the transition went surprisingly smoothly. It seems they lacked loyalty to Annea, rather, they were loyal to her water and resources. But now, the Nomad was parked within the new Outpost.

Landing pads had been placed at the large sinkhole at New Tuchanka's north side. Additionally, the North and west entrances had walls, with not one, not two, but three gun emplacements guarding the gap in said wall. And a road had been marked along the unblocked path to New Tuchanka. Currently, the Outpost consisted of merely five pre-fab buildings. Those on the west side, were small, and one of the three were two stories. On the sinkhole side were just two, but one was the larger, two story main building. This is, of course, ignoring the water tanks and solar panels that had been placed within the colony. And the garage. I of course, explored. Vetra and Drack wandering around as they pleased, though mostly staying somewhat close to me. There were, of course, people still setting up or getting arranged all over, but in the second level of the west side building, I found a Salarian who appeared to be the doctor, given the insignia on their shoulder. The doc turned to look, hearing the door open. Confusion, disappointment, and then normalcy flashed across their features within a second.

"Oh, I thought you'd be my patient from the colony. She's twenty minutes late," the doc remarked. Given the higher pitch, a she.

"The colony? And already? Don't the Krogan have doctors though?" I asked.

"Not for injuries," she clarified. "I'm a fertility specialist, Dr. Mesha Lannok," she held out her hand for a shake, which I accepted.

"Scott Ryder. So, how you helping them?"

"I'm working with the Krogan to maximize their new, more lenient birth restriction. The gene therapy they received helps, but they need and deserve more. But I can't do anything if my patients don't even show up," she grumbled.

"Surprised you're helping with that, hell, anyone," I remarked. Without really thinking.

"Why? Because I'm Salarian? I want the Krogan to thrive here just as much as they do," she defended. "The Initiative may not agree with me, but I'm doing whatever I can to lessen the Genophage."

"Apologies for not being clear. I support it fully, and want the Krogan to make a life here. I just didn't know how many others may have that sentiment," I reassured.

"Sorry," Mesha meekly replied. "I'm so used to defending my stance. But I'm glad you agree."

"I certainly do," Drack called out from where he had wandered inside. Made Mesha and I both grin.

"The Krogan have a real shot in Heleus. Better than back home. It's the Initiative's duty to help them along," she reaffirmed.
"Agreed. So, any baby Krogan popping up?"

"A few females have laid eggs, though I can't say how many will succeed. Not yet, at least. It's still early. There's a deeply ingrained psychological pattern to colonization. Though, as shown with the eggs already here, there can be exceptions. The vast majority of births, or in this case, eggs, won't happen til the Krogan feel secure. It's a biological reflex," she explained.

"Well, I wouldn't want the stress of having a child while so many things are still up in the air," I chuckled.

"Quite," Mesha laughed. At that moment, a nervous looking Krogan female entered the office. "Ah, there she is. If you'll excuse us, Pathfinder."

"Of course, good meeting you, Mesha." Drack, Vetra, and I left to explore further.

"Scott… You do know…" Vetra began to whisper, trailing off.

"Course I know that. Was just joking," I shrugged it off.

"But-" she began to continue.

"V, it's fine. Don't worry about it, really," I reassured. "We can talk about this later, I don't know if this is too soon or not to talk like that," I began to mutter. Of course I'd love to have kids someday, and obviously that child couldn't possibly be the flesh and blood of BOTH of us. Whether that's adoption, or I jack off into a cup, it gets sent out, that kid is shared, or the same process but Vetra gets artificially inseminated, or, no kid at all, I'll be alright in the end.

"Yeah, probably a good idea," Vetra muttered. We entered the colony's main building when an Asari noticed us, and made a beeline, stopping us.

"Pathfinder, pleasure to meet you. I'm Karisse Archana. I'm here to oversee operations and attempt to repair relations between the Nexus and the Nakmor clan," she introduced. "And I must say, it is a tremendous accomplishment, securing their cooperation."

"Thanks, and good to meet you, Karisse. Let's just hope it doesn't get screwed up a second time, eh?" I remarked.

"Hm, quite. Leadership's previous decisions regarding the Krogan were… shortsighted. Prejudiced. I won't repeat their mistakes," she reassured.

"So, I assume you are essentially the mayor then?" I asked for clarification.

"To put it simply, yes. While Morda has full control over the Krogan colony, this land is shared. I represent the Initiative for working alongside her. Given that our colonies have merged, we are an extension of New Tuchanka, just not directly under Morda's rule," she explained. "Oh, I almost forgot. Addison wanted to speak to you over the holo. It's just down there, at the end of the hall," she pointed.

"Well, guess I'll go get that over with then. Good meeting you Karisse," I grinned, and turned towards the holo. I approached, and began the call. Waiting only a moment for her to appear.

"You really did it. Almost a civil war, and you brought them back," Addison murmured.

"But it's all about the resources. No poetics, right?" I remarked.
"I considered the Krogan a permanent loss. Too many egos involved. Thankfully my ledgers don't care how they get filled. If I can retroactively call the Krogan colony an outpost, that's a win. But that practicality is not universal. Tann hates this," Addison warned.

"It's hard to calculate how few fucks I give about Tann's opinion. But I think you know that," I retorted. Drack had a hard time suppressing his laughter behind me. Hell, so did Vetra. Even Addison had a smirk on her face.

"I of course, can't comment. Well, with Elaaden, all of our marked golden worlds are accounted for. Some are lost forever, and some might be salvageable with more time. But there we are. The last of the golden failures we thought we'd lost. You did it. And it'll attract thieves. Particularly ones with ZK trackers. We still need the other colonies to be investigated, Pathfinder," she reminded.

"Well we've been requested to help out on Voeld, so we'll need to drop by there anyway," I shrugged.

"Fair enough. But now, I need your voice. Get the flags waving." I took a moment to put something together.

"You may have heard some… interesting things about Elaaden and New Tuchanka. Hot as hell, crashed Remnant ships, Remnant pillars rising from the sand, and even a giant Remnant worm thing that just hangs around the dunes to the northeast. All true. And if I know some of you, that's more of a draw than any flowery words I could use," I spoke loud and clear.

"Into the records. Addison out."

"Well, Elaaden's looking nice and cozy right now. So, that probably means it's time for us to get going," I remarked.

"You said we were heading to Voeld? Do we really have to? I mean, really?" Vetra grumbled.

"Not looking forward to it that much either, I know. But we were requested personally, and call it a chance to check up on the outpost. And, we could drive a Mako," I suggested.

"I'm sold," Drack chuckled.

"Least with a tank we won't have to be outside much," Vetra muttered.

"Yeah, and I'll give Avitus a call about what we found on our way there. See if he's had any better luck."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest was making its way towards that damn ice-ball. Going from one extreme to another. Though maybe the vault's made it even better. I had read the data SAM had copied from Dr. Okeer's data. He was obsessed with creating a perfect Krogan. And he didn't care about curing the Genophage. Odd… Other than that, Lexi had a report on the scav who took some of that serum to try and fix his brain. Was showing progress. Though with signs of slight depression, so whatever was wrong must have been releasing dopamine. Though Lexi was confident it was only temporary. But there was one email that left my eyes wide. It had no subject, but it did have a sender.

Akksul. "Human, 'To hate blindly is as dangerous as to trust blindly.' An old Angaran proverb. One of many I have forgotten somewhere along the way. This is not an apology. I don't know if I will
ever be able to look upon an alien and not feel hatred. But what I did to Jaal was wrong. So, I must try. I will also give you the same official statement that has just been sent to the Resistance. I no longer lead the Roekaar."

Well, fucking A. Guess any more we see of that little group are the most fanatic of the fanatics. Still devoted even after their leader began to doubt. Well, I made my way to the comm room. Let's see what that Ex-Spectre has been up to. I placed the call to him, and surprisingly, hardly even waited that long for him to answer.

"Ryder, and I was just about to call you," he remarked.

"Everything alright, Avitus?" I questioned. He lifted a hand to his forehead, his face straining.

"I've got… numbers. Coordinates, flashing in my head. I think it's an SOS… from Macen," he revealed.

"It must be from your SAM implant," I nodded.

"He's sending me his location," Avitus began to grin, a sigh of relief.

"And on Elaaden we found evidence that Natanus may be intact, but not in the best of states. Pods jettisoned," I explained. "No survivors, but logs showed it happened long after the Ark hit the scourge."

"Someone's still flying the damn thing," Avitus murmured.

"Or keeping it afloat at least. So, coordinates?"

"Sending. Meet me there, and we'll find answers," Avitus stated confidently.

"We'll head straight there. Will send ETA when we know. Scott out," I ended the call, and patched into the intercom.

"Kallo, SAM is sending you new coordinates, we need to go there ASAP. It's Ark Natanus," I explained.

"Truly? At once," the pilot answered.

"Wait, wait, Scott, did I hear that right?" Vetra exclaimed, having heard the intercom.

"That you did. Avitus was getting coordinates through his SAM implant," I answered.

"Spirits…" Vetra murmured.

"Pathfinder, the coordinates are back in the Remav system. ETA… sixteen hours," Kallo stated, only pausing as he waited for the calculation to finish.

"Understood. Least we'll still be close to Voeld by the time we're done there," I remarked. I moved down from the com room to check AVP status. Well, damn. The other colonies must have been making good progress as well. There's not one, not two, not even three or four or five cryo pods ready to be opened. But SIX. That's two civvie blocks. With the remaining four being evenly divided between military and science. Speaking of science, wonder how Peebee is coming along with Poc. I made my way to the escape pod bay, and knocked. Just to be safe. The door opened on its own. Poc was once more floating in a corner of the room, but Peebee had sat herself on the floor, a bottle of beer in her hand.
"There you are," I stated, entering the room.


"Ok, who stole Peebee and put you in her clothes?" I questioned, trying some light humor to perk her up.

"Not funny," she looked up, still deadpan.

"It's a little funny," I nudged. There was the ghost of a smirk.

"Ok, it's a little funny." Peebee pulled a data pad from her pocket. "I received this." she pressed a button on said data pad.

"Hey babe. Sorry I broke your pet. It lacked versatility. Couldn't keep up. Maybe I'll do the same with your other new toy. Ta." Kalinda's mocking voice filled the room.

"She means you. Jaal, if she knows, everyone else here. I hate her," Peebee grimaced.

"Then why are you letting it bug you?" I asked gently. "Do you really hate her? Don't get me wrong, she's not exactly the best of people, but… I don't know."

"Me neither…" Peebee sighed. "It's not that she took my bot and broke her. We got Poc back and I repaired her, better than ever. Didn't even find any bugs. Now my scanner is fully upgraded and sweeping the cluster for Remnant signals. We won," Peebee explained. Yet her voice lacked any sense of mirth.

"But…?"

"It's just… drummed up feelings I thought I'd put behind me. Turns out, I just buried them," she continued, sadly. Then she took on more anger. "This is what happens when you let people in! You acquire baggage. I travel light, damn it. No baggage!" she exclaimed. I sat down beside her, hand on her shoulder.

"Come on Peebee, you don't mean that. Sure, sometimes the wrong people get in, and you have to force them out. Sometimes that leaves a mark. But think about what happens when you let the right kind of people in. Me, the crew, and most importantly, Jaal. I know what it's like to have baggage. I've known for a long time. Yet I wouldn't have given it up for anything," I comforted.

"Well then I'm just not able to deal with it," Peebee argued, her head lowering.

"Don't be so sure. Very few people are ever able to truly handle baggage like that alone. And even then, only for so long. There's this one piece of baggage I've been carrying since about two years before we left. Like you, I thought I put it behind me. But, still always bugged me. Just last night, I told that story to Vetra. Her being there, comforting me, now it feels like it's behind me. So, get Jaal. Talk to him. Another one of those heart-to-hearts you've told me you've had with him. Let him hold you, be there for you, comfort you, whatever it is you need. It helps a lot knowing you have someone that cares about you like that," I explained. Peebee raised her head to look at me.

"Yeah… I guess that does help. Thanks, Scott," Peebee grinned. "Vetra got lucky with you."

"Could you mention that to her offhandedly? I think she's just scraping the bottom of the barrel with me, but hey, so long as one of the two of us believes that, right?" I joked.

"I'll keep that in mind," Peebee laughed.
"Thanks. Alright, I'll go, let you and Jaal talk," I shook her shoulder reassuringly.

"Before you go," she stated as I stood. "I want you to know. I let Kalinda become important to me. You know how that turned out. Now, you, the others, Jaal, are becoming important. You need to know, I resist checking out of this hotel every day." I made a show of glancing around the room.

"With accommodations like these, I don't blame you," I remarked.

"You are funny," Peebee chuckled, shaking her head. "Hopefully the new scanner will pick up something amazing and make all this Kalinda trouble worthwhile."

"Bah, as if we need the scanner. All we need is you and your freaky Remnant sixth sense," I teased. Peebee chuckled, and I left the room. Well, who can I talk with next? Haven't spoken much with the bridge crew, or Gil, in a while. But as I left Peebee's room, Kallo and Suvi were both deep in a conversation. Something about new readings from the science team on the Scourge. Nothing I'd have a great time understanding. So, I wandered off to the engine room. I could see Gil inside, paying only mild attention to the drive core. Just seeing more… spaced out otherwise. Wonder what he's thinking about. The sound of the door opening snapped his attention back to reality.

"Oh, hey Scott. So, question for you," he greeted.

"Shoot," I remarked casually, leaning against the wall, the hum of the drive core ever present.

"When all this craziness is over, think you'll have kids?" he asked.

"Well hello left field," I chuckled. "You do know who I'm in a relationship with, right? Regardless, what brought this on?"

"Jil, you know, the best friend I've mentioned. She's starting the Initiative's first repopulation effort at Prodromos. It's all she can talk about. It got me thinking. At the end of the day, this whole thing, the Andromeda Initiative… we're basically here to spawn," Gil murmured.

"Well, that is kinda the thing that organic species do. Took you this long to figure that out?" I asked jokingly.

"I told you. I didn't really think this thing through. But nothing we do here really matters unless we survive. Jil's right. At some point soon, we better get busy making babies," Gil continued. "Who knew this thing was just a glorified dating service?" Gil sighed. "The biological imperative is kind of a bummer."

"Well that's all one big weird conversation Vetra and I are gonna have once this is all over," I murmured. "But, you want to have a kid of your own? I think that's what I'm getting here," I prodded. Gil just… paused. Thinking.

"I… I don't really know. That's never been a thing for me," he murmured. "You know me. Whatever my gut says in the moment, I do. And I don't look back. My mom says that's how my dad was. I wouldn't know. His gut moved on before I was born."

"Sorry Gil, must've been hard," I tried to comfort.


"Sure, won't keep ya," I nodded, and walked out. Damn when this is all over? What's that even
gonna be like? What do I want it to be like? I want Vetra to be there right alongside me, but, what else? What about everything else?

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

With a power-nap or two, some meals, even just re-watching old shows back in my room, FINALLY, we got the alert that we were about to be exiting FTL. I immediately headed for the bridge to see what we'd find. The ship slowed out of FTL. We were greeted with the same asteroid field as H-1047c in front, the gas giant in the background. But there was no sign of the massive asteroid we were on last time we were here. Then, we got pinged by an Initiative signal, and I heard the door open behind us. Vetra and Sid both coming to see.

"Scott," Avitus greeted. "Guessing that blip I just got was you? Haven't been waiting long. The coordinates lead inside that field, but I thought your scans would do a better job of picking up Natanus than me just weaving my way through all that," he explained.

"Certainly can't blame you there. Hang on. Suvi, scanners telling us anything?" I asked her.

"A moment… yes, I'm getting something. Source pinpointed, certainly seems like it should be the Ark. Kallo, can you bring us in closer?" Suvi requested.

"Of course. Avitus, transmitting our course, should allow you to follow right behind us," the Salarian answered.

"Course received. Lead the way," Avitus responded. The ship got closer and closer to the field, before needing to navigate to avoid larger rocks. Fortunately, it seemed that all the asteroid's in this belt moved relatively slowly. Gave us enough breathing room. And then, there it was. Unmistakable. It still had lights flickering, but had clearly suffered scourge damage.

"That's… the Turian ark…" I murmured. "Sure has seen better days.

"How bad is it?" Sid asked nervously.

"Hold on, running a detailed scan," Suvi stated. "Severe damage to all sections due to Scourge exposure. Also detecting fifteen-thousand, three-hundred-seventy-two stasis pods on board, opposed to the original twenty-thousand. Given the hull damage, the ark is not safe for transport, certainly not FTL. However, a recovery team shouldn't have too much issue extracting the remaining pods," she reported.

"Could be better, could be worse," I remarked.

"Life support appears to be running on emergency power. Only keeping those in stasis alive. There won't be any atmo when you board. I believe gravity may also be offline," Suvi warned.

"There's still a chance he's alive. Suit up, and meet me in the upper starboard docking bay. It appears intact," Avitus stated.

"Wilco," I answered, ending the call. I turned back to face Vetra.

"Go ahead and get suited up. SAM, get Drack and Cora ready as well. With the muscle and the biotics, we shouldn't have much problem if anything blocks our path," I ordered. Vetra nodded, and took Sid with her away as I went down to my quarters to get in my under suit. With that, and my return to the armory, I donned my Pathfinder armor, and only bothered bringing my rifle. I get the feeling we won't need our weapons.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Avitus had landed and departed before we had, impatiently moving ahead, though I can't say I blame him. We caught up with him just outside what should be Natanus' equivalent of Hyperion's Habitation deck. His white armor with red lights almost fitting in nicely with the white walls and the red glow of emergency lighting. He turned to face us, helmeted, just like the rest of us. Gravity was online, but barely, and there was, as Suví said, no atmosphere. Things were still floating in the air, thanks to the state of the artificial gravity currently, though our mag boots kept us grounded. His helmet lit up his face through the visor as Avitus spoke.

"Limited power, life support's busted. Surprised there's any gravity at all," he murmured.

"This can't be easy to see. I don't know how I'd feel seeing Hyperion like this," I attempted to comfort. I know Vetra wasn't having the best time either, but was just happy they had been found.

"I'm not really a feelings type of guy, Scott," Avitus shook his head. "Let's just find Macen. H-047c. Was supposed to be the Turian home world in Heleus."

"And the scourge had its way with both..." Vetra muttered.

"Whoever was piloting the ark wanted to get here no matter the cost," Avitus theorized.

"They wanted to find home," I nodded.

"It's not really a home if no one's left to live there," Avitus retorted. "Come on, speculation won't get us anywhere." There was a barely active terminal just in this room that I skimmed through for any info. Just correspondence between the captain and Macen before they left. About H-047c and then Macen, the Captain, and Avitus, Avi, as Macen called, a nickname, I guess, getting drinks. Nothing useful. The door towards the bridge and SAM node didn't have the power to open. Fortunately, that's what power redirects are for. And there was a power console, online just by the door. Transferred power from one door somewhere else on the ship to here, and it opened for us. Another terminal with correspondence between crew. Avitus to leadership, the captain to Avitus, and Macen to Avitus. Nothing interesting in any except the one from Macen. Wanting 'Avi's' face to be the last thing he sees before Cryo. This is sounding like it's more than just a strong friendship. Jesus, if true, no wonder Avitus was so impatient when he landed here. Can't imagine what's going on in his head.

"Scott, console over here looks pretty busted. Think your SAM can get us in?" he called out from across the room. I walked over, seeing the console for myself.

"Don't give the AI all the credit. I help," I joked. "SAM, try to fix it and pretend I helped."

"I found a log from Dea Praeton, the Ark's captain. The video is corrupt, but I can recover the audio," SAM explained.

"Something's tearing Natanus apart," a female's voice, the captain's, was played through our comms. "Half the cryo chamber is gone. Trying to get anyone awake to the escape pods. Spirits, there's no time. Find Macen!"

"Maybe she found him. Made it to the escape pods?" I suggested.

"He wouldn't leave the ark without me," Avitus countered. "Natanus didn't get here on its own. We need to know what happened next."
"I can gather no more data from this console. I recommend finding the Ark's SAM, or at least another console," SAM informed.

"Then that's what we do," I nodded. Fortunately, the next two doors opened without issue. Unfortunately, the second was blocked by debris. So, we diverted power to the adjacent door, and it was clear. Yeah, the Atrium, just outside the bridge. No bodies, just debris and blockage. And another console. We all approached.

"Still got power," Avitus murmured. I managed to get an audio log to play. A man's voice.

"SA… SAM. How're we doing?" he questioned. Must be Macen.

"Macen!" Avitus exclaimed. And I was right, it was him. There was just static now. "Bring it back!"

"Could use a little help, SAM," I requested.

"Like the previous log, video data is corrupt. I am working on repairing the audio data," SAM answered.

"We'll find him, Avitus," I reassured. I'll admit, I was starting to feel less sure.

"Macen. He's… more than the Pathfinder to me," Avitus began meekly. Guess they were.

"Playing the audio now," SAM stated.

"SAM. How far to Avi's pod?" Macen questioned.

"300 meters," the AI answered.

"An easy stroll then," Macen let out a pained chuckle. There was the noise, of perhaps hull shearing off. "Damn it. Maybe not so easy."

"Where's the rest of it?" Avitus questioned.

"That is all I could recover," SAM explained.

"Damn it!" Avitus muttered.

"We know he survived the initial impact," I pointed out.

"He didn't sound good," Avitus sighed.

"Don't give up on him yet," I reinforced. We assumed the ship's internal layout was like Hyperion, so we made our way to SAM node. With another power diversion, we were provided access. The door opened, Avitus rushed in. The hologram of the Turian SAM was flickering, but there. Lying beside the console, however? A body. Black and red armor. A helmet resting on the floor. The head? A victim of the effects of a vacuum. Avitus saw the body, and froze, before slowly beginning to move closer. My squad and I slowly followed behind. We knew what this was. Vetra took my hand in hers, squeezing it, and I squeezed hers. We were both still there. Avitus collapsed to his knees in front of the body.

Macen's head was a gruesome sight. The eyes had long frozen and popped. His mandibles frozen stiff where the mouth hadn't collapsed in on itself. It looked like his skin was covered by frost, blue, almost, in color. The colony markings remained. Barely. And other features I assume would be barely recognizable. Avitus slowly reached out his hand as if to touch him, to take his head in
his hands, but then stopped himself. Who knows, what if he touched him, and the head just shattered? He needed to just feel Macen, and that was something he couldn't do.

"Macen…" Avitus choked back the tears.


"My counterpart is suffering from severe trauma. If I partition the damage, it may be able to speak with us," SAM informed.

"Be careful. I don't want to lose this SAM because we rushed for answers," I whispered. A moment passed.

"Avitus Rix. Welcome home," the AI greeted. It gained no response.

"We found the ark because Avitus received coordinates from Macen via his SAM implant," I answered for him.

"You are mistaken. I sent the coordinates," the AI stated.

"Do you have a final log?" I asked gently.

"I do. Though I need Avitus' permission to play it. Shall I play the Pathfinder's final log, Avitus Rix?" the Turian SAM questioned. Still no answer. "Avitus Rix-" the AI began again.

"What? Yes… play it…" he murmured, still staring at him.

"Avi," Macen coughed. "Whatever we hit, a piece of it shredded my suit." Avitus looked down, as did I. There was gash in the side. An open wound. The blood frozen. That suit is likely the only thing keeping his body intact. "Stings like hell, but spirits, it's beautiful. I need you to go on for the both of us. Don't let that temper get the better of you. SAM, commence transfer," Macen ordered.

"Yes, Pathfinder," the AI answered.

"Even the stars look brighter…" Macen murmured. And then released one deep breath. His last.

"The Pathfinder died before I could complete the transfer. That was the source of my trauma, and the vague information you received in your implant," the Turian AI explained for us.

"Why bring me here? What was the point?" Avitus questioned, still staring at Macen's disfigured face.

"To complete the transfer. The Turians need a Pathfinder," the AI answered.

"I can't…" Avitus murmured.

"Why not?" I asked gently.

"I never thought I'd get the job. My whole career, I worked alone. I don't know how to lead people. I don't want to lead people!" he exclaimed. "But Macen? He… he inspired everyone. He inspired me to be better than what the council wanted of me. To break away, be my own man. I… I can't do that…"

"Avitus, when we first met, I saw you leading those refugees. You led them, you protected them. You found the Turian ark. You've already been playing the part of Pathfinder. You just didn't have the title," I argued.
"A title that belonged to him!" Macen countered, pointing at the body of his lover.

"Which he wanted you to have. Rejecting it won't bring him back. My title, my ship, my crew, all of it should have been my father's. Even my armor is his. Rejecting it wouldn't have brought him back," I continued.

"What if I let him down?" Avitus murmured.

"You'd only do that by walking away," I answered gently. He looked away from Macen, to me, and back.

"Damn it…" he shook his head. "You're right…"

"Shall I begin transfer?" the Turian SAM asked.

"It'll be safer to do that on the Nexus. My SAM, call Kandros and Tann. We need to pick up the SAM node, gently. Tell them the Turians have a Pathfinder and an Ark to recover," I ordered. There was no reply. I didn't need one.

"Not to sound rude, Scott, but… please, I want to be alone," Avitus requested.

"Take all the time you need," I answered softly. We turned, and left the room. We heard a sniffle, and then choking, and then crying, before Avitus cut himself out of our comms.

Drack and Cora had returned to the ship, but Vetra and I both lingered outside SAM node. Just in case Avitus needed to not be alone while the shuttles were on their way. We simply sat alongside the wall in silence, against each other, leaning on each other. Constantly reminding one another that we were still there. Eventually, he walked back out to see us waiting.

"You can go. I'm going to wait in my shuttle, follow them back to the Nexus. Thank you," he murmured. We both stood, and while Vetra refused to let go of my hand, and I hers, I do have more than one. And that spare gently grabbed him on the shoulder.

"If you EVER need to talk, Avitus. I know exactly what you're going through," I reassured.

"Do you?" he replied bitterly. "Sorry, just…" he began to apologize.

"Don't worry, Avitus. I understand. Eden Prime," I gave him all the explanation he'd need. Vetra and I returned to the Tempest together. Sid was there to meet us, though she had already been told what happened.

"How's Avitus?" she asked quietly.

"About as well as you can expect. Took the role, but he'll be feeling this for a long time. And he doesn't seem like the kind of guy with the best grasp on how to deal with emotions, so, probably even longer than me," I muttered. Sid tilted her head to the side questioningly. I caught on to what I said and Sid's look. I just sighed and shook my head. Sid just silently nodded her understanding returning to the armory to let us be.

"I'm going to go get changed. Would you do the same and wait for me in your quarters?" Vetra requested.

"Yeah, sure. Want me to grab beer?" I asked.

'Yeah, probably," Vetra sighed. I nodded, giving her hand one last squeeze as we reluctantly let go
of one another. To take the armor off and store it, before heading to our own rooms. I grabbed a
dextro beer out of the mess, then left it in my room's mini-fridge before getting out of my under suit
and into more casual clothes. I know Voeld is both next and close-by, but I think when we land
we'll stay on board for a small while. I waited on my desk chair for the door to open, which it soon
did, admitting the woman I had been waiting for. I leaned forward, opening the mini-fridge and
tossing her the dextro beer I grabbed, and taking one for myself. Without words, I stood, and we
sat next to each other on my couch. Legs resting on the coffee table as we sipped our drinks. Vetra
had her head resting on my shoulder, and her hand had once more found mine. We stayed like that
in silence, until the drinks were empty.

"Don't do that to me," Vetra whispered. "Please, just… don't."

"I'm not planning on it," I murmured, placing my right hand over her right, which was clasped onto
my left. "But that request goes both ways, ok?" I turned to look at her. She looked back at me.

"Agreed." Our eyes closed, and our lips met. Followed by tongues. Soon, hands were along sides,
or the back of our heads. And my back to the sofa. Then, Vetra parted for air. Having gotten lost in
that little trance, I felt a momentary surge of grumpiness at it being taken away.

"Can we move this to the bed? So we can be beside each other without rolling off?" she requested
gently. Clarifies that it's not that. I nodded, and Vetra got off me, allowing me to stand. Hand
finding hand once more, we made the short walk to the bed. I laid down in the center of the bed on
my back. Vetra lay on her side, so I shifted to face her. "Just reminding myself that it wasn't me
that lost someone," she murmured. She wrapped her arms around me, as best she could given our
position, and pressed her forehead against mine. It wasn't long before our foreheads parted, and our
tongues met again. I had a hand run across my cheek before pulling me closer by the back of my
head. I had one hand along her back and our legs intertwined. Our mouths parted once more for air,
and we gazed into each other's eyes. And then we crashed back together more aggressively. Soon, I
was back flat on my back, straddled by the Turian woman, our hands exploring the other. We
parted again, calming ourselves down.

"Definitely not leaving," I smiled, running my hand along her cheek. She tilted her head into my
hand and hummed quietly.

"Good." She lowered her head onto my shoulder, and her arm sprawled across my chest. My hand
found itself over her own, while my other rubbed the small of her back. I don't know if either of us
fell asleep, but that's how we stayed for what technically was hours, but neither felt like nearly that
long, or nearly long enough.
Divisions

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest may have landed at Taerve Uni a few hours ago, but I was a bit pre-occupied comforting, and being comforted by my girlfriend. Huh, still weird to say about her. I know we still had to scan for those ZK trackers, but it makes little difference if we do so when we arrive, or when we leave. Soon, though, Vetra and I had to get up, and go back to get set up.

SAM had untinted the viewport to my quarters, and there was daylight. And my AI friend told me that the Temperature has slowly been rising. The snow certainly won't be missing anytime too soon, but hey, it's better. I had chosen to don my father's N7 armor, not because I suspected heavy fighting, but rather just for that bit of extra temperature control. And a helmet. I sent a quick message to the crew for them to just wait inside the cargo hold while I went for a discussion with the outpost leaders. As I stepped out into the cold of Voeld, well, I honestly couldn't even feel it. The armor's climate control was able to fight it. No doubt the sun being out helps a bit as well. There were more Pre-fabs around the colony, more landing pads as well. And more plots for minor farming. I even saw some colonists setting up a drill. Not sure if it's for resources, or to try and nab some geothermal. The colonists themselves were still wearing heavy winter jackets, snow pants, snow boots. All looking like they were fur-lined. Even saw a few Ushankas. Now if only they were squatting in yellow Adidas tracksuits blaring hard bass, and yelling "Cyka Blyat."

I made my way towards the main, administrative building of the colony, receiving greetings and responding accordingly, from both Resistance and Initiative around. I found Priya Blake sitting at a desk, either typing reports of her own, reading messages, all while talking to someone over the comms. She saw me approach, and asked whoever she was talking to, to wait a moment.

"Good to see you again, Pathfinder. What brings you back to Taerve Uni?" she greeted.

"Good to see you again too, Priya. And nice to see that my armor's climate control can finally keep me warm on this ice ball. Anyways, my presence was requested by a member of the Resistance, but I wanted to check in, see if you needed anything while I was here," I explained.

"Well… there is something," she trailed off. She let out a sigh as she continued. "I sent some scientists out to drill for geothermal. They've gone missing. Haven't reported back in. We have a final transmission, but I don't want to send more of my people out in case it's a Kett trap," Priya answered.

"Give me the coordinates and a Mako, and consider it done," I offered.

"Gladly. We refresh our access codes daily, so here's a new one. Just be sure to log it. Sending coordinates now," Priya nodded, typing away at her Omni-tool, as the coordinates transferred.

"Much appreciated. If your people are alive, we'll bring em home," I reassured. Priya gave her thanks and I let her return to her work. I eagerly headed to the garage, logged the Mako I would be taking, and brought it just to the end of the Tempest's cargo ramp. "Pathfinder team, come out and see what little treat I've got for ya," I commed the others. I saw the cargo bay doors open and the others start to stride out. Liam raised a celebratory fist into the air, and more than a few heads nod. I opened the Mako's doors, and heard laughter as they entered. Cora got to the engineering seat beside me, and Liam stood for the gunner, just like when we first took one of these babies for a spin. They were the best trained for those tasks. The others took their seats back in the troop compartment. I began the drive, first to the Resistance base to see Raelis for what she wanted from
"So! We got two jobs here today. First, our assistance was requested by a Resistance member by the name of Raelis. Said she found something interesting we could help her with. Find out just what all that means, and then some scientists from the outpost went missing. Last transmission is at the east end of the valley, just to the north east of the old Kett base," I explained.

"Think the Kett took em?" Liam asked.

"Doubtful, but not improbable. The Kett do still maintain a presence in this valley, yes, but they prefer to remain on the defensive. Even adopting the same hit and run tactics we've used on them for years. They still maintain a strong presence on Voeld elsewhere, but not here," Jaal countered.

"Didn't I hear stuff about the Initiative helping you guys out in a few combat ops?" Drack questioned.

"Yes, Taerve Uni, your APEX and Militia forces there, have been a large help in giving Voeld's capital the breathing room it needed. Aid from these Mako tanks, armed shuttles, and even fighters for air assaults have been a boon. For a long time, the Kett have maintained a strong air superiority," Jaal explained. "We've had AA guns, yes, though they are difficult to make. Fortunately, the Initiative has given us designs for your own anti-air guns and artillery that our scientists are working on replicating or improving with our own methods."

"Just imagine when we start building real ships. The Tempest is tiny compared to mostly everything we had back home," Cora remarked.

"Yes, the Angara haven't been able to spare the resources for warships since before the Kett. And those are what we'll need if we're ever able to truly push the Kett out of Heleus," Jaal replied.

"Can't wait to see cruisers, or even dreadnaughts taking shots at Kett warships. I remember seeing vids from the end of the Skyylian blitz, vids taken from cams on the hull of Alliance ships as their Mass Accelerator cannons fired at pirate ships. Just... the silence as you see the gun charge and fire, then the silent flicker as the round punches through the enemy ship, maybe hits the drive core. Just watch it explode, and not a damn sound. Hell, it's even amazing watching rounds just bounce off the shields of the ship the cam is attached to," I chuckled at my recollections.

"And we won't have a treaty of Farixen limiting how many dreadnaughts we can make," Vetra remarked.

"Ha, why bother with cruisers and carriers and everything else? Just make only dreadnaughts!" I laughed. I of course knew that the idea was stupid and should never be implemented in any Navy, cruisers, carriers, destroyers, all serve valuable roles that can't be overlooked. But hey, humor is humor.

"I dread to think of what could happen," Liam joked. I know I chuckled, and Cora groaned. Though everyone else? Damn puns don't translate right.

"Lemme guess, Liam made a shitty pun, but because our words for dreadnaught, and dread are different, we have no idea what the fuck he said," Peebee remarked.

"Yes, yes he did." Cora groaned. We continued the drive to the Resistance base without issue. The only sign of Kett being an occasional shuttle in the distance. Too far away to take aim on, let alone too short a time-frame. The Mako was parked outside the door to the base, and I allowed the others to remain inside the vehicle if they wished. Jaal, however, still followed me inside. Plenty of the
Resistance recognized us, either from the party we had when we were last here, or other reports. Soon enough, we found Raelis working at a terminal, reading over the reports crossing her screen.

"Raelis?" Jaal got her attention.

"That's me! Yes, I'm Raelis," her head shot up, her gaze locking onto us as she got out of her chair. "Wow, you really showed up!"

"Sorry it took so long, we have a list of things to take care of, sometimes things that can't wait pop up," I shrugged.

"Oh, I know, don't worry. I've seen plenty of reports," she grinned. She seemed rather excited.

"You seem… thrilled. Come on, I'm just another soldier," I reassured.

"Just another soldier? You saved the Moshae from the Kett! And more than just her! So many people owe you their lives!" she argued.

"Come on, I hardly did it alone. If I even began to try I'd have died within five minutes," I countered.

"Regardless, we should get to the point of why I asked for you. Your raid on the exaltation facility and the Kett base have sent them scrambling. They're still trying to get their operations in order. Our scouts report increased Kett movement through certain areas of Voeld. But not military. Science and research," she explained. "Yet still under heavy guard."

"Doesn't matter if it's scientist Kett, warrior Kett…" I struggled to think of another Kett role. Eh, guess that one works. "Janitorial Kett. They're all bad news," I agreed.

"Some of us were concerned they might be planning more exaltation. And your outpost would have plenty of ideal candidates," she warned. "Ignoring the plenty of our own out there they could put through torturous study. The encryptions on these minor bases are too heavy for our own tech. But someone needs to stop them."

"Like someone with an AI. You're talking to the right person. More than happy to help. So, point us in the right direction," I nodded.

"I knew you'd help," Raelis grinned. "Sending the nav-point now. Good luck."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Hey, didn't we blow this place the hell up last time?" Drack questioned. He was right, when we first took a Mako for a joyride, we stumbled across this outpost, blew holes in the walls with the main gun, slaughtered the Kett here. But it had been repaired.

"Guess they came back and fixed it up. Can't blow it up this time though. I wanna know what they've been up to," I answered.

"Where's the fun in that?" Drack mumbled.

"Liam, get ready. But try to stick to the machine gun," I ordered.

"You got it, boss," he responded. We sped towards the base. Plenty of Chosen, opened fire, rounds pinging off the Mako's shields. But they were spread out outside amongst a bunch of supply crates.
Now that, we could blow up.

"Fire at will, you can use the main cannon on anyone not close to the main building," I ordered again.

"Now there's the fun!" Drack chuckled. We heard the rapid fire of the machine gun and the boom of the main cannon as the Kett still struggled to break through the shields, and their own numbers quickly dwindling. To make it even harder for the Kett, the Mako kept moving, while the turret remained locked on them.

"Shuttle coming in from the north!" Cora called out.

"Got it," Liam answered, the turret swiveling up to face the shuttle, a boom resonating within the vehicle as an explosion bloomed at the bottom of the back end of the shuttle. Pierced the drive core. Though small, the Eezo would still react violently, and the whole shuttle exploded into shrapnel. Liam, Drack, Jaal, Peebee, Vetra, and I all laughed at the detonation, while Liam returned to work on the other Kett. Soon, he gave us an all clear. The shields had never broken, and were currently recharging to full strength.

"Drack, Vetra, Peebee, come with me. Just in case anyone is hiding inside," I ordered. The three of them nodded, and with weapons raised, followed me to the small, likely one or two room 'base' door. I got SAM into the system, and seconds later, the door unlocked. We entered in a standard breaching procedure, but no one was inside. Plenty of crates and equipment however. I looked at one of the desks, there was what looked like one of the needles used in exaltation. I scanned it. It contained samples of plasma, brain tissue, and bone fragments taken from several Ascended Kett. And there was a data chip beside it. Contained charts showing genetic sequences of the subjects in large detail.

"Find more of those needles, run scans with them, and take them. Maybe we could learn something," I ordered. The console was still online. I searched it. This one had an audio log, and two other logs. Initial observations of discovered species. One for Salarians, and Turians. The Salarian one stated that they were short lived, fragile in the sense of no natural armor, high metabolism, and the Kett suspected exceptional brain functions. The Turian one described their carapace, how it was metallic in nature. They assumed for protection, but didn't know it was primarily protection from radiation. They found out the obvious dextro protein, and noted that they were agile. Their height and skeletal structure allowing for increased reach and flexibility. Makes sense, though haven't gotten a chance to test just how… flexible Vetra is… I shook those thoughts out of my mind as I played the audio log.

"The Angaran genetic code that expresses as projection of a bioelectric field has been isolated. The process to integrate this into our own genome is ongoing. Early successes documented. Once complete, adaptation to be distributed to all Ascended in Heleus. Ability may also prove useful as part of base soldier configurations. All research has been transmitted to the empire," the Monotone voice explained.

"That confirms it… It's more than making more Kett, they want to gain beneficial traits," Jaal murmured, having heard the log over the coms.

"He said 'Empire.' Anyone else catch that?" Liam asked.

"Yeah. And I don't like the sound of it. Just how many more are out there?" I muttered. We continued searching. There was a sample of Angaran DNA, one that was unknown thanks to improper storage, an exalted Kett soldier, specifically adrenal secretions, plasma, and bone fragments. And another data chip with charts. Muscle tissue, bone marrow, and epithelial cells
from Kett fiends. With another data chip of charts. Finally, another bio specimen from a species we  
couldn't identify. Must be something outside of Heleus. In addition, more data logs. One log read  
'Exaltation: Phase Shu.' It read "With the Angaran genome unraveled, we have begun the process  
of isolating the most valuable trait to augment the Kett. Bio-electrical discharge: Isolated and  
reproduced. We have commenced the distribution of this ability amongst Ascended. Conversion of  
light to energy: Tricky, much more integrated into Angaran physiology. Our current focus. Note:  
Angaran genetics complex, but elegant. Lacking obsolete, residual traits, commonly found in  
evolved species. Similar to Kett in certain ways." Intriguing, but likely just coincidental.  

Another log, for humans. Observed that we're soft-skinned. No natural armor. Without technology,  
we can only survive in a narrow range of environmental conditions. We're more genetically diverse  
than the other species, somehow. And, this is likely just taken from intercepted logs, renowned for  
tenacity and adaptability. Probably an unfair analysis, the other species certainly have the capacity  
for the same. In addition, on this set of logs, was an audio log.  

"Transmissions unacknowledged by home world. Possible breakdown in connection and  
information mishandled. Investigation ongoing. Logs to be updated shortly."  

"So, the Kett aren't the well-oiled machine they seem to be," Vetra mused.  

"E.T.'s trying to phone home, but it just goes right to voicemail," I muttered. "Old movie  
reference," I explained quickly before any of the non-humans asked. Peebee called out she found  
another data pad and I scrolled through. More species logs. The Asari and Krogan. For the Asari,  
they've put together that they are extremely long-lived. They understand that all Asari can create  
gravitational fields of some variety, but they don't fully understand it. I bet the fact that other  
species have biotics, but aren't all biotics confuses them greatly. They understand that Asari are  
mono-gendered, but don't understand HOW they reproduce. From what little they have intercepted  
however, they have heard 'rumors' that they can take in genetic traits of other species to improve  
their own. And this is of great interest to a Kett known as the Primus. The Krogan log also noted  
that they were long lived. Large and muscled. Hardy, resistant to many environmental conditions,  
and superfluous organs. Evidence of chromosomal damage which they don't fully understand. The  
Genophage. And whoever made this log seemed to believe it needed to be emphasized. That  
Krogan are big bastards. Finally, one more audio log.  

"All transmissions appear to have failed. Some of the team has suggested that this research is being  
prevented from leaving Heleus. Troubling implications. Set aside for now. Taking steps to verify  
that primary communications are still active." And I got a nav-point from the log.  

"Just got a nav-point for a nearby Kett station. Must be their primary communications," I informed.  
And began leading the others back to the Mako.  

"We might learn just why their communications aren't working, and then take out even more of  
their communications," Jaal began to chuckle. "I like the sound of that."  

"Pathfinder, I noticed something interesting in all scans of the Kett bio specimens. They all contain  
the same genetic sequence. At first, it appears to be like a familial connection, but the genome  
shows signs of modification. Evidence suggests that the sequence was drawn from a single  
individual, and incorporated into the other Kett," SAM explained.  

"Remember how the exaltation facility was like a temple, with a big statue of the Archon?" I  
reminded. "Bet he's the individual."  

"Exaltation…" Jaal murmured.
"So, does he lead the Kett because they see him as, what? A father?" Peebee questioned.

"Or does his rank give him the privilege to propagate his genes like this?" Cora added. Jaal just grumbled.

"A cultural question, beyond my purview," SAM answered.

"Hm, well, just make sure that all finds its way to Resistance and Nexus science teams. Meantime, let's hit their comm facility," I ordered. The nav-point seemed to lead to the other side of the mountain the now defunct Kett base is located. Wonder if the Resistance are still digging around.

We soon were approaching the facility from below. Seeing landing pads on the ledge above. I allowed Liam to open fire on those when we were out of the way. Maybe it'll take the floor out from under a few Kett. And there was another shuttle that Liam took out. As we made our way up to the front of the comm outpost, a trio of Chosen had been investigating some Remnant pillars sticking out of the ground. Liam could have just mowed them down with the MG, but instead, he blew them the fuck up. Limbs splattered, and chunks of flesh blown away. It's raining men. Blue mist began to engulf the area around a Kett ground transport, but with another explosive round, the transport blew up, blowing away the mist, and anyone within it. Destined should learn that you don't always need to see your enemy in order to kill them. Just need to have a general idea of where they are. We drove down into a kind of courtyard in front of the comm facility, either running over the few Kett still there, or mowing them down with the MG. Once more, the area was clear. Once more, Drack, Vetra, and Peebee, now accompanied by Jaal, left the Mako with me. Like last time, I wanted Liam and Cora keeping the Mako ready, and watching. In case any reinforcements try to join the party, they can be blown to hell.

We entered the comm facility. It had a roof, but was not at all closed off from the environment. We found a data pad outside. "Received by Central." I read it out loud.

"Attention: Archon of Sector 1-19-NYKZ. Previous report was thirty-nine cycles ago. Senate requires an update of progress within this sector. A reminder that all campaign leaders are expected to deliver reports once in every fifteen standard cycles. Senate recognizes that presence of the 'Scourge' phenomenon may be disruptive to communications. Take steps to circumvent this obstacle, so that regular updates can resume. This is your second reminder of this nature. Please acknowledge receipt." I finished reading. Vetra let out a whistle.

"Seems the Archon is breaking some rules…” Jaal muttered.

"And sounds like he's not the only Archon. And he has superiors," Vetra remarked. We accessed a terminal nearby and managed to pull an audio log.

"Primus: Communication orders require explanation. Archon commands a block of all transmissions of Angara data to the Empire. He is in breach of protocol." A Kett voice explained.

"The Kett are questioning their leader… Good. Very very good," Jaal nodded. I imagine grinning.

"Both factions may be our enemies, both may want to exalt us all, but if they end up fighting each other? Well, that just makes our job easier," I know I grinned under my own helmet. We pulled another audio log from the console. A reply to the previous, from this Primus.

"Communications: Only Archon is aware of shifting situation in Heleus. If Archon's opinion is that protocols are not to our benefit, accept his wisdom. He is the Senate's voice in Heleus, and must be obeyed." The voice sounds similar to that Cardinal from the Exaltation facility. Higher pitched, slightly more feminine. Even though the Kett apparently don't have sexes anymore.
"So, there's definitely more to this, but what do we do next?" Vetra questioned.

"There is likely nothing to be done. But conflicts between factions seldom resolve quietly," SAM answered.

"Then we'll keep an eye out for anything to happen. In the meantime, good work people. Make sure this intel gets spread to the Resistance and Militia. Back to the Mako. Let's see how it handles a few explosive shells," I chuckled. Drack rumbled with laughter as we returned to the Mako. I backed the Mako up for safety, and told Liam to fire at will. He fired round after round until the comm outpost was a pile of rubble. Then, I drove to the side on the slope, and got us a sightline one the supports securing it to the rock. And we blasted those apart. The outpost began tumbling down the mountainside. Pleased with the destruction, I drove the Mako up the mountainside. Now to find the missing scientists. We followed the nav-point to the ridgeline overlooking the entirety of the North-East section of the valley. The miles of snow glistening in the sunlight. It was still up ahead, so I eagerly drove the Mako off the ridgeline, using the vertical thrusters to give us some bonus airtime. Not quite like using the Nomad, but it's fun. There were cheers from everyone but Cora, who instead cursed and held her hand over her mouth. Still, we landed on the ground safely, driving away.

Until we came to another ridgeline. I could see a shuttle crashed down in the center. I wasted no time in driving right down the rocky slope. There was an Eiroch investigating the site. Must have smelled corpses. Damn. The Mako came to a stop just before the shuttle, the Eiroch roaring at us to get off its claim. Our reply was a single high explosive shell straight to the head, blowing the creature apart, leaving just it's legs, waist, and some of its bulky torso intact. I scanned the shuttle and the bodies. Identifying them all. Some died in the crash. Others were killed by weaponry. The wounds hinted strongly at Remnant. Even the corpse of another Eiroch by the crash. Burns and shocks. What kind of Remnant could bring down a shuttle? We found a data pad that might answer the question. Barely intact. The valley they were going to had large amounts of seismic activity. With Eiroch's running from it. Shaking got worse and worse, off the charts even. Then they saw something. Something big. Started shooting right through the hull. They crashed.

"I think we've got an Architect," I called out.

"Should we call for reinforcements?" Jaal questioned.

"See if there's anything we can do. But, well, we do have a Mako. Might be able to blast right through the legs," I mused.

"As you say," Jaal nodded, and began keying his comms. Meanwhile, I led the others into the Mako, and drove in the direction of the valley they were heading to. And there it was. Flying in circles above a demolished Kett base, was an Architect. And it noticed us. It dug it's three legs into the ground, looking right at us. Its weapons extended and the protective flaps on its legs opened, revealing the glowing red conduits within. I kept the pedal to the metal, driving around the metal beast.

"Liam! High explosives! Now!" I ordered. He did not answer, instead, allowing the boom of the main gun to talk for me. Its legs closed as the explosion rocked the leg, and it shot its head into the air, as if it was screeching in pain. Now, the head was glowing red, and looking right at us once more. Another explosive round. It tried to fire at us, but our movement made us tricky to hit. And it seemed to pull its head in, raising its neck while keeping its face pointed at the ground as it slowly shook it, making Remnant bots. Won't do much to stop us though. To try and keep the same leg in our sights, I shifted to reverse, and began driving back in a straight line, letting Liam get the clean shot he needed on the leg. But it didn't matter. Not yet, we needed to take down the bots first. And
what kind of bots did it make? Two destroyers. Close together on a destroyed Kett landing pad, I might add. Liam quickly took aim and fired off another explosive round. Destroying both with one shot. The legs opened as the Architect's weapons once more attempted to take aim.

They didn't get the chance. The explosive round struck the leg, making all conduits on that leg flicker and die, exploding in sparks and shards of metal. It reared its head high into the sky, bits of metal rotating violently before it climbed back into the air. Retreating to a new position. But that would hardly stop us. We circled the ruins of the Kett facility until finally, it set itself down into the ice once more. It's two remaining functional legs revealing the conduits within. More than ready to receive a dose of high explosives.

"Gotta say, I'm not fond of just waiting in here for either the all clear, or for us to be blown the hell up," Vetra grumbled.

"Don't get too worried. It hasn't been able to get a good shot off yet," I reassured. As if to emphasize my point, the sound of the main gun firing once more filled our ears as it struck the Architect in the conduit's in its head. Made of sterner stuff to withstand this much. But it's still not gonna be enough. It tried to counter us with another pair of Destroyers, but those were quickly put down. This time just by MG fire, trying to conserve the HE rounds. The power of the MG still quickly tore through the shields of the Destroyers, and shredded through the armor.

"Hey Liam, when the leg opens, let's see how the MG handles it?" I suggested.

"Sure, change it up a bit," Liam chuckled. This time, as I saw the leg open, still keeping the Mako moving, instead of a single loud boom, we heard the rapid fire of the machine gun. This time, the Architect was managing to get shots off. Most missed, but one or two struck our shields. It did significant damage to the shields, but still didn't break them. And the MG did its work, the leg conduit exploding, and the Architect once more screeched, before rising into the air.

"I just called the Resistance. Told them we have this handled," Jaal chuckled. "I think some were upset they won't be joining in on the fun."

"Just imagine if they nabbed a Mako too," I mused.

"Ah, now that would be fun," Drack laughed. Once more we circled the ruins, once more the Architect planted itself down. Once more the legs opened, once more, they were made to close with the beautiful sound of explosions. We repeated the cycle once more, as the final leg lost its function. The Architect barely able to stand as the cracked, flickering conduits within its head revealed themselves. One last explosive round rocked out, knocking the Architect to the ground as the self-repair initiated. I rushed the Mako to just in front it's maw and got out. Cursing slightly as it was colder here for some reason than the rest of the valley. There were glyphs, as if there was a countdown, as I interfaced with the massive construct, allowing SAM to rewrite its protocols. The Architect straightened itself up, and launched up into the atmosphere. Now, it will simply observe and monitor the planet from orbit. Safely.

"Damn I love this tank."

Pathfinder Scott Rhder

We returned to Taerve Uni without any resistance. Sadly, the others returned to the ship as the Mako was returned to the garage, and I gave Priya the news. She was saddened by the loss of her people. Blaming herself for letting them search that far out. But she was at least happy that the Architect wouldn't be a threat to anyone anymore. But that concluded our business on Voeld. And
so I returned to my ship, and into orbit we flew. But before we left the system, we had a ZK tracker to find. Suvi confirmed that we had been pinged, and we followed it to its source, while I remained on the bridge. We approached it as subtly as we could. But still, it detonated.

"Wait… There! A common vector! Maybe a point of origin!" Suvi exclaimed. We might have them. "It's in the next system. Only… thirty minutes of FTL. Max."

"Good. Head straight there," I nodded. I made small talk with the bridge crew on the way. Kallo telling us stories about the team that designed and built the Tempest. The team he was a part of. From practical jokes they played, to loopholes they found to get around roadblocks. Like Teon, a Quarian on the team from the Moreh. Which Kallo told me, that Teon told him, that the Moreh was the vessel home to one of the Quarian Admirals, Daro'Xen vas Moreh. Apparently, she was… unpleasant, obsessed with the Geth, but a genius. Given she was Admiral of the "Research fleet" the Moreh was dedicated to science. Be it technical, engineering, physics, or otherwise. True, it's not inaccurate to say that the entire Quarian fleet is dedicated to science, as the Quarians have a knack for technology and engineering, but it was a vessel dedicated to such. Anyways, while trying to acquire parts for the Tempest, there was this Batarian merchant who refused to sell to Teon, simply because he was Quarian. Using the obvious slang used against them. What did Teon do? He added what was essentially a kind of memory foam to his environment suit, and leaned against the part during negotiations. As a result, they managed to acquire a partial mold for the part. Using some relatively simple math, they were able to calculate the dimensions, getting the proper design, and make the part themselves. Gotta hand it to the Quarians. They're crafty.

We arrived at the edge of the Nalesh system. We ran a scan, and there, an Initiative shuttle.

"Damn it, the shuttle's just a relay. But I think we can get in their feed," Suvi explained. "Hold on." She typed away at her console. We heard static, and then a man's voice.

"Signal's through, ready for coordinate transfer and… who the fuck?" I think they noticed us. "We've been found, dead-head the comms!"

"Here we go again," I murmured. "Wait! Wait! I'm the Pathfinder!" I exclaimed. The man paused. Did we lose them?

"A Pathfinder? One finally showed?" the man remarked.

"Harlan, how else would the Initiative gotten all these outposts? Stop talking," A woman ordered.

"Doc Kennedy? You ok? Addison's been worried about you, and wondering about why your tech has showed up around our outposts," I stated.

"Keep them talking, Scott. Tracing," Suvi whispered.

"All I want is to stop the stealing. We have outposts of people trying to start their lives. We'd be happy for you to join them," I offered.

"Outposts starting lives, huh?" the man, Harlan remarked. His tone hinted he had a brow raised.

"Let them see, Harlan," Doc Kennedy suggested.

"Hold on, they just… forwarded Dr. Kennedy's medical profile?" Suvi began confused, and then gasped. "Scott!" I looked at the files myself. Well, I'll be damned.

"She's pregnant. That woman is pregnant," I murmured.
"That woman knows full well the state she's in," Kennedy retorted.

"But, the blockers, how did you…?" I questioned, surprised.

"You're talking to two doctors. We figured it out," Kennedy answered. "You're with Addison? Well she sided with Tann. Couldn't add mouths to feed until we were stable, he said. But this wasn't about waiting until we could afford a house. We were dying. So I left. With enough meds for Harlan and I to get off the blockers." Well that's counterproductive and irresponsible if you ask me. 'Honey, we're starving and running out of food. Let's have a baby, where I'll be eating a lot more food until it's born. And then, the baby is gonna run out of food. Meanwhile, if things stay like they are now, we'll still be running out of food, just faster. Oh that's a great idea dear! That way, we can all starve as a family!' Lucky for them, I came along and we're producing food for them to steal now. I don't like agreeing with Tann or Addison, but it is a bit of common sense that you shouldn't have kids unless you're able to support them. But I shouldn't start yelling at them like that to keep them on the line.

"How far along, Kennedy?" I requested.

"Eight months. Give or take," Harlan answered. Eight months? That baby will be popping out before too long.

"We're not coming back. And you're not getting my tech. We'll be fine without you," Kennedy stated. "Tell Addison...Fuck it, don't tell her anything. Kill it." Before I could even respond, the comms went dead and the relay shuttle exploded.

"Damn it, couldn't get a trace," Suvi muttered.

"Ah shit. Kallo, get us to Kadara. We'll see if we can find another tracker there. Meanwhile, I need to make a call," I ordered.

"At once, Scott," Kallo nodded. I left right for the comm room. I immediately keyed for it to call her, and waited a few moments for the call to connect, her hologram appearing on the other side of the table.

"Addison, got a sighting on Kennedy and those trackers," I began.

"She's alive?" Addison questioned, surprised.

"And eight months' pregnant."

"Fucking hell..." Addison murmured.

"Kennedy didn't disappear. She left to try and have a kid. Well, not try, succeeded," I continued. "You really had no clue?"

"I knew she wanted to fast-track the schedule, but we had no worlds. We were going to lose people. I wasn't going to watch babies die too!" she argued.

"For once, I agree with a decision you made. Yeah, it would have been a bad idea to start having babies while rations were running out. Just figured you'd have added that to the possible reasons she left," I reassured.

"Of all the stupid, irresponsible, selfish..." Addison sighed. "She was always like this. Even back on Earth. She talked me into this. And now... now we have to save her tail."
"Kennedy's not alone. Seems to have some support. Save her from what?" I asked. I still wanted her found, the first Milky Way child born in Heleus is going to be symbolic, but if she's not in immediate danger, we could relax a bit.

"How long will that last? She's the smartest person I know, but she jumps without looking. We have two speeches banked for the first child in Andromeda. Trust me, you want the one for the good outcome," Addison warned.

"Well we're already en route to Kadara, see if there's a tracker there. If we don't narrow down her location with that one, we'll stop at Elaaden."

"Good. Find her, Pathfinder. The first child in Andromeda can't just disappear."

"Agreed. Pathfinder out," I ended the cal. I released a deep breath. Really hope this turns out alright. I started heading back to my quarters to grab a beer, when I was pinged with a message. Peebee wanted me to come see her, stat. Had something. I returned to the bridge, and from there, Peebee's room. "Hey, what's new?" I greeted.

"Funny you should ask. I need to know. If I had something really important to do, could I count on you to help? To come along?" Peebee questioned.

"If it's as exciting as you make it sound," I chuckled. She was bouncing on her heels.

"It's pretty damned exciting," Peebee beamed. "Thanks to my new, Remnant-augmented scanner, I'm onto something big… Hear that signal?" She keyed her omni-tool, and there was a low, resonating beep. "Best I can tell, it's coming from a piece of raw Remnant programming tech. A building block in an unused state. My eyes bulge thinking what we might be able to learn from it—or do with it!" she exclaimed. "It's like a rem-tech wild card. The kind of mystery I live for. I have to go get it. There's not time to lose, right?"

"Wait, wait, I'm sorry, I don't think I understand what this implies. What is this device? What could it do?" I asked to clarify.

"Bare minimum? Strengthen our bridge to Remnant technology. Even just getting closer data readings could help us break down Remnant programming, use their tech more efficiently. I need to find it. Like, now. Well, now that now's gone, so… now." Peebee explained.

"Well, shit. Ok, Peebee, that is definitely very important, but, well, let me explain what just came up," I began. Peebee looked upset, but willing to hear me out. "You know those ZK tracker things we've been kinda after? Taking relatively minor resources from the outposts? Well, I just had a conversation with the woman. She's eight months pregnant. We need to find her so that baby doesn't disappear, or the woman gets into trouble, which, Addison knows her, and she's very prone to do so," I explained.

"Human woman?" Peebee asked. I nodded. "And how long do Human women gestate?"

"Eight to nine months," I answered.

"Oh. Yeah, Asari go a bit longer. And that woman is about to pop. Ok, babies, I don't like them that much, but yeah, guess that can't really wait…" Peebee murmured.

"Thank you. I promise, the very second they're safe, we will go STRAIGHT for that Rem-tech. Ok?" I reassured.

"And, what if this baby wasn't a concern right now?" Peebee asked.
"We'd already be at those coordinates," I grinned.

"Without any further interrogations? Just, you're in?"

"I'm in. Yeah. Even right now, I'm in. I just already bound myself to helping the baby out," I answered.

"The fact you're game means the world to me. I'll put the coordinates into the galaxy map. Consider them, and myself, primed and ready," Peebee smiled.

"THAT'S IT! I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS!" I heard from outside the room. Something I didn't expect to ever hear. Kallo, shout in fury. Peebee and I both, in curiosity, turned, and opened the door to see Kallo storming out of the bridge.

"Please, calm him down," Suvi requested. I followed Kallo, and Peebee followed me, wanting to see what was going on. Kallo was storming towards the cargo bay, but the doors there opened to admit Gil. Kallo crossed his arms, standing in front of the holo-table.

"You don't give a damn what my team and I went through to build this ship!" Kallo accused. I looked to see that Jaal had come out of his room to see what the commotion was. As had Cora. Drack and Vetra were both leaning against the wall behind Jaal now, watching.

"No, I don't," Gil shrugged. "I care about us surviving out here. And if that means redesigning-" Gil raised his voice to argue, defending himself.

"You don't have the right!" Kallo shouted.

"Knock it off! Both of you!" I yelled, my voice booming throughout the room. Damn, I kinda surprised myself a bit with that. Definitely got this from Dad.

"Sure, once he gets off my back about how I work on the Tempest," Gil nudged a finger in Kallo's direction.

"You weren't here. We had to get all kinds of new tech working in a single starship. Fifty-hour shifts. Epiphanies. Accidents..." Kallo listed. "Humans can forget. Salarians can't. To me, it's all still happening. My team is here! Stripping down the Tempest like some broken radio risks everything they suffered to build. Their legacy!" So, part of Kallo's side of the issue is an issue moving on. Seems like an issue with improvements. The legacy bit confuses me. I would certainly want that if someone looked at my achievements, and saw a way to do it better, or correct a flaw, that they do so. Sure, let me get credit for the original, but let them get credit for the improvement.

"Kallo, how much of that is an exaggeration? If he had the Tempest up on blocks, I'd see it," I questioned.

"Look, Kallo, your people did a great job, but they're dead. And they couldn't have anticipated half the problems in Heleus. Like the Scourge," Gil argued. "If we don't adapt, we'll die too. Is that what you want their legacy to be?"

"Gutting a complex ship isn't adapting! It's irresponsible! And... disrespectful," Kallo countered.

"Kallo has a point. Gil has a point. So, both of you, shut up, and listen to me. Do not make me say this as an order," I warned. I turned to Gil.

"Gil, you will no longer make any changes to the ship whatsoever, UNLESS, we are in port. Kallo, while we are in port, you and Gil will work TOGETHER, on improvements. Maybe run them by
the science team for good measure. You will propose modifications, improvements to one another. You will either both agree to implement an idea, or take something away. If you can't agree, you will come to me, and present both of your sides. Convince me, and I'll make the final call. You will work together like adults. We must adapt to the problems in Heleus, but we must do so safely. And it is my belief that any true creator would look at someone seeing shortcomings or faults in their creation, and proposing improvements would find nothing but the utmost respect from that. Do I make myself clear?" I questioned.

"Yes, sir," Kallo and Gil both answered. Glancing between each other.

"Good." With that done, I lowered my tone. "I don't like needing to use my boss voice, but I'll do so if I need to. We all good here? And hey, drop the sirs," I let out a small grin to reassure them both.

"Yeah, yeah, we're good, Scott," Gil nodded.

"Yes, just… I need a bit of time," Kallo murmured.

"I know your team meant a lot to you Kallo. I know you still remember it all. The past is still the past though. Remember it, always, but you can put it behind you. Your team would be proud," I put a hand on his shoulder. Kallo just nodded, silently, sadly.

"Alright, nothing to see here, go ahead and do whatever," I remarked to the others. They started to disperse, Vetra being the only one to not move. Kallo didn't make his way to the bridge, though. Rather the crew quarters. Now, Vetra and I were the only ones in the main room around the holo-table.

"Don't think I've ever seen that side of you before," Vetra smirked.

"Yeah? Scare you a bit?" I teased.

"Weren't yelling at me," Vetra chuckled. "And I kinda liked seeing you be the man in charge."

"Oh? Did you now? Think I should do that more often?" I raised a brow playfully.

"Hmph, well, I still like taking charge myself," Vetra whispered as she got close. "Guess I like a bit of both…" I felt her hot breath brush against my cheek as she began whispering into my ear. Instinctively, I placed my hands on her hips, while her's were on my shoulders.

"Guess we could make that one of our little games," I suggested.

"That sounds interesting…" Vetra stopped a moment, thinking. "Would a strap-on be out of the equation?" My head shot back from hers, my eyes, wide, yet my hands still on her hips.

"YEAH IT FUCKING IS!" I exclaimed, yet still barely keeping my voice at a whisper. "If I was forced to get a tramp stamp, it would be 'exit only.'" That made Vetra laugh, and she pulled me closer.

"Somehow, I just knew that would get a rise out of you," she whispered, then giggled.

"Definitely not the fun kind of rise," I joked. Even though it was the truth. I had been 'on the rise' since that conversation began. The moment she mentioned the strap on, well, there was no reason for me to think 'Down boy,' it had gone right down. "Please tell me you weren't serious."

"No, no I wasn't. But, I wouldn't have complained if you said yes. Surprised, but no complaints," she answered. I shuddered, and I definitely stood a bit straighter. "How about I make it up to you?
Why don't we go... compete a bit?" Vetra suggested.

"Yeah, that uh, that works for me," I chuckled. She led me, my hand in hers, towards my quarters. And I think she was swinging her hips a bit too. She pushed me down onto the bed before quickly placing herself on top of me, her mouth crashing against mine. Our tongues intertwining. I had nearly forgotten we had come here to compete. When that thought returned, I started to run my hands along her sides. Before rolling us so that I was on top. Vetra giggled. She removed her hand from the back of my head and was now rubbing her hands along my sides. Oh no you don't. Using one hand to keep me up, though our mouths never parted, air rushing in and out of our noses. I took both her hands and held them above her head. I pulled my head back, hearing her whimper slightly at it being taken away.

"You're not using my own tricks against me," I smirked.

"Is that so?" Vetra retorted, lifting her head up, while my own went to meet hers. Our lips met again before she quickly parted. "Least I still have plenty others," she grinned. Her legs wrapped themselves around my waist and she rolled so that she was back on top, straddling me. Her mandibles flaring playfully as she chuckled. I moved my hands to her hips when, in both her hands, she grabbed them, and shoved them down into the bed, holding them there as she kept herself upright. "Like that." She lowered her head to mine as we resumed our make out. I twisted my wrist to tap her arm twice to get her to let me speak.

"Well, I have a few other tricks too," I teased. A blue aura began to form around me and her as my biotics slowly came to life. I was lowering her mass, and then quickly I was able to break out of her grip and roll her back below me. I pinned her hands above her head. Though I released her from my biotics, I was now increasing my own mass. She wrapped her legs around me and I felt her try and roll me again. But she was meeting resistance. Both one way or the other, my new mass was giving her problems in that regard. I felt one of her talons gently tap my arm, and I pulled back.

"Pretty good trick," she teased. "Unfair, too. But... fun."

"Tell you what. I'll occasionally stop affecting my own mass, for just a moment. Then start doing it again. You just need to figure out when," I suggested.

"And what happens if I... get used to this?" Vetra raised a brow suggestively.

"Well, I won't complain," I smirked, as our mouths and tongues met once more.
Sorry it took a while for another burst. Work is kicking my ass.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Well. Today has certainly been… interesting. So far. Vetra and I had continued having fun for a small while, and I was convinced she had stopped trying to roll me over. Finally, though, we reached Kadara, and found a ZK tracker. And it stayed intact upon our approach.

For all the wrong reasons. Some of the remaining Roekaar fanatics found the satellite first. They wanted Initiative access, but they had learned of Dr. Kennedy, and that she was pregnant. They recognized that "The Breeder," as they called her, was a symbolic target. No mercy. Well, that's exactly what those Roekaar will get if we find them going after her. I was about to order an immediate course to Elaaden, as fast as we could to see if there was a tracker there, but Ditaeon, our outpost on Kadara pinged us with a distress. Some colonists had gone worshipping a Remnant Architect nearby and it had now bitten those cultists in the ass. The Architect was a danger and had to be put down.

At the very least, we managed to get some help. The Cavalry arrived before we even got started taking the beast down. Crux, our redheaded liaison with the Collective, and one of Reye's representatives arrived with several squads of Collective forces. Not to mention vehicles with Machine Guns and the rocket launchers several of her men were carrying. Given my team already knew how the Architect's behaved, how their weaponry functioned, we briefed the Collective before we caught the giant flying metal worm's attention. Divided ourselves into three teams. One for each leg. Lit the fucker up. We didn't destroy its leg conduits in perfect synchronization, but close enough. We brought it down relatively quickly. No losses for my team, and minimal for the Collective. Nearly without a word, after all that, the Collective left. Crux merely saying she owed me a drink.

Before returning to the ship, Jaal requested we go just slightly north of where the Architect was. He thought he saw some Angaran ruins. We did, and a relic that Avela may appreciate having. Jaal recognized it as being similar to an Angaran instrument, and yet it's design was completely new to him. With business concluded, we quickly made our way back to the Tempest, and back to orbit, and FTL towards Elaaden. Hopefully, a tracker was there.

"Oh, well ain't that fucking perfect?!!" I exclaimed as we approached a sparking ZK tracker orbiting the desert moon. Suvi had just confirmed that there was Kett tech attached, following its feed.

"Hold on, I'm getting data," Suvi began… "Yes! The four trackers have given us a point of origin… on Voeld!"

"Augh but we were just there!" I groaned.

"But she likely wasn't. I suspect that they've largely remained on the move. Who knows where they were when we were on Voeld," Suvi reassured.
"Yeah, but, still..." I let out a sigh. "Kallo, get us to-

"Pathfinder, we are being hailed by New Tuchanka. Priority message," SAM informed. Groaning again, I bent forward, resting my forehead against the console that would raise itself to greet me between Kallo and Suvi.

"I swear to god if another Architect is out and about..."

"They have reported an Architect slowly making its way in the direction of the Colony," SAM stated.

"God fucking damn it... How many of these fucking things are there?" I muttered. "Alright, take us down to the Colony, quickly. We can't afford to waste much time, we need to save Kennedy. SAM, get me Morda." I ordered as I began walking towards my quarters, getting that under suit on once more.

"At once," the AI responded. Some time passed, and I was about halfway through getting the under suit on when Morda answered.

"What do you want, Pathfinder?" she questioned. Normally, I'd feel like something was wrong, or that the person isn't exactly a fan. But Morda? I think that's just how she is.

"Morda, you gotten reports of a Remnant Architect coming to pay you guys a visit?" I asked.

"I told your people we'd handle it. Do they not trust us?" Morda responded.

"We only got notified when we were in orbit. Which we were for unrelated matters. Probably just thought you could use the help," I remarked, ready to head to the armory and finish suiting up.

"Again, we have this under control. My people are itching for a good fight," Morda continued.

"Well we're already on our way down, and my team and I have already taken down three. Not saying don't fight, just let us fight it with you. Besides, these things run on a pattern and my crew knows it. You may be able to figure out to shoot the big red glowy bits, but knowing where to hit isn't the whole battle, right, Morda?" I questioned.

"Humph, Three, huh? And no, it's not. Alright, Pathfinder. Let's see if you have a bit of Krogan in you."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The air was filled with the triumphant roars of the Krogan as the architect flew towards the atmosphere, beaten, it's code rewritten. There may have only been relatively few of the colony's warriors, and Morda, but still the sound of their triumph rung throughout the old Remnant site, still it echoed in our ears. Yet my crew and I remained mostly silent. Just another day's work and being tired of fighting these things.

Then I was nearly knocked down onto the ground, face first by the massive hand that slapped me hard on the back.

"What a fight!" Morda laughed.

"It was a lot more fun when we had the Mako," I remarked, turning to face her as I recovered.
"That's an Alliance tank, right? Heh, some clans on Tuchanka still had old Krogan tanks from the rebellions working, but hidden. Now THOSE were impressive," Morda chuckled.

"I can imagine. Sorry about the men you lost."

"Bah, those three were idiots. The first just stood there and let that turret gun him down. Blasted him to pieces. The next two just ignored us yelling at them to get out of the way of that attack from its head. We're better off without them," Morda shrugged. I can't claim to be a fan of that mentality, but, different strokes, different societies. I won't get involved.

"Yeah, well…" I trailed off. "Anyway, Love to stay and celebrate, but we really need to get going. Roekaar and Kett are both after our target."

"Both of those assholes? What are they after anyway?" Morda questioned.

"A woman eight months pregnant," I answered as the crew began to pack up for the quick journey back. Both the Nomad and a borrowed Colony transport.

"Only eight? Right, you fleshies do that quicker than us. Alright, go. Kill a few of those bastards for us."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The Tempest was finally making its way back to Voeld as fast as possible. To save a bit of time, I gave Priya Blake a call and ensured that a Mako would be warmed up and waiting for us the moment we landed. I even called Commander Do Xeel, asking her to help keep an eye out, maybe they could stall the enemy to give us the time we need. I'd ask them to help secure her, but I didn't want her to simply run off. I needed to be there to make contact again. Maybe with both Kett and Roekaar after her, I can convince her to stop running around Heleus.

"Hey Scott, come take a look at this," Peebee requester over the intercom as I had just grabbed myself a drink for the flight. Curious, I proceeded towards the escape pod bay. Peebee, Jaal, and even Cora were standing inside, around her desk. One of those Remnant data cores lay on it.

"Whatcha got for me?" I asked, leaning my back against the door.

"See the data core? I've tried everything to make it work. Tried biotic, with Cora's help, I might have tried hooking it up to the Nomad's mass effect core, I might not, don't tell Gil," Peebee chuckled as she continued. "But then, I had a hunch. Show him, Jaal." Jaal nodded and closed his eyes, grabbing hold of the data core and showing it to me. A slight electric hum began to fill the air and I could feel my hair starting to stand on end. Jaal's bioelectrics.

The data core glowed to life. The green glow of rem-Tech lighting illuminated the room. The streams racing around the device.

"Well I'll be damned…" I murmured.

"Amazing, right? I'm only able to get bits and pieces of data but I'm getting data," Peebee exclaimed.

"What I wonder is why the Angara are able to activate them," Cora mused.

"Maybe the Remnant also had bioelectricity?" Jaal theorized.
"Maybe…" Peebee hummed. Her eyes widened and lit up as another possibility crossed her mind. "Wait, Scott, remember how a lot of Prothean ruins seemed to suggest they were studying us before they disappeared?"

"Yeah, like the Mars Archives," I nodded.

"Exactly. And there were loads of Prothean ruins on and around Thessia. Maybe before the Scourge they were grooming the Angara for… I dunno, success? To join them?" Peebee theorized.

"That's an idea our scientists have tossed around before. Explains why our home worlds have vaults and so many Remnant ruins. Not to mention the heavy influence they have on our culture," Jaal murmured thoughtfully.

"But why would it be so hard for Angara to operate Remnant machinery then?" Cora questioned.

"Perhaps the Scourge disaster had more consequences than we thought. Damaged many pieces ability to respond to us. Or perhaps we've just been doing it wrong," Jaal ended in a chuckle. "Plus, there are some Angara who can operate minor pieces of Remnant technology. Though it requires complete focus and concentration. And they can't explain how the know what to do."

"Like Taavos back on Havarl," I nodded.

"Precisely," Jaal agreed.

"So, how do they know to use the pieces then?" Cora asked.

"Genetic memory? I figured that was how Taavos remembered his 'past life.' Maybe sometimes rather than memories, it's how to use the tech," I theorized.

"Makes sense. But how would the Remnant even begin to go about genetic imprinting like that? Goddess, what they must have known about biology and genetics," Peebee muttered.

"Knowing everything they did about terraforming, I think I could believe it," Cora chuckled.

"Good thing that Remnant programming… thing is so close to Voeld then. I don't know how much longer I can wait with all these theories," Peebee began eagerly bouncing on her heels.

"Speaking of Voeld, you said one of those satellites was tapped by remaining Roekaar fanatics?" Jaal questioned.

"Yeah. Akksul left, and the only ones left are those probably too far gone. Going after a goddamn baby," I shook my head.

"It's despicable. A child. The remaining Roekaar are as bad as the Kett. A part of me wishes for them to try once we're there, so we can put an end to them," Jaal growled.

"Can't say I blame you. Though I'll just feel a lot better if we can reach her and get Doc Kennedy safe before either Kett or Roekaar find her. But if they try, well, we'll have a Mako," I smirked. Cora, Peebee, and Jaal rumbled with a low laughter.

"They won't know what hit them."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

At my insistence, the crew was already fully suited up in the cargo bay by the time we landed. And
thankfully, the Mako was, as promised, waiting right for us at the end of the cargo ramp. The
coordinates that Suvi had derived from the ZK trackers placed Doc Kennedy at the northeast end
of the valley. By the buried city. And, not all that far away from the slave camp we liberated and
then Vetra and I were stuck in an ice cave afterwards. Don't think we'll be having a repeat of that,
however. We quickly got in the Mako and began speeding away as fast as the Tank could take us to
those coordinates. Along the way, I called Do Xeel.

"Do Xeel, we've landed and are en route to the doc. Picking up any hostile activity in the area?" I
asked.

"A few Kett shuttles have been spotted in the area, but we've seen approximately the same amount
in that area since the command center fell. Though it's not impossible that this day their interests
have shifted," the commander cautioned. "Additionally, there are reports of unidentified Angaran
shuttles. Could be smugglers, could be Roekaar. I'm sorry, but that's all the intel we have in this
regard." I let out a nervous sigh.

"That's fine, Do Xeel. Whether or not they'll give us trouble, we have a tank. So…"

"I've seen those tanks in action. Worry not, Pathfinder. Doctor Kennedy and her child will be safe,"
she reassured.

"Yeah, that's the hope," I remarked. "Just can't say I like the idea of a baby being near exaltation.
We may have taken down one of those damn horror shows, but like hell is that the only."

"I understand. Stars guide you, Pathfinder," Do Xeel spoke gently, and the comms fell silent. I let
out another pent-up breath.

"So, remind me, just how pregnant is this woman?" Vetra asked.

"Eight months. For humans, that baby could decide it wants out at any time," I answered.

"And they left to have this baby right after the mutiny, when we were still living off scraps of
rations, not producing any kind of food?" she continued.

"That would be correct," I murmured.

"Do I need to point out everything wrong with that decision?" she questioned rhetorically.

"Oh, believe me, I've already thought through just how bad a decision that is. Even made me agree
with Addison for once," I chuckled. "Still, don't say anything like that to her, I want to try and
convince her to at least live on an Outpost."

"And what's the escape plan?" Cora asked from beside me.

"Depends. If they have a shuttle and are in it, just trying to get lift off but they're grounded by
hostiles, we give them an opening, go from there. If not, we get them in the Mako, and get out,
back to the Tempest. Go from there. Our main priority is just for them to make it out alive.
Everything else, like bringing them back to the Initiative, stopping the use of the tracker satellites,
that's all secondary," I explained.

"Well, least odds are we won't be trying to evac them while she's in labor," Drack chuckled.

"Now you've jinxed us," Liam remarked.

"Jinxed?" Jaal asked.
"Old human superstitions. Saying that something won't happen means that it will. Kinda like Murphy's law. Anything that can go wrong, will," I answered.

"Humans are quite pessimistic, aren't they?" Jaal asked, jokingly.

"Says the Angara who told us that story about the kid who got spaced!" Peebee laughed.

"Wait, what?" I questioned, confused.

"While we were messing with the Remnant data core, Jaal told Peebee and I an Angaran… folktale, I suppose you could call it," Cora began snickering. "How did it go again?"

"Putting it simply, there was an adventurous little girl. She wanted to go out and see the stars, but her mother told her it was too dangerous. So, she snuck onto a ship, and then got vented into space with the garbage and died," Jaal recited. The entire Mako burst into laughter. "Truly, I don't understand what is so funny. It's a story meant to scare children into behaving. Do you not have that?"

"Humans have stories kinda like that. Though, in most renditions, the kid survives to learn their lesson and gain a new appreciation. Not just die horribly," I spoke through the laughter.

"Turians have plenty stories like that. Though normally centered around warfare. Someone being a coward or a traitor and receiving a gruesome, dishonorable death," Vetra snickered.

"For a Krogan those stories are pretty much identical. Just getting eaten right up by a Thresher maw. Heh, or kidnapped by Salarians for their experiments," Drack chuckled. We were starting to get close to the coordinates now.

"Mayday! Mayday! Any Initiative personnel, we need help!" a man's voice shouted on all Initiative frequencies. I know that voice. Harlan, the man with Kennedy. I immediately got onto the comms.

"This is Pathfinder Ryder. There may be Roekaar and Kett inbound!" I responded. I heard Kennedy start grunting in pain.

"No, no, no, not now!" Harlan exclaimed, very clearly nervous. Ah shit.

"Harlan! Talk to me! What's going on? Can you make a run for it?" I questioned. I think I can see them, the very top of a shuttle under the cover of some rocks in a hill poking out of the ice. Giving it shelter from the wind. And some rocks around it to further hide it.

"Running is unlikely, Pathfinder. AUUUGH, FUUUUCK!" Kennedy panted, then groaned.

"Great, he did jinx us. Shit, this is not the ideal time," Vetra muttered.

"Tempest! Get Kennedy an escape vector ASAP!" I ordered. We were closing in on them now, I saw the glow of heat lamps. And Kett gunfire.

"Give. Me. A gun!" Kennedy demanded, more pained grunts.

"Well, my kind of girl," Vetra chuckled. "Come on! Floor it!" I already was. I ignored the rocks blocking the area around the shuttle. Instead focusing on the Kett weapon fire just by the shuttle. The rocks sent us up, and down. There were supplies and barricades and heat lamps, but it didn't matter. The Kett were using them as cover, and now? They were being crushed beneath our wheels. Liam did a quick scan around with the main gun, seeing nothing.
"All clear!" Liam informed.

"Get out and secure the area! Liam, Cora, stay where you are, try and take down any shuttles," I ordered. Cora nodded, and Liam simply lowered one of his hands, giving a thumbs up into the troop compartment so that we could see as we exited. We got out, and I was pleasantly surprised to see that the Kett had been crushed. To my surprise, however, there was a trio of Angaran corpses in the back. Not killed by the Nomad, rather the Kett. Roekaar, no doubt.

"Pathfinder, we have defense turrets on either side, but they powered them down. Can you get them started?" Harlan informed.

"Can do. Vetra, get the south side, Drack, follow her. I'll get north," I ordered. No responses were needed, merely actions. We got right to the consoles and merely turned them on. A simple push of a button.

"Shuttles coming in, Roekaar to the North, Angara to the south," Liam informed.

"Don't shoot them down! They could crash on us!" Harlan cried out.

"Damn it he's right, they might just pull a damn Kamikaze. Just gun down who they drop off, maybe shoot the damn thing as it flies away!" I supported.

"Tell them to fucking hurry!" Kennedy demanded through gritted teeth at the pain of a tiny human pushing its way out of her.

"We hear you doc, hold on!" I reassured as we let the Mako focus on gunning down the Roekaar, instead helping Drack and Vetra take care of the Kett.

"I'm on someone else's schedule," Kennedy managed to chuckle through the pain.

"This is not encouraging me to become a mother someday," Peebee remarked. Either half joking, or not at all. The Mako's main cannon boomed as a shot went out, impacting the back end of a Kett shuttle as it began to fly away. And it hit the drive core, making it explode entirely. The debris crashing into the snow a few yards north. Liam quickly began swiveling it around to try and take the Roekaar shuttle, but it was too far away now, and the shot was a miss.

"They got a path yet?" I questioned. I seemed to have gotten my answer as a shuttle, way overhead dropped its payload. A Hydra, it landed on the ice, somehow not breaking through but leaving an obvious series of cracks as it began to move. Fortunately for us, it was an easy shot for the Mako. Only one explosive round, and it went down.

"That's gonna have to do! I'm taking off!" Harlan exclaimed, clearly nervous and scared. The shuttle's engines flared to life and it began hovering into the air.

"Wait until you're clear!" I tried to order.

"There's no time!" I pushed. I was not about to lose them like this.

"Are they safe?" Vetra questioned.

"Come on, tell us?" I pushed.

"Their escape vector reads as clear, Scott, how should-" Suvi began. But she was cut off by a noise. One I would not have expected to hear, let alone expect Kennedy to hear for a few hours yet.
We heard the baby, crying. We all went silent.

"We're safe." I could practically hear Kennedy just beaming. "He's safe."

"Yes!" Vetra exclaimed. I leaned back and sat on the ice alongside one of the surviving supply crates, chuckling. Everyone, the whole squad, even those back on the Tempest, I could hear them cheering, laughing. I could even hear Kennedy and Harlan laughing together.

"Get clear, doc. But, would you mind being ready for a call soon? Wanna wrap this up with Addison. You, me, and her, ok?" I requested.

"Understood Pathfinder. Think I might just… take a nap first… whew…" Kennedy dozed off. On comms.

"Thank you, Pathfinder. Truly," Harlan stated, the baby still crying. The comms went silent.

"Are all human births this… stressful?" Jaal joked.

"She certainly would have made some of our females proud back at the colony," Drack chuckled.

"Real good work today guys. Just… damn good work," I smiled under my helmet. "I feel good about that one." Leisurely, we all got back into the Mako and returned to Taerve Uni. Returned the Mako to its rightful owners. Priya was relieved to hear of the child's safety and would eagerly be awaiting the official news announcements.

Back on the Tempest, I let the ground team know that they shouldn't get too comfortable. The coordinates Peebee found were a cluster away. About 30 minutes flight time. But we didn't take off just yet. I wanted to get the call done first. Plenty of the crew wanted to see Andromeda's first Human baby. Out of respect for Doc Kennedy, I told them to wait below the com room and that they could come see so long as she was alright. Can't imagine how exhausted she must be though. Still, I placed the call to both her and Addison. Addison was the first to answer, her hologram appearing to the right of the table. and I quickly told her to just wait a moment as I waited for Kennedy to pick up. She did, seconds later. Her hologram appearing to the left side of the table. Even through a hologram, I could easily see how tired she was. Her hair a mess, her eyes baggy.

"Hey Kennedy, how's the baby?" I asked with a smile. That surprised Addison, her eyes going wide, I could even hear a slight intake of breath.

"Lungs like a banshee," she chuckled. "And safe."

"Zoe? You, the baby, alive and safe?" Addison exclaimed.

"Well we wouldn't be talking if I wasn't, right?" Kennedy joked.

"Hmph, someone hasn't changed," Addison murmured. "Now that you're back in the fold, it's the Initiative's job to keep you safe."

"And it seems I'm not the only one who hasn't changed. Look, I'll return the research and any resources we gained, but we don't want to be locked away on the Nexus," Kennedy crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm inclined to agree. The first baby born here shouldn't be locked away, for their protection or otherwise. Sends a counterproductive message," I nodded. I wasn't done yet, but that didn't stop Addison from speaking up.
"You had to comb the whole cluster and then rescue them from two different hostile factions," Addison argued.

"From what I've heard, that doesn't sound much different than what he's done for each outpost," Kennedy countered. "The Pathfinder knows you can't keep this bottled. You want us safe, make it all safe."

"I wasn't going to suggest that we just turn you loose. How about Prodromos? The first born in the first outpost?" I suggested.

"It's not far, if you ever want to talk," Addison agreed.

"As you said, I haven't changed, Foster," Kennedy shrugged.


"So, the baby have a name?" I asked. "Pathfinder? Scott?" I joked.


"Wait, wait, wait. My dad knew a David Edward. His last name was Anderson. You're not talking about the Human Councilor, are you?" I asked, shocked.

"That I am. We were in university together," she nodded.

"My crew and I would love to see him," I requested.

"Well, you did save our lives after all," Kennedy smiled. "Just be quiet. He's asleep." I moved back to look over on the others waiting patiently and waved them up. When I got back, Kennedy was holding the baby, which was wrapped in a small blanket, only his face visible, in her arms, gently rocking him back and forth, just staring at her son, smiling. A heartwarming sight, I must say.

Vetra, Sid, Jaal, Peebee, Suvi, Cora, Liam, and Drack then joined us up there. Sid immediately began cooing, nearly as enamored by the newborn as his parents are.

"I wish I could hold him," she whispered.

"He's looking a bit on the pudgy side. That normal?" Drack asked in his usually gruff voice, but still keeping it relatively quiet. Still messed with the moment, but I think that was intentional.

"Yes, it is," Kennedy chuckled.

"He looks so... soft. And squishy," Peebee murmured. I notice that the baby slowly began to open his eyes, opening and closing his mouth a few times. Sid just cooed more. A lot more. Vetra chuckling quietly at her sister. Little David turned his head to look right at Sid, trying to figure out what the blue and weird looking transparent figure that's losing its mind over him is. Sid's mandibles were flaring and closing non-stop and David got an arm out through the point his face was in and tried to reach out to grab one of her mandibles. Sid began giggling quietly and playfully moved herself closer to the hologram. The baby was clearly confused why he couldn't grab hold of her. To try and keep his attention, Sid covered her face with her hands.

"Peek-a-boo!" She exclaimed, removing her hands from her face, her eyes wide. She repeated the process a few times amidst our laughter that, of course, Sid knew that. And it certainly did get the kid's attention. Soon though, David lost interest and then began pawing at his mother, starting to cry a bit. A flash of realization crossed Kennedy's face and she quickly found a slit in her shirt, and took the baby to her breast.
"Sorry Pathfinder, But I should go," Kennedy smiled.

"Of course, and congratulations Doc," I grinned. The call ended, and the hologram faded from view.

"So, does anyone want to tell me why she latched her kid onto her tit?" Vetra questioned, confused. Everyone but Drack, including Sid, burst into laughter. "Alright, all of you, fuck off," Vetra was failing to hold back her own chuckles.

"Vetra, breasts make milk. Milk feeds babies," Suvi giggled.

"So, you just let the baby latch on to the nipple? Doesn't that feel… I dunno, weird?" Vetra asked.

"Don't ask me," Suvi laughed. "I'm not a mother."

"Calm the calamity that is your mammaries," I joked, looking at Vetra.

"De-stress your breasts," Peebee joined in, grabbing hold of her own.

"Sooth your boobs," Suvi awkwardly added her own voice.

"I don't even-" Vetra began, her head shaking.

"Come on Vetra, adjust your bust before it combusts," I chastised playfully.

"Hakuna your tatas," Liam butted in. Suvi and I released a burst of laughter, knowing no one else knew the reference. If they did, they'd be lion.

"Your honkers need to stop going bonkers," Sid exclaimed. I noticed Cora was shaking her head, hand on her forehead, the ghost of a smile. Drack was clearly grinning.

"Give that chest a rest," Cora sighed, joining in herself.

"Don't have a rack attack," Peebee smirked. I stepped forward, and placed a hand on the shoulder of my very confused girlfriend. I looked up and into her eyes.

"Calm your tits," I broke out into laughter. As did all the others.

"What the fuck," Vetra murmured, shaking her head.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I watched from the bridge in my usual spot as we exited FTL and entered the Inalaara system. Jaal had mentioned upon hearing the name of the system that it meant a virtue. "To know your map, your course, right down to the blood." Jaal suspected that one of the reasons this system received a name that had such poetry about exploration, was that this system was on the edge of the Heleus cluster. Everything beyond the cluster was unknown to the Angara.

Our destination in this system, thanks to the Rem-tech Peebee has detected, was a planet simply labeled Pas-10, the only planet between the small sun and the asteroid field. Per my orders, the crew was all suited up and waiting in the cargo bay. Wasn't sure this mission would call for the full crew, but it wouldn't hurt to keep them ready if we all can just waltz right out and to the site. We approached the planet, our sensors doing their work. Less atmospheric pressure than Earth, and a surface temperature of thirty-two degrees Celsius. Not that bad. Problem is, one feature renders all that for naught. It's heavily volcanic. Unstable, like Earth in its infancy. Scans were also picking up what appeared to be a massive Remnant complex, which was mostly buried beneath the surface.

"Scott, the signal Peebee detected is appearing right next to an active volcano. None of my scans are detecting a place to land," Kallo stated. Shit, there has to be a way though. Open the cargo bay ramp and launch the Nomad out, like a Mako airdrop?... No, the Nomad isn't rated for that kind of beating, and how would we get back on the ship?

"Oh wow… these readings are off the charts," Suvi murmured, mesmerized.

"Geographic?" I asked.

"No, technological. Remnant signals and energy readings that are getting past the ash cloud cover. Peebee's right. Whatever's down there is important," Suvi explained.

"Go get with the others, I'll see if I can find a safer spot once we're in atmo," Kallo suggested. I nodded, and made my way to the cargo bay. I arrived quickly, everyone was ready to go. Peebee bouncing on her heels in excitement.

"We have a landing zone?" she questioned, grinning.

"Not yet. Heavy volcanic activity. Kallo wasn't seeing any suitable LZs from scans, heading down to have a closer look but…" I shook my head. "We may need to head back to Taerve Uni, borrow a shuttle, either use it to go the whole way or fit it in here."

"Would a shuttle even fit through the doors?" Vetra wondered as Peebee's face fell.

"It would be a very tight fit," SAM answered.

"And I don't like the idea of one shuttle that could potentially fail or get damaged and leave us stranded on this planet," I muttered. Peebee lowered her head, thinking. I was about to say something to reassure her, when she looked back up, her eyes wide as if she had a kind of epiphany.

"Hang on, I'll be back," Peebee stated before rushing out of the cargo bay, likely to her room. I looked back at the others, they just shrugged. We waited about fifteen minutes, still not getting any signs of a landing zone. And Peebee had yet to return.
"Peebee, you awake? Still got that mystery signal down here," I remarked on the intercom.

"Uh, right, ok, yeah," Peebee muttered. "Er, actually, can you, Vetra, and Jaal come here please? My place. Straightaway," she requested. I looked between Vetra and Jaal. And shrugged, before jerking my head in the direction of her room for them to follow.

"This should be fun," Vetra mused.

"What does she have planned…” Jaal whispered to himself. I led the others to her quarters. Papers still scattered, tech, wires, a half-eaten protein bar on her desk and torn wrappers everywhere. The door to the escape pod was open.

"Peebee?" I called out.

"Back here. I won't bite," she responded.

"Uh, I know for a fact, you do," Jaal joked. Peebee moved her head down and into view of the escape pod entrance.

"Take it as a compliment that you make me need to bite into something. Now, shut up, and over here," she waved us over. I smirked, my laughter suppressed to just a chuckle, as was Vetra's.

"So, what's this about?" I asked, leaning down and then stepping into the escape pod, followed by Jaal and Vetra.

"Kallo won't find a safe place to land the Tempest…" Peebee began, facing the console, her back turned to us.

"Give it time, he is pretty crea-" I began to reassure. She pressed a button, and the alarm went off. The door behind us closed. Escape pod. ESCAPE POD. I don't know if I should be pissed that she just sprung this onto us, or proud of her quick thinking. But again, there's one problem. How the hell will we get back to the ship? Speaking of which, the pod jettisoned. Rocking us all as it began speeding towards the planet.

"And safety first," Peebee called out, taking a seat and pulling down one of the harnesses.

"Always full of surprises, aren't you?" I let out a smirk, in spite of myself. I sat and pulled the harness down. Vetra sat with a space between her and I, a bit of comfort in the more confined pod.

"This won't end well," she muttered. I took hold of her hand and gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"Well, this is… creative," Jaal remarked, taking a seat beside Peebee, pulling the harness down around him.

"I'm not doing this for the fun of it," Peebee shouted over the shaking of atmospheric entry. "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," Peebee defended her point.

"In? Where exactly are we going? Does the facility have a big hole with a neon, 'come in!' sign flashing?" I asked, half joking. She just looked right at me, trying to find the best way to respond. I can't say I like the looks of that. "Peebee, where are we going?" I repeated the question.

"It's not my fault the signal's coming from inside a volcano," she shrugged. The eyes of everyone, but Peebee, widened.
"Peebee, what the hell?!" Vetra exclaimed.

"Hey, we should land on the ground," she reassured. "Assuming my subterranean scans are accurate," she failed to reassure. Vetra squeezed my hand tighter. "And the impact doesn't alter trajectory too severely," she made it even worse. "And-"

"Alright, alright, we get it. If we survive, we're really damn lucky," I remarked.

"Tell me you have a plan for getting back to the Tempest," Vetra demanded. Peebee got the shy, embarrassed, guilty smile of a kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

"Is that a thing? We came all the way to another galaxy with no plan for getting back home," Peebee answered.

"You're lucky I love you..." Jaal murmured. Peebee smirked again.

Love? A serious word for an Angara to use, being such an emotional species. Lotta things must have happened, been said, without me knowing. But, that's not my business, not my place to pry.

"Alright, brace for impact!" Peebee shouted.

I held onto Vetra's hand, and the harness tighter. The pod shook as it a rock, assumingly, and then what must have been the ground. The pod flipped, upside down and right-side up before impacting on the ground once more, sliding to a stop. The pod was on its side. Peebee's and Jaal's backs were to the ground. The pod was sparking from some now exposed conduits, and an alarm from the pod computer.

"So... uh... are you mad, Scott?" Peebee meekly asked.

As Vetra and I dangled forward, kept from falling to the ground by the harnesses digging into our chests and stomach, my wide eyes began to settle and focus on the Asari. I looked back to Vetra, ensuring she was ok, and the squeeze she gave my hand told me she was, I looked back to Peebee. I let out a sigh.

"No, not mad," I grunted through the bars pressing down on my chest plate.

There is a gel layer in the armor for shock absorbency, but really that just keeps most impacts that would break bone or be lethal, from being lethal or breaking bone. "You two get out first so we don't land on you," I suggested.

"Uh, right, and, thanks," Peebee let out a half grin. She pressed a button which unlocked her's and Jaal's harnesses, and the two pulled them up, crawling along the ground to reach the pod's exit.

"I've made my decision," Vetra whispered, grunting in some pain herself. "I can never allow her and Sid to become friends. The crazy ideas she would pick up..." Despite the pain, that did make me laugh.

"I'll get out first, the biotics should give me a gentle landing. Then I'll help you along," I offered.

"What, don't think I can have a graceful landing myself?" Vetra teased.

"Just trying to be a gentleman," I defended playfully. "Come on, humor me. You know if you fall flat on your face or ass I'll give you shit about it for a long while."

"Hm, good point," Vetra mused.
"See? I look out for you," I smirked, releasing the safety locks on my harness.

I began focusing my biotics on myself, so that I could lift myself up slightly and push up the harness, gently getting myself onto the floor. I certainly couldn't stand, but I could make do with the crouch. I looked back up at her as she reached for the button, only just noticing her visor had fallen off. I found it at my feet and grabbed it, putting it behind me so that I could help her down. I raised my hands and grabbed her at the waist, helping lift her up as she pushed the harness up. Using biotics as an aid, I gently lowered her onto her own knees in front of me, before reaching back and grabbing her visor.

"I think you dropped this," I remarked, handing her the visor.

"Heh, hardly noticed in the crash. Thanks," she smiled, tapping her forehead against mine as she put it on, then turned towards the door.

I followed. Damn those… tuxedo flap… things for blocking my view. We exited the pod and took in the "scenery." The pod had landed on the rim of a large hole with a lava pit below. The rock everywhere was craggy and black, and there was Remnant architecture everywhere in this volcanic valley. Vetra let out a whistle as she looked down into the glowing hot magma below.

"Too close for comfort," she murmured.

"Any landing you can walk away from, right?" Peebee shrugged, another shy smile. Jaal shook his head, sighing, the ghost of a grin.


"No, I'm all left. We're all, all left now," I joked. "We're fine Kallo. Investigating Peebee's signal," I answered. "I think you can tell the rest of the crew that they're off duty now." I ran a quick scan of the escape pod. Busted, won't have any chance of using this to MAYBE get back into orbit.

"I'm picking up the signal. It's housed in a Remnant structure not far from here," Peebee informed.

"SAM, give us a path," I ordered.

"Plotted. Follow the cave to your south," SAM answered. I turned southbound, and sure enough, a cave in the rock.

"Care to do the honors?" I gestured to Peebee. She happily took point. We were following her right around a lava pool, I looked down at my feet at some loose rocks. I quickly used my biotics to lift one up and into my hand, and then threw it out into the lava pool, watching it impact, the very rock starting to melt.

"Please do not dick around with the lava," Vetra requested, a bit nervously. I chuckled, shrugging, and continued following our Asari guide. There were Remnant pillars blocking our route.

"Hm, we need a way back to the surface, but those pillars are blocking our way. Anyone see a console?" Peebee asked.

"Pathfinder, I am detecting a Remnant power signal within that block of obsidian. It is brittle, and should break if fired upon," SAM informed.

"The glowing chunk of rock? Sure," I nodded. I pulled out the Sweeper that I'm grateful I hadn't left in the cargo bay and shot the rock. The whole chunk collapsed revealing the console within. I interfaced, and the pillars began to retract, clearing the way.
"The network you're accessing seems to be a production system," SAM informed.

"Producing…?" I trailed off.

"Remnant hardware," the AI answered.

"Just like I thought! Raw Remnant programming data? Must be like a kind of template for their machinery!" Peebee exclaimed.

"Be warned. I'm picking up structural shifts throughout the cavern area," SAM warned.

"Uh, in a volcanic area? Isn't that a bad thing? Like, really bad?" Vetra questioned.

"It is not a positive sign," the AI answered. Vetra began muttering curses to herself as we continued following Peebee. As the pillars were clear, there was an Observer floating ahead. Staring at a wall. It was not glowing green or red or blue, just… a white shade.

"Interesting. This Observer is in a persistent idle state. Its neural pathways are blank," SAM informed.

"Just like Poc when I removed her Remnant protocols. No programming," Peebee remarked.

"Please let the rest of the Remnant here be the same," I spoke aloud, to no one in particular. Though we all knew that wish would never come true. The ground shook, dust and pebbles falling from the ceiling.

"Don't say it SAM, we know," Vetra muttered.

"Very well. It is worth informing you that I have detected more idle Observers in the area. At dispenser points, you should be able to enlist their support," SAM explained.

"Ooh, sounds handy," Peebee whistled. Led us further in, and there was a Remnant pillar connected with a Remnant hole in the ground that I didn't pay much mind. In addition, at the end of this part of the cavern were more pillars and pockets of brittle obsidian. One had a console. But it was in the ceiling. I won't be able to reach that.

"I think that Rem-tech behind us might be dispensers. You see a console? Might get an Observer," Peebee suggested. I nodded my head, agreeing with her. I quickly found the console, it was emitting a green light. The pillar from the ceiling began retracting, leaving the hole in the ground open.

"You are identifying yourself as an ally to the unprogrammed Observers in the assembly line," SAM informed, as one formed and flew out of the hole, glowing green.

"Hey little guy!" Peebee greeted cheerfully. "Nice to have you on the team."

"Now, open the door boy!" I spoke like I was talking to a dog, pointing my scanner at the console that should retract the pillars. It beeped, shaking in the air and moved to the console, emitting a beam to interact. The pillars began retracting.

"Thanks buddy!" Peebee grinned. The Observer didn't respond. Neither did it follow us as we continued.

"Pathfinder, Kallo reports no safe area to land. Retrieval may be impossible," Kallo warned. I let out a sigh.
"Well shit, get a call to-" I began. Peebee had begun rubbing her arm awkwardly.

"He has detected a few smaller vessels making their way to the surface, however," SAM stated.


"Unknown. But they are of exile make," the AI answered. Maybe ones who won't want to shoot us on sight. Peebee quickly led us up and out of the cave system. Back to the surface. And we saw a small squadron of shuttles flying by.

"Oh no… fucking damn it… I know that shuttle," Peebee murmured.

"Pelessaria, are you tracking that sweet signal too?" Kalinda questioned mockingly.

"Back off Kalinda! It's mine! I found it!" Peebee exclaimed. The bitch just laughed.

"We have to hurry, we gotta beat her to it," Peebee gave a wave of her hand and jumped down the ledge. We quickly followed, our jump jets softening the landing.

"How they'd find this place? Thought you scrubbed Poc for bugs," I asked.

"I did! Must have missed something, the bitch. Fuck if I know, maybe she left something when she first snuck onto the damn ship," Peebee growled. Throwing her hands into the air.

"Alright, alright," I calmed. "Let's get a move on." We rounded a corner. Remnant.

"Fully programed and deployed bots will still react to you as a hostile intruder," SAM warned.

"I see another gate ahead. Think we can sneak by and they'll leave us alone?" Peebee suggested.

"You know our luck, the very thing we need to open it will be surrounded by the fuckers. Take em down, start with your virus," I ordered. She nodded, and sent her little toy out to do its work. Weakening the Remnant as we opened fire. The Observer's, under the virus' effects quickly lost their shields, becoming floating pieces of paper for our weapons. And the Assembler's never present much difficulty on their own anyway.

Quickly, the area was cleared. But then a group of four Observers flew over from the other side of the pillars. They gave us pause for a moment, but only until Peebee let her virus wreak havoc once more. I noticed some even fall into lava pits. We found a console overlooking the pillars and I interfaced. The pillars began receding.

"Ah, thank you Ryder," Kalinda mocked. "You opened the gate up here, too. Come on, boys- we're in."

"Must be on a ridge above us," Jaal remarked.

"Shit, shit, shit," Peebee murmured, and we moved along.

"Pelessaria, the high road is so much more direct," Kalinda continued.

"And yet, you keep taking the low road," Jaal retorted.

"Ooh, so eager to jump to her defense. You must be her new boy-toy. You should pay me a visit sometime, show you everything she can't," Kalinda offered suggestively.

"That fucking bitch," Peebee growled.
Jaal ignored Kalinda, simply grabbing and squeezing Peebee's shoulder as we moved along. A lava flow was blocking our way, but I saw Remnant pillars that might make a bridge. And a turret, offline. Quickly, I made my way to the console and brought the turret online in the way we'd want it to be, and then interfaced with a console SAM pointed out that should get us across. It would require time to hack through. And the ground shook again. Remnant decided they should try and make this difficult. But that turret? Yeah, I wish those bots good luck in trying. The turret charged up and then destroyed an Observer in a single shot as Peebee let her virus run rampant once more, as it likely would many more times on this mission alone as we held our ground. Our weapons firing away or launching a tech attack.

"I need to re-wire power from other structures in order to extend the antennae," SAM informed, as cover began to fall.

"Just do it, we should be fine," I ordered. "Stand and watch out, cover going down." A Nullifier formed ahead of us, but, as I expected, it did not require our focus. The turret neutralized its threat.

"No bots to fight up here," Kalinda laughed mockingly. Is she in our comms? Or are we in hers? Or is SAM just transferring us to the same open channel whenever he detects her speaking?

"I'm gonna kill her," Peebee growled as more Remnant tried to stop us. But we held our ground. Finally, the antennae had extended, and we had a way across the lava flow.

"Move! Now!" I ordered, leading the others in a run across. There was a small gap we had to jump over, but it provided no difficulty as we continued our way towards the facility. I caught a glimpse of Kalinda's men on a ridge ahead.

"Pathfinder, I am detecting another unprogrammed Observer dispenser," SAM informed.

"Who cares? Right now, there's a mountain of rock between us and the signal source!" Peebee exclaimed as we continued down into the clearing, a Remnant site above a lava pit.

"There is a structural weakness in the rock wall that an Observer can exploit, and clear a path," SAM explained.

"Got it, thanks SAM," I responded as we rushed down. I saw another turret, and interfaced, before finding the controls for the dispenser. SAM believed it could summon less friendly Remnant. He was right, but our Observer and the Turret both were on our side, helping take down the other bots. Though, one of those bots was a Destroyer. Least we were able to focus on the big fucker while the others dropped like flies. We managed to destroy one of the Destroyer's chain guns before turret rounds began impacting the massive bot. Rocking it to the side. It turned to face the new threat, and another rocked it again, the shields breaking, and a scorch mark appeared on the front. It opened up its core to fire its main cannon, but another round struck it there, causing a chain reaction that destroyed the Destroyer entirely. With the area clear, and our bot still around, I scanned the weak portion of the rock wall to order the Observer to break it down.

"Pathfinder, interfacing is escalating tectonic activity. The area is becoming increasingly unstable," SAM cautioned.

"Well we don't have much choice right now, but thanks for the warning," I muttered.

The Observer broke down part of the rock wall, but it collapsed onto the Observer, sending it down into the lava pit. Least it carved us the path we needed. You will be honored, nameless and generic Remnant Observer. Your sacrifice will forever be remembered. We jumped over and up the ridgeline. I saw Kalinda down at the other end, by the entrance to the facility. Accompanied by her
"Make sure they don't get inside! A triple share to whoever brings me their sweet implants," Kalinda ordered.

Oh, the bitch wants us dead huh? So that she can sell the implants in our heads? Well, not all of our heads. I obviously have one, most people in the Initiative do, though they always had the option to opt out of it. It does allow SAM access. Though nowhere near as extensive as the ones a Pathfinder or their team would have. Mostly just to monitor vitals so long as they're in range.

"Man, I hate her," Peebee scowled.

She saw us, gave a mock salute, and ran inside the complex. Some of her men followed, some tried to slow us down. One, a sniper. The rest, thugs. People with rifles. Yeah, they lasted at most five seconds. The last fell. "Come on! Let's go!" Peebee urged, and we ran down into the Remnant structure. Still a cave for the moment. But it opened into a hallway. Not one without obsidian build up or slight lava flow, but it was there.

"Hold them here, Krannit! I'm making sure they can't follow!" Kalinda ordered.

"Ain't Krannit the Krogan she made us think was the leader before?" Vetra asked, remembering.

"Good! Been wanting to meet him and show him who's boss," I growled softly. That fuckhead was plenty annoying when he gloated about beating us to the last piece of the Rem-tech that Peebee needed. When it was on Kadara, where they already had people.

"And what's she up to?" Peebee questioned. We ran towards the chamber when there was an explosion followed by more shaking. And Kalinda laughing.

"So long, losers!" Seriously, who says losers anymore? There were more of her men. Looked like rifleman, mostly. Mostly human, though a Turian or two among them. And a Krogan I could only assume was Krannit.

"No, no, no! Kalinda's barred the way!" Peebee exclaimed. The exiles opened fire. We took fire, focusing on their rifleman first. Krannit was staying back, for some reason. And that allowed us to slowly whittle them down.

"Come to your doom, Pathfinder!" Krannit laughed. "Kalinda sends her regards!"

Ok, fucking come on, is Kalinda a Lannister now? Krannit a Frey? I rolled my eyes. The last of the other exiles came down and I was over this shit. There was a lava flow coming down from the ceiling to the left. I focused my biotics and pulled Krannit's shotgun away. He growled, and began to charge towards me but I lifted him up and he began flailing in the air. His armor was heavy, let alone him being a Krogan. It was starting to sap my strength. But this fucker will be out of my hair in three, two, and one. I threw him towards the lava flow, hearing him cry out in fear before the lava began flowing over him. He screamed and fell to where the lava was gathering, likely a pit farther below.

"Just fuck off already," I muttered, shaking my head as we moved to continue.

"Hey, console, and a power node above this other door," Peebee called out.

I nodded and ran over to her, activating the console, spawning another Observer. I then scanned the node, giving the Observer it's orders.
"Alright! We're back in the game," Peebee breathed, reassuring herself. We wasted no time in rushing through the hall. Could see a larger, more open chamber ahead.

"This is it. The signal source is in the chamber after that one," Peebee informed. Then it occurred to me. I raised a hand out to the side, halting the others.

"Why don't Jaal and I take a look, first," I suggested.

The others stopped, and then nodded, seeing the logic. Jaal and I both cloaked. Two Hydras. One on the left, one on the right. Snipers. Rifleman. And two Observer dispensers. "Jaal," I whispered. "Get up, and take down at least one of the snipers. Take his place. I'll head to one of the dispensers. You two, get ready to move," I ordered. I moved towards one as I said, before looking up and seeing a sniper quickly be pulled down and onto the ground by an unseen figure.

"In position, snipers on the right ridgeline are down," Jaal informed.

"Get ready, this Observer will take their attention. Get ready to move, find a good spot," I ordered.

I keyed a console, the pillar began rising and I began running towards the other dispenser. A Hydra turned to look at the Observer that spawned. It glowed green. Looked between it and several other exiles. It looked straight at a rifleman, and hovered close to its face, slowly. Its laser fired right into his face. Melting right through as those nearby let out a cry in terror, and I called for another Observer on the other side. Oh, that's good. A hydra has its back turned to be. As gunfire rang out, and I heard the beam once more and Jaal's sniper fire, I climbed onto its back and pulled the Asari commando sword from my belt. I stabbed it into the fuel cell a few times until fuel was leaking. I jumped off, and an incendiary round ignited it. I focused on the rest of the exiles on the right side. On the left, two were left, and the Hydra.

"Nice place for an ambush," Vetra laughed.

"Funny," Kalinda groaned. "That's exactly what I thought…"

"Yeah! And then I thought, 'How could I best counter the painfully obvious ambush?'" I mocked.

"Kalinda, you ass, just give it up!" Peebee demanded.

"There's a piece of pure, uncut programming tech in there. Plus, you want it, so there's no way I'm giving up," Kalinda retorted.

"You're an insecure, weak, cowardly little cunt, you know that?" I insulted, getting tired of her bullshit, still trying to screw with Peebee after she finally worked up the strength to get away from her.

Kalinda didn't respond. The Hydra was torn between two lines of fire. And figured that the other two of Kalinda's men would be handled. So, I simply repeated the same tactic. Though now it tried to shake me off. Failing horribly as it's just a big and clunky machine. The fuel leaked, the fuel ignited, the Hydra exploded. And the other riflemen were dead.


"Really?" Peebee raised a brow.

"Not really," A squad of troops jumped down from the left and right ridgeline.
I ran up to those that just jumped down on the left. And launched a shockwave. There was a lava pool at the end of this ridge, and they all went flying into it. They didn't scream for long. The others, were definitely afraid now, but backed into a corner. Between Jaal's sniper fire and the rest of us, they went down.

"Ugh, you really are annoying," Kalinda scoffed.

"Finished yet?" Peebee questioned.

"Not even close. But I will have to go on a recruiting spree after this," she responded.

Her remaining men must be up ahead, as none came to face us here. Heh, or they didn't want to fuck with us. As we directed the Observers to new power nodes to bring us across the lava pool on the left side of the room, Peebee felt like it was her turn to mock.

"See Kalinda? It's fruitless," No response, "Silence? I don't like the sound of that…"

"The signal source is beyond the next rise," SAM stated.

"Let's finish this. Pillars rose from the lava, and we used those to pass through unharmed. And then climbed up, and over. There was a platform floating in the lava. Right ahead of us? Kalinda, and the last of her men. The whole place was shaking apart. Those troops opened fire, forcing us into cover. Kalinda took her chance to run for the tech.

"How many fuck heads does she have?" I exclaimed. Peebee saw her run.

"Oh no you don't!" Peebee exclaimed. She made a break for it. Those exiles let her go. "You won't make it, Kalinda!" Peebee shouted.

"Come on, finish them off!" I ordered, standing and unleashing a shockwave, knocking the exiles over so that we could rush over and finish them off.

There was a pedestal the two Asari were running for, it must have the programming data on it.

"Too late, gal. It's mine!" Kalinda shouted back to Peebee as she still raced ahead.

She staggered, almost falling over, before steadying herself and jumping across. She didn't make it the whole way, but her arms latched onto the ledge, struggling to pull herself up. With jump-jets, Peebee was much more successful. I ran to follow. Peebee grabbed the ball on top of the pedestal, the programming tech. And Kalinda shouted like a baby in a tantrum. But the cavern shook again, and a splash of lava. Peebee struggled and dropped the ball. Literally. She fell onto her back and Kalinda struggled to hold her grip. The platform began sinking. Kalinda's side would be the first in the lava. If I wanted to, I could cross the gap now if I wanted to. But I was just waiting for Peebee.

"Peebee help! I'll give you everything I've got!" Kalinda panicked. "All the relics! Everything worthy! Anything!"

I saw the look on Peebee's face. She was… unsure. Afraid even. She didn't want Kalinda to die. I saw it in her eyes. And I also saw the Remnant data ball starting to roll.

"Aw crap… I don't want her to die, Scott!" Peebee exclaimed, standing to run towards Kalinda. The ball was rolling the same direction, but to the side.

"Get her, I got the tech" I shouted. I focused my biotics as Peebee nodded, running for Kalinda. Using my biotics, I grabbed hold of the programming tech and gently lifted it into my grasp. It was
secured. And Peebee grabbed Kalinda's arm and pulled her up onto the platform. The platform, while sinking, was getting closer to our side. Both her and Kalinda jumped across, their feet landing on the edge, their arms flailing. I grabbed them both, steadying them. Kalinda pulled herself right up and onto solid ground. Peebee let the lean go a moment, righting herself up more gently.

"Wow, that was close," she let out a breath.

"We need to get out of here!" Vetra urged, weapon stowed and ready to run.

We began running. Me at the front, Vetra at my flank, Jaal and Peebee behind us, and Kalinda behind Peebee.

"Peebee, thank you. Listen, no hard-" Kalinda began. I heard a meaty smack, seeing Peebee's fist return to her side as she kept running. She was grimacing, but a look of pleasure was in her eyes. "Ow! Fuck!" Kalinda exclaimed, covering her nose as she ran.

"Finally beat you to the punch," Peebee snickered, as we ran out a door.

"I've got two shuttles waiting, come on," Kalinda ignored the joke. Pretty sure this whole mountain was about to blow. We ran out of the ruins and up a ridgeline, the lava flow increasing, more rumbling. No one spoke, just running as fast as they could, focusing on breathing. Into a cave, a rock fell blocking one way, but Kalinda pointed at another. Slightly narrower. We passed a ridge that we could see our escape pod from as we continued the run. Lava was rising to meet it.

"Well, there goes my bedroom," Peebee joked.

There, the shuttles. We hastened our pace and jumped in. Kalinda took one for herself, while the rest gathered in the other. Everyone was accounted for. I got in the pilot's seat, SAM walking me through the controls quickly, and got SAM into the autopilot. We lifted off, and got out of the cave.

"Hell yeah!" Peebee cheered. I think we all did.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Kalinda was off on her way, we had gotten back onto the Tempest via the airlock, and the others had all returned to their quarters. Getting out of their armor and everything. I gave myself a minute, and went to go see Peebee. When I got to her room, she was leaning against her desk. The Programming core sitting on it.

"Hey stranger, how're you doing?" I greeted.

"Any word on her delivering?" Peebee asked.

"Too soon to tell. Soon, though," I answered.

"We have received a transmission, it is text, transferring to Peebee," SAM stated. Her Omni-tool glowed to life.


"You trust her?" I asked.
"Being a fingertip away from death can change a person," Peebee mused. "Still, it would be best if we scanned everything she sends over. If she sends anything…"


"In the meantime, guess I have this to occupy myself with," Peebee remarked, looking down at the programming tech.

"I was right. Raw, unused programming tech. With some time, I can make it upload specs of our design into Remnant hardware. A true fusion of both technologies," Peebee beamed. "My first real mark on Andromeda, and I have you to thank."

"And yourself for finding it in the first place," I smirked. "Though, I suppose we do have a little… bookkeeping matter to discuss," I walked over to the sealed entrance to the now missing escape pod.

"Ah shit," Peebee murmured. "The Tempest is light one escape pod. That's gonna cost me, isn't it?"

"You kidding? With the tech we just got? Hell no. Shit, even if we didn't get it, I can just write up a requisition order. They're not gonna let me travel without an escape pod. Necessary mission costs," I shrugged it off. "Though I suppose we should stop at Nexus soon to get that replacement."

"Wow, thanks Scott. Guess I'm crashing with Jaal till then," Peebee smirked.

"Yeah, he won't complain," I smirked. "Though, you are banned from all future escape pods."

"Except in case of emergency?" Peebee chuckled.

"Especially in case of an emergency," I smiled.

"Oh, you're no fun," Peebee pouted. We both laughed. Today was not a bad day.
A few hours later, and after another… session with Vetra, the Tempest landed at Aya. We had no pressing business there, but I wanted to go see how things were with Evfra, the Moshae, and of course, our Embassy. Plus, I would like to show Sid the place before we drop her off at the Nexus. After all, we don't want her on board when we go after the Archon's ship. Just in case.

I remembered that Jaal mentioned to Gil last movie night an idea he had, so maybe the two of them could get started with the supplies they'll nab while here. A part of me still felt uneasy, knowing what was on the horizon. We were in the final preparations for us to infiltrate the Archon's ship. That's… daunting. We all knew it. We all felt the nerves. True, I think we all suspected that we'd pull through, but it's probably going to be our hardest fight in Heleus yet. We might lose people. True, it's a possibility in any combat op, one stroke of bad luck, but… we don't know anything about what we'll be up against except a ship full of Kett. In their home turf.

Before we had left Pas-10, the planet where we found the Remnant programming core, we had tried the Kett transponder we got from Vehn Terev once more. Sent the signal out, still got a response, to which we immediately closed the transponder again. Traced the signal back, and it was still the same system as last time. The Archon's ship isn't moving. What do they have hiding in the Tafeno system? Shaking the doubts and questions out of my mind, I went towards the cargo bay, dressed in a black T-shirt with the Andromeda logo, some shorts, and to try and relive some memories of home on this rather tropical world, flip-flops. Even sunglasses, which I kept clipped onto the neck of my shirt until I was outside. Vetra and Sid were both waiting, dressed casually themselves.

"What's making that noise?" Vetra questioned, hearing the sound of my flip flops slapping against the ground.

"Eh? Oh, it's these," I answered, lifting a leg up, holding it with an arm, wobbling slightly as I kept my balance, showing her the footwear, then placing it back down on the ground. She looked down, brow plate raised. And I moved to go grab the box housing the Angaran instrument we found on Kadara. It was small enough to carry in one arm, and not that heavy, fortunately.

"So, leaving the top part of your feet uncovered?" she continued.

"Yeah, nice sunny day on Aya, as always," I shrugged. "Letting them get some nice, warm sun. Plus, easy as hell to put on."

"So, why bother wearing any kind of shoes at all?" Vetra half chuckled, confused by we strange humans. I myself chuckled internally, suspecting that life with her would be chock full of these kinds of questions. Everything either of us took for granted, shrugging off as being normal.

"So that the bottom of my feet aren't on cold or rough ground. Protecting that. Not like the bottom would be getting any sun after all," I explained.

"Aw, does the ground hurt your little feetsies?" Vetra teased, a voice like she was talking to a baby. Smirking, I just lifted my middle finger at her. Both she and Sid laughed.

"Can't do that, can ya?" I asked rhetorically.
"Read between the lines," she chuckled, holding up a hand with her two fingers, leaving her thumb hidden behind her palm. Now it was my turn to laugh.

"Come on, I wanna see Aya," Sid urged. Vetra and I nodded, and began walking down the Cargo ramp. Vetra and I may or may not have begun holding one another's hands. Sid noticed, and her mandibles twitched in a smirk, a light in her eyes. We stepped outside.

"Wow," she murmured, taking in the view.

The sun shining on the moss-covered rock walls and the waterfalls, the light's reflection glinting into our eyes, reminding me to put my shades over my eyes. She loved the many vibrant colors of the many plants that lined the city, either naturally or in growth beds placed as decoration. Given we were at the docks still, despite our proximity to the city gates, our ears were still filled with the sounds of people talking. Most of it was too far away for the translators to catch, leaving the lingering sound of a language that sounded very artistic, flowed like a river, a poet may say. And yet we couldn't understand a word. I felt like there was a sliver of pity in that.

Then, it occurred to me I had no idea what the Turian language sounded like. Figure that's something Vetra and I should do sometime. Turn off our translators, and say things. I figure that their language shouldn't be, relatively speaking, all that different. After all, you can't translate names. And "Vetra" doesn't exactly sound very alien, thinking about it. Hell, I remember that APEX squad leader who helped us on Eos, Ajax. That's a name you can find in Greek Mythology, Roman too, most likely. Point is, their language shouldn't sound like a bunch of screeches and caws, like I've heard from jokes with some Alliance buddies, else screeches and caws would be what their names would be.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Vetra asked. Guess she noticed I had spaced out as we walked into the memorial gardens.

"Huh? Oh, nothing. Something I may want to bring up later, but just curiosities," I shrugged off.

"Come on, tell me," Vetra urged casually.

"Just wondering what your language sounds like. Thought that on the Tempest sometime later we could turn our translators off, say stuff," I answered.

"Hm, yeah, I'll admit, now that you got me thinking about it, I am kinda curious too. Never really occurred to me before. I mean, I KNEW, but with these translators, you just never think about it," Vetra chuckled.

"I wanna hear more of the Angaran. Already turned off my translator listening to human stuff before," Sid remarked, joining the convo, "What's it called again?"

"I think it's Shelesh. Ask Jaal before we get to the Nexus, I'm sure he wouldn't mind showing you," I responded.

"You guys are really doing it then, huh?" Sid murmured.

"We have too, Sid. You know that. If we want a real shot here, we need Meridian," Vetra tried to ease her sister.

"But… do you? Scott's been getting the vaults. It seems to be working," Sid argued quietly.

"You're not wrong, Sid, I'll admit. But… what if the Archon finds Meridian first? We have no idea what Meridian is capable of, and I don't want him to be the one that finds out," I countered.
"Yeah… you're right. Just, be safe, alright?" she requested, a nervous look in her eyes. Vetra turned to look at her sister, wrapping her in a hug, and tapping her forehead against Sid's. I suppose they do that with family as well, not just their partner.

"Always," Vetra answered. Releasing her sister, and her hand returning to mine.

"I'm gonna miss being on the Tempest," Sid remarked, her tone picking back up.

"And we'll miss having you around. But you understand why we don't want you on board when we go, right?" I asked.


"You know it's not about whether you can take care of yourself? Not about not wanting you to help?" Vetra continued, wanting to make absolutely sure.

"Yeah. If it comes to the point where I'd need to start fighting Kett off, it wouldn't matter anyway, we'd all be dead. And there's nothing I can do to help you there anyway. Practicing my hacking wouldn't be all that smart on a high-risk mission against some of the highest security the Kett have, after all," Sid ended with a joke.

"Probably not, no," Vetra chuckled, "And I remember my promise. When this is over, when we find Meridian, and can start to relax a bit, I'll start teaching you some tricks."

"I know. If there's one thing I've learned from living with you all my life, it's that when you make a promise, you keep it," Sid grinned. We were almost at the marketplace now, which is likely where we'd begin to split up, but before that…

"Hey, over here," I lightly pulled Vetra to the side, knowing Sid would follow. I led them to the guard rails that looked out over the Aya landscape. The mountains and lakes, and further off, the rivers of magma and tornados of smoke, ash, and even fire. The wind blowing gently against us, and the occasional sound of a shuttle flying by. It was a breathtaking view.

"So, is this the part where someone should say just how beautiful it is, and then I start staring at Vetra, and say 'It really is,' or something?" I joked, breaking the moment and near trance everyone else was in. Vetra and Sid both began laughing, Sid just a bit harder than her sister, drawing the confused attention of some passersby.

"Remind me why I'm dating you?" Vetra asked teasingly.

"My good looks? Being a big, strong man?" I responded, smirking.

Sid, was giggling. Vetra just rolled her eyes, chuckling. "Not hearing a no." She punched me lightly on the shoulder. We pulled ourselves away from the view and made our way up to the marketplace. Saw a few new stalls and a few new vendors. Few of the familiar ones, however. Maybe they trade places every now and then, or something of the sort. Some vendors get this location on certain days, some vendors get another location on certain days.

"Well, I know that this is where you thrive, Vetra, so I'll let you be and go take care of my own things," I remarked.

"Sure, see you 'round," Vetra nodded, releasing my hand.

"Hey, here's a thought, maybe we meet back up at the Tavetaan later. Get some drinks, see if we can order some food that isn't nutrient paste. They have a dining area by their brew tanks," I
"Uh, Dextro, remember?" Vetra reminded.

"...shit. Um, bring some of the stuff on board and do that? See if some of the crew can join us? Could just be nice to sit around, people watch, relax here, and what-not," I thought of a solution. "I'll even have rations from on board too."

"Nah, it's fine," Vetra grinned, a light chuckle. "I have a few things of higher quality stored on board. Won't be as good as the Shatha Drack cooked for us, but it'll be a lot better than the normal rations," Vetra reassured.

"Why am I not surprised?" I remarked. "I'll send you a message when I'm feeling hungry then."

"Sure, see you then," Vetra ended once more.

I waved a farewell to both the sisters as they started to browse the marketplace, and I made my way towards the Museum. While doing so, I typed out a quick message to the crew.

_Thinking of having us all go and get some food and drinks at the Tavetaan later. If interested, don't eat, and will let you know when. Jaal, would be nice if you could show and help us with the menu_

I got the first reply as I opened the doors of the repository. From Jaal. He'd be happy to join us and thought it was a great idea. So, that's Jaal, and likely Peebee we can expect to join us. Inside the Repository, I noticed some of the Nexus diplomats and researchers examining the exhibits alongside a few other Angara. I looked around quickly, but didn't see Avela anywhere. However, I did see one of her aides. I asked them where Avela was. They told me she was in her office examining a new piece. Down to the same corridor the Moshae has her office, but only a few doors down on the left, rather than the end of the hall. It would have a sign.

I thanked them and made my way down to see her. She was inside, completely focused on a piece of Angaran tech. Old Angaran, I'd suspect. She didn't even notice the door open.

"Hey Avela, got something for you," I greeted, holding out the box for her.

"Oh!" she began, realizing she had company. "Oh yes, of course. Please, set it down on my desk." I did so, and she moved to open it. Lifting its lid.

"Sun above... It's an ancient Rivaan. A musical instrument. It uses an Angara's body energy to produce music. We have them now but... nothing this beautiful," Avela whispered, gently running a finger along its ornate design. "The songs it played were probably lost long ago. How much culture have we forgotten? Art, music, stories... it's all gone," she murmured sadly.

"Can't imagine losing everything that way," I muttered.

"You left your culture behind. It isn't much different, I suppose. You'll need to learn how to make it again, to continue it, even if you have records or copies of the past," Avela remarked, still a hint of sadness. "In any case," she lifted her tone. "Relics like this help us. Thank you."

"So, what's the thing you're working on?" I asked. Avela smiled and pressed a button on the device. It lit up, showing a holographic... projection. Reminded me of projection I got in the Aya vault, or even the Eos vault. It would flicker slightly, but it works.

"An old Angaran star map. Still can't believe it works," Avela answered.
"Wow, where'd you find it?" I asked.

"On Elaaden. I learned that there were sightings of an old Angaran site to the north of the crashed Remnant Starship, but a journey there was too dangerous. Either from the heat, or the scavengers. But, thanks to you, activating the vault, taking out some big-time and dangerous groups, I deemed it safe enough. I actually just got back last night," Avela explained. "Anyways, the star map. It's pre-scourge, clearly. I'm trying to analyze it, hopefully we can learn where our people traveled before the dark age."

I looked back at the holo. It didn't seem to have enough for Navigation. Not enough worlds. The Eos and Aya ones had much more.

"Aren't star maps usually bigger?" I questioned.

"Angaran star maps aren't used for navigation. Well, not THESE kind of star maps. Instead it acts as a log of where its owner travelled. Most of its data is locked, and I was able to decrypt enough to show me a holo of the worlds, but none of the details to distinguish which is which. Fortunately, Elihn can decrypt it for me," she shrugged. "You've given me more to study than I ever expected. I've got a lot of work ahead," Avela chuckled. "And I'm looking forward to it all."

"You know, we have a saying back on Earth. It ain't work if you enjoy it," I remarked.

"Very true," Avela laughed. "I think I'll use that. Thank you, Pathfinder. Directly, or indirectly, you've given us the means to uncover so much of our past. You don't know how much this means to us," Avela smiled.

"No thanks necessary, Avela. Besides, I'm not the one who can make sense of it all. That's you," I countered. Avela glanced down, blushing, I think, slightly. "Have fun with your research. I'm gonna check in with the Moshae," I remarked, ending the conversation.

Avela stuttered out a farewell and I left in the direction of her office. Which also serves as quite a lab, I must say, remembering from the last time I was down here. Moshae Sjefa was standing at a table, examining a data pad, likely information sent to her that she's studying. She was clearly focused, but she also was aware of the door opening, and the presence of a guest.

"Ah, Ryder, good to see you again," she grinned in greeting, a small wave of her hand as she set down her data pad.

"Good to see you too, Moshae. Feeling well?" I returned.

"Yes, I am. Everything's back in full, working order. Jaal told me everything about your journey to the Forge, and your confrontation with Akksul. I'm grateful that it ended without the deaths of Akksul, Jaal, you, or anyone on your crew, for that matter," the Moshae remarked.

"Only wish more of those Roekaar we had to fight along the way could have been convinced. That they could have seen how far he had gone. And Jaal got one helluva scar, though I think he likes having another," I ended in a chuckle.

"He bears it proudly. For me. And for his lady friend, I believe," the Moshae smirked. "The Roekaar have been exposed for what they really are. Those who retain the title are pariahs. Like him, even though he has now renounced the title."

"Yeah, I actually got a message from him not that long ago. Not an apology, but that what he did to Jaal was wrong, that to hate blindly is as dangerous to trust blindly, and that he doesn't lead the Roekaar anymore," I informed.
"You did? Please, don't spread this, but I have reached out to him. Hmph, he reached out to me, in fact. It's been slow, but I've been able to reason with him. Thank you for that," she smiled.

"I promised I would convince him. Though, I'll admit, when he pulled the gun on Jaal, I was really afraid I was calling a bluff where there was none. He would have died if Jaal had. Martyr or no martyr. Either by my hands, or, as you put it, his lady friend's," I murmured.

"I understand. But let us just be thankful it did not come to that," the Moshae nodded.

"So, he told you about Peebee?" I asked.

"At first just that he had met someone. I had assumed one of our people, but then he hinted that they were on board your ship. And I know Jaal to be the only Angara on board. Once I got it out of him, he asked if I could help him tell his family," the Moshae snickered. "Silly fool, his family may be surprised, but they'll be happy. Even before you helped get Jaal's siblings out of the Roekaar, they were supportive of your people."

"Bet they'll still be surprised to know he can father children with her. Even though they won't be Angara," I remarked.

"Yes, I had heard such about the Asari.

Understandably, I was at first, rather concerned, given how close I was to exaltation. But, Jaal explained how the other is entirely unchanged. I was able to see enough of a distinction. Hmph, this is bringing to mind something I've been wondering quite often. About heirs. I've been considering that I'm at an age where I must look for someone to replace me. Thanks to you, this museum's curator has made extraordinary discoveries. I always respected Avela, but I think I may have underestimated her," the Moshae chuckled. "You've helped us both."

"Thanks. Would that be, 'Moshae Kjar,' or 'Moshae Avela'?"

'Strange,' the Moshae let out a small laugh. "I've only heard my own name follow that title for so long, that hearing another just sounds… wrong. Even my own first name sounds so alien."

"Oof, then I really need to make sure more people just call me Scott rather than Pathfinder Ryder. I like my name," I smirked. "Speaking of titles, what does Moshae mean? Doesn't turn into anything through the translator."

"Because it isn't a title. It's a reference. People from mythological times, before the Scourge. Legends say we once had many Moshae. Master inventors of unfailing wisdom, guided by boundless compassion," she explained.

"That is quite a lot to live up to," I muttered, eyes widening a bit.

"It's nonsense," she chuckled, waving a hand dismissively. "I don't remember who first called me 'Moshae,' but I do recall telling them to shut up." I laughed as she continued, "To my regret, the name stuck. I've minded less, lately. Being the Moshae has its uses."

"As does being the Pathfinder," I connected. "So, what have you been working on these days?" A smirk appeared on her face.

"I thought being a Kett prisoner was the worst fate imaginable. Then I got home and saw my backlog," she joked. Again, I laughed. "Avela comes in every so often asking if I have a second. At this rate, I'll never catch up. In essence, I'm busy with everything and nothing all at once. We'll see which wins."
"Sheez, think you deserve a bit of a load off. You must know a helluva lot to be asked to help so much. Expert on Remnant, Kett, shit I don't even know exists," I chuckled.

"All true. Why do you ask? Do you want to be one of my students?" she asked.

"I know I just said you deserve a load off, but that's actually not a terrible option. I have no training with anything Remnant related. Don't even know how that shit works, but whoop, there I go flipping all the switches, pressing all the buttons," I joked. This time it was the Moshae's job to laugh.

"And yet, you do it so well. There are two kinds of knowing. What we take in from the universe, and what is already inside us. Instinct or intuition, you could say. You have the essentials figured out. Plenty, you can learn as you go. But if you wish, once this is all over, I would be happy to share the finer points that I know. Help you understand some of the why and how to all the what you already know," the Moshae offered.

"I might take you up on that. Genuinely interested. Another thing I've noticed, kinda want to know. Are you originally from Aya, or someplace else? I've heard several different accents among the Angara, but you are the only example of your own I've ever heard," I remarked.

"I was born on a research vessel in deep space. My parents were explorers. They never stayed in one place long, and my own work has taken me to every world, many times over. They all try to claim me as their own, but if I'm honest… my favorite chair, so to speak, is here," she answered thoughtfully.

"With the view you get out there? Yeah, can't blame you. OH! Just remembered something. Hang on," I requested. I quickly typed out a message to Peebee on my Omni-tool. Asking her to come down to the Moshae's lab, and to bring the programming core. She responded, saying she'd be there in a moment. "Alright, should be getting a visitor with something to show you in a few. You'll want to see this," I grinned.

"Well, this is certainly interesting…" the Moshae mused.

"While we wait for her, one last question. When the Kett are gone, when we fix all these worlds… what exactly do the Angara want?" I asked. I was curious. Trying to be hopeful for the future.

"Depends who you ask," the Moshae smirked. "Like your own people, the Angara are individuals. Paaran will continue spreading hope and optimism. Evfra? I don't know what he'll do without an enemy to fight. Retirement won't suit him. As for me? Well… maybe I'll just fade away. That's what people do when they're no longer needed, right?" the Moshae gave a quiet, tired laugh.

"Well, if anyone's deserved a rest," I remarked with a shrug. We were soon joined by Peebee, carrying a bag to conceal her little ball of wonders. "Moshae, Sjefa, meet Peebee," I introduced.

"Oh, we've already spoken before, Ryder. I wanted to know the woman who captured Jaal's heart," the Moshae replied. Peebee actually blushed, slightly.

"Yeah, well…" she murmured awkwardly. Then reached into the bag and pulled out the Programming core. "A Remnant modified scanner I built a couple days ago detected this on the planet… what was it again?" Peebee asked, turning to me.

"Pas-10," I answered.

"Right, right. Scanner let me get an idea of what it was, and we picked it up earlier today. It contains raw programming data for Remnant. Through what I've been able to figure out so far, with
time, I could-" Peebee continued.

"Use it to upload code of your making into Remnant hardware," the Moshae nodded, rubbing her chin, "I suggest we work together on this. We could decipher it faster, and learn ways that would benefit both our peoples."

"Uh, sure, but I'd like to keep it on the ship, it's something for me to do and…" Peebee began awkwardly.

"And it's your discovery, of course," the Moshae reassured.

"Well… ok. Want to get started?" Peebee suggested.

"Alright, you two have fun, I'm going to leave before this becomes all different kinds of techno mumbo jumbo I don't understand," I chuckled, "Peebee, don't forget, we do have plans later," I reminded as I left the room, then leaving the Repository, making my way to the Resistance HQ, followed by Evfra's office. He quickly noticed my arrival. I approached, and he had the first words.

"When I first read the report on your mission at the forge, I didn't believe I read it correctly. That you stood and watched Akksul shoot Jaal," Evfra murmured. His brow was raised. I had the sense he didn't approve of the action, even if he approved of the outcome. More or less. "What was your plan if Akksul killed my best soldier?" His best? Should probably mention to Jaal that Evfra said that.

"Jaal told us to trust him, fully. With whatever happened next. When I saw Akksul raise his weapon, I saw the twitch in his hand, the look in his eyes. I called Akksul's bluff," I explained.

"Hmmm… Still a big risk," Evfra responded. "Now, Kadara on the other hand, that was a report I was happy to read. Keema Dorghun took over, with your help, and that Collective's. I'd be concerned by the latter, but one of the reasons we picked her was because of her proximity to the Charlatan, and how much they trust her, after all," Evfra shrugged.

"Sloane was dangerous, and her methods were only leading to suffering of those not strong enough to fight back. And, the port belongs to the Angara. All too happy to see that restored," I nodded.

"Keep this up and I might just have to believe your good intentions," the ghost of a smirk crossed Evfra's features.

"Drinking buddies, just like I said," I reminded.

Evfra rolled his eyes, keeping the ghost of a smirk. He was about to speak but one of his advisors rushed over, whispering some information. Suspecting I should leave him to his work, I gave him a wave, and he nodded his own farewell, and I took my leave. But before leaving the HQ itself, I checked the med-bay for that woman, Ljeta, and found her. She was still in the process of recovering on one of their Ion beds. She was suspicious at first. I explained I was here because her friend, Rorik, was worried and had a cryo bracelet, but she didn't want it. Didn't want anything to do with him, or any of us. Gently, I asked what happened. She was jumped and left for dead by scavs. Thought she could come back to Aya and forget about outsiders. And my appearance shows she can't escape them. I reassured her by telling her that some of us outsiders still care about her. Rorik sent me to find her after all. I told her that lots of us are trying to bring some good to Heleus. Like Rorik, like me. Reluctantly, she asked to see the bracelet again. She felt touched that he made it for her, to visit him again. She agreed, that with some time, she'd visit Rorik. Though didn't want him to know, as he would blame himself. I think that's something I'll let the two of them sort out. Though I did drop the hint that he deserves to know, that it would be worse for her hiding it. She
didn't respond as I left the med-bay.

I visited our embassy next. Rialla didn't have much to pass along, simply that things were going well, and that the exchange of the Angara who gave up a place on Aya for our own diplomats were enjoying their time on the Nexus, and that the other volunteers who I had convinced to embark on the journey were also enjoying their stay. Next, I thought I'd go see Paraan. She was typing away at her desk. And smiled when she saw me enter.

"Greetings, Ryder. I received a briefing on your encounter with Akksul. It was flawless. Better than I could have hoped." Well, guess I'll be learning where the Angaran leaders stand in view of my actions.

"Wouldn't say flawless. Jaal's newest scar is a sign of that. Or evidence that it was, depending on who you asked," I half-joked.

"He'll heal. And I have it on good authority that he's proud of you. In a very real sense, you crushed the Roekaar movement by NOT firing a shot," she emphasized, "If anyone questions our alliance again, I have quite the example. Thank you. For that, and the opportunity to strengthen our ties with Kadara Port, given the change in leadership."

"Thanks, but I've done so much work talk today. So… what do you do for fun around here?" I asked.

"As I've said before, the Tavetaan is a popular place for recreation," she answered.

"I mean what do YOU, do," I chuckled.

"Productivity is the best form of relaxation," she answered once more. A workaholic?

"And stress producer, that to," I remarked.

"You sound like my brothers. All ten of them," Paraan smirked.

"Jesus, ten," I shuddered.

"And eight sisters," Paraan chuckled again. "They're not allowed to bother me at work."

"Ten brothers and eight sisters," I cringed. "That's a lot."

"I always thought it average. You said you had the one twin sister, correct? Did something happen to the others?" she asked. Now it was my turn to laugh.

"No, no, just the two of us. That's average for humans. Well, least it was average when we started having easy lives thanks to technology. No longer needed fifteen odd children to help with work or in case some died of disease," I answered.

"Just a single sibling? That sounds… relaxing," Paaran joined the laughter. "When my family gets together, the noise is like standing next to our largest waterfall. My mother says I became governor so people would HAVE to listen to me."

"Is she right?" I asked with a smirk.

"Always."

"How did you become governor anyway? Vote?" I asked. I do prefer a good ol' Democracy to Empires or Monarchies, especially dictatorships. Though a Republic is also acceptable.
"If by vote you mean argue loudly until one candidate remains, then yes. I got here because I was willing to both endure and fight for the obligations that come with my office," she explained.

"And what about the deal between the Government and the Resistance? I've gotten a vibe of tension, but who's actually in charge?" I questioned.

"Evfra likes giving orders right until the actual work of running a city starts. The Resistance is good at protecting us from the Kett, but our people need more. I've learned to indulge Evfra's need for control just often enough to maintain my own. In effect, we both rule separate parts of our people and their lives. You could say that I lead our civilization, and he leads our military. Both of which, for the time being, are intricately tied. And we share the responsibility of security on Aya," she explained.

"Must be difficult sometimes. I've noticed that sometimes you two don't get along at all, and other times, you're just fine or even downright friendly," I inquired.

"Evfra is a brilliant tactician and inspiring leader. We both respect each other greatly. We simply disagree on what's best for our people. He believes isolation and secrecy keep us safe, while I believe we can't defeat the Kett alone. And neither can you," she answered.

"No argument here," I responded, as my stomach decided to grumble, telling me I was hungry, "It was good talking, Paaran, but I'm going to grab something to eat. Think my crew and I are going to see what the Tavetaan has for meals," I ended the conversation.

"Of course. Isharay, Ryder. Enjoy."

I typed out a quick message to the others to meet me by the Tavetaan, specifically the small plaza between it and the Governor's office. Vetra and Sid were the first to join, followed by Jaal, and then Peebee. Drack had just poked his head around the corner, giving a small wave before heading back around the corner, likely to the bar. Liam and Cora both were not far behind, and then the ship crew in its entirety joined us as well. Everyone was accounted for. Quickly, I counted in my head. That's twelve. Right? I double checked. Yeah, twelve. I approached the bartender.

"Got a table for twelve?" I asked.

"You know how big our families are. Of course. In fact, one just left, and we had it cleaned. Go take a seat and someone will be with you shortly," the bartender smiled.

I thanked him and led the others all down to the table. I sat by one end of the table. Vetra to my right, and Sid at the head of the long, rectangular table. Peebee and Jaal were across from Vetra and I, Jaal closer to Sid than Peebee was. Lexi sat across from Drack. Gil sat next to Drack with Liam beside him, and Cora in front of him. Suvi sat at the head of the other head of the table, and Kallo to her left. Vetra got a pair of drinks out of a bag she had bought for her and Sid.

"Got food too, but we're going to ask if they'd be willing to heat up one of our options in an oven or something. Got the proper time and everything. And if they can't, well, got a backup," Vetra explained.

"I'm sure it won't be much trouble for them," Jaal reassured. A waiter soon appeared, speaking loudly enough so that all of us at the table could hear.

"Hello, you must be the Pathfinder team. It's an honor to be serving you today. And… Jaal Ama Darav? It's an honor to meet one of the Heskaar!" he exclaimed. Jaal shuffled awkwardly. The waiter took a breath to compose himself, and began handing out menus across the table.
"Apologies. My name is Nij De Nama. Can I get you any drinks?" Jaal began, ordering a drink with a name I don't think I could even pronounce. He looked at Vetra and Sid to take theirs.

"Dextro, can't drink any of your stuff except water unless we want to die. Brought our own, thanks," Vetra explained.

"Oh, is that why? Explains why I haven't seen any of your people dine here," Nij mused. "Pathfinder, sir?"

"Water to start. Think I need to figure out just what all this stuff is," I answered.

"Oh! Of course. If anyone else wants more time, I can just bring waters for everyone," he offered. The only one who didn't accept it was Drack, who just ordered their strongest drink. "Excellent. Now, before I go, since the embassy arrived we have had Milky Way diners eat here before. Some have graciously gone and compared our food and drink to those you are familiar with. Human, Asari, and Salarian have done so. The menus I've given you today will have those notes on all. Should be a great help," Nij smiled, and left us.

He was right. Saw plenty of comparisons to the drinks as to what each of the Angaran alcohols taste like and their strength. All had something fruity to them, but ranged from the same strength as beer, all the way to hard liquor, and everything in between. Very few had names I could pronounce, unfortunately. Perhaps I could if I had them spoken aloud to me, but just by reading them? No. As for the meals, I was relieved to see confirmation that their diet did include meat. Additionally, the Angara had their own equivalent of bread. Obviously not made from wheat, but of something similar to it. The notes stated that you wouldn't taste a difference. Explains why beside the Angaran title for a section, there was a note that read "Sandwich."

Further reading showed the Angara had a bird that they would often catch or breed for food that tastes like Chicken. Why am I not surprised? They had Challyrlion meat, and the notes claimed it tasted like pork products, depending on how it was prepared. And to my very pleasant surprise, Adhi tasted like beef. So, I'm getting something that's Adhi, but-

"Hello again!" Nij greeted cheerfully, passing out the waters and Drack's alcohol. "Decided on drinks?"

To avoid the butchering of the word, I showed him the menu and pointed at my choice, apologizing that I was using this method. He laughed it off, saying I wasn't the first. My drink was simply the Angaran equivalent of beer. Peebee's choice was, as she told me, akin to whiskey in strength. Couldn't hear what the others chose. Nij wrote everything down, and when done, told us we could expect the drinks momentarily, running the orders up to the bar.

"They didn't even check us for I.D. Should we feel insulted?" I joked. Drawing out quite a few laughs.

"If I knew this place existed when I was ten years younger, I'd have made my own Andromeda Initiative!" Gil remarked, earning more laughs from others.

I got back to the menu, getting back to where I left off. Ok, so I could get a sandwich with the Adhi meat, the notes from the Human saying that while he couldn't identify what the seasoning reminded him of, he approved of it, fully. And... ah, they do have the means of producing cheese. Wonder what animal they get their dairy from, though. Or... do I want to know? Let's just keep that a mystery for now. Like the blissful ignorance of just what exactly the food from fast food joints like Fishdog Food Shack are made of. Alright, have my meal almost completely narrowed down. Sides... well, they seem to have small chunks of that bird that tastes like chicken, but
breaded and salted. And sauces that we could put in small dishes on the side to sample it all.

"Hey Jaal," I asked, gaining his attention as he was helping Peebee with her own selection, "The Shatha meat. How would you recommend that being cooked?"

"Just enough to kill the bacteria. Tastes great when warm and juicy," Jaal answered, unable to resist licking his lips at the thought.

"Perfect, thanks," I nodded.

Alright, think I've decided what I'm getting. Helps a lot that, along the list of cheeses, they were able to list what cheeses taste like what. Even a bleu cheese. Soon enough, Nij returned to drop off all of our drinks and then check up on us for our order. He was more than happy to take the Turian's meal back to the kitchens so that it could be put into the oven, and we ordered our meals, some people further down the table asking one or two questions before deciding. With all the meals gathered, Nij made his way towards the kitchen, notes in one hand, the Turian dish in the other. For the most part, it was just asking Jaal his thoughts on other items on the menu. Till we saw Suvi, Kallo, and Liam burst into laughter talking about some song. Jaal had a devilish grin appear on his face.

"What did you do?" Vetra questioned, smirking.

"The other day, on the bridge, I caught Liam singing an Angaran folk song I had taught him to Suvi and Kallo on the bridge. At least, that's what I told him it was," Jaal's grin grew wider.

"Oh no," Sid giggled, holding her hand over her mouth.

"Don't worry, the marriage can be dissolved with another song." He smiled as all those within earshot of his whispers, the Turians, Peebee, and Drack, burst into partially suppressed laughter, "If I can remember it."

"You know, I think they do make a great couple," I chuckled.

"I dunno, I think Kallo and Gil are already married. They bicker like an old married couple after all," Peebee remarked.

"You're right. Jaal, you need to remember that song and then get Liam to sing it for those two, and then sing the marriage song for Kallo and Gil," Vetra suggested jokingly.

"Or don't dissolve the marriage, make some drama," Sid joked.

"Ooooh, even better," I snickered.

"So, Vetra, just what was that meal you're getting warmed up?" Drack asked.

"Leftover Shatha from when you cooked dinner. We've been saving it," she answered.

"That re-heat well?" I questioned.

"Very," Sid licked her 'lips.'

It only just occurred to me that my right hand had found, or been found by Vetra's left, and the two were holding each other. How long had we been doing that? Vetra seemed to notice at the same time and looked over at me as I looked at her. I shrugged, then she shrugged. So, we just squeezed each other's hands.
"So, Peebee, how'd it go with the programming core?" I asked.

"Went alright. Mostly, the Moshae and I just discussed our understandings of the groundwork. I don't expect the real work to happen till later," Peebee answered.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. Scott, my true mother called earlier. She'd like to meet you sometime," Jaal informed. "And Peebee, I thought… that would be a good time to also introduce and tell them about you… About… us…" Jaal explained awkwardly.

"Oh… uh… yeah, sure… alright. When?" Peebee questioned, also awkwardly.

"Well, she is very busy. I don't think there will be a time until after the Archon's ship," Jaal answered.

"Just let me know when we have a time and place. I'll make it happen," I nodded. Soon, our meals arrived. A pair of waiters, Nij included, pushing a pair of carts along towards our table, handing out the meals accordingly. The bread of my, well, Adhi burger, and the side dish of bird, were purple. And the Adhi meat was actually the same color as beef. Well, I have seen Adhi blood before, and it is red. So makes sense that their insides would be the same color. That was surprising. The cheese actually looked like bleu cheese, but I suppose Dairy is its own kind of thing. Same properties, same ingredients, in the end. The two sauces recommended for my dish were set out to the side, and more than easily in reach. Everyone had napkins and silverware. But I knew I wouldn't need the latter. My food is finger food. We dug in.
Calm Before The Storm: Part 2

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Lazily, we all returned to the Tempest with full, happy bellies. It was a good meal. The drinks weren't my cup of tea, so to speak, but I'm not gonna complain. The spices and seasoning the Angara use were fantastic. And the sauces were quite good themselves. For all of us, the bill wasn't exactly meager. But, I wasn't concerned. The Tavetaan has an agreement worked out with the Nexus. If an order is paid for by credits, they will use those credits to exchange for goods that the Tavetaan can use or simply trade back to their own economy to consider the bill paid. I signed off the proper payment from the Pathfinder funding, with a decent tip, of course. If Tann or Addison wants to complain about me treating myself and the crew, well I'll just point right to our new Outposts. And they can bite me.

While we were heading back to the ship, I told Kallo to set course for the Nexus. We'll probably stay overnight. Heh, guess a part of me just wants to delay the inevitable. I was going to just go back to my quarters for a nap, let some of the food digest, but Peebee asked that I follow her. She led me up towards her room, Kallo and Suvi both taking their usual seats in the bridge as the door closed behind me. Poc was still floating in the corner, and Peebee set down the Remnant Programming core before making a show of looking for something. She appeared flustered, awkward.

"Aw crap. Wait right here, would you? I'll be right back," Peebee requested, holding up her index finger as a sign to wait. With a brow raised, I shrugged. She left, and the moment she did, Poc beeped and whirred. Then spoke, with Peebee's voice.

"Hello! Don't worry, I'm not springing anything terrible on you," she reassured. Pre-recorded message, I assume. Doubt she made Poc actually able to talk on her own. "Actually… you be the judge. So, you and your team are like a fungus, you know?" she began to explain awkwardly. "You look and smell funny, and you grow in the weirdest places. And, somehow, you found a root in my-" The awkwardness grew. I swear, if she says heart… "Oh, it's so corny to say…" Oh my god she is. "In my heart." Jesus fucking Christ. I had to work very hard to keep in the laughter. This was no doubt very hard for her to do, and also, very meaningful. I don't want to soil it. The recording of Peebee groaned and then sighed. "I'm recording this so when I get antsy, and believe me, I will, just sit my ass down and play it. A 'shut Peebee up free' card. Now, if there's anything you'd like to preserve for posterity, say it at the beep. Oh, and then join me in the meeting room?" she requested. Damn, Peebee has come a long way. I waited to hear a beep. And then there was a pause at it seemed Peebee was waiting for a beep. "Oh! Right, it's not a real voice message," she awkwardly chuckled. "Ok, beeeeeeeeeeep." Damn, I think Jaal needs to listen to this. It's precious.

"Fungus works both ways, Peebee. So, yeah, you're right. 'Ugh,' pretty much sums it up," I teased. "Seriously though, means a lot Peebee. You've grown on the lot of us too. Glad to have you around. So, should I leave a beep to say it's the end of the message? Beeeeeeep," I chuckled. Shaking my head, I left and made my way to the meeting room. Peebee was pacing back and forth, her back towards the front of the ship, and the ground team with their backs against the holo table. Some amused, some confused. I could hear Peebee stuttering along. Lexi would have a field day psychoanalyzing all of this.

"So, um, the reason I uh, wanted to talk to you all," Peebee continued stuttering as I began walking up the ramp to join them.
"Peebee… did you mutiny and jettison Scott?" Jaal teased.

"Aw, damn it, no such luck," Vetra somehow seemed to pout, lifting her chin, lowering her mandibles, and the bottom of her "upper lip," curving in slightly, her brow plates rising in the center, lowering at the sides. "He just showed up."

"She did ambush me. But I survived, barely. And your concern makes me feel so appreciated, Vetra," I smirked.

"No harm, no foul? Heh…" Peebee shifted awkwardly. She took a deep breath.

"I just want you to know. Whether you all knew it or not, I've had one foot out the door since I got here. And that's gonna stop. I'm… proud, and… happy, to be a part of this team. This… family." Peebee released another breath, glancing between both Jaal and I with a smile. "That…. That's really it." I could see Jaal smiling.

"Uh, okay," Cora answered a bit rigidly. Well, guess the two of them never talk much anyway.

"About time you caught up, kid," Drack smirked. Well, guess that means he likes having her around himself.

"Yeah, you're one of us whether you like it or not," Vetra grinned.

"I think you already know where I stand," Jaal remarked. Peebee managed a giggle, actually. A giggle. What has happened to the little crazy recluse?

"So… my room is an utter mess. Who wants to help me clean it up?" Peebee questioned with clearly forced cheer. I think everyone in the room raised a brow.

"Think I left the stove on," Drack quickly answered, walking away.

"I'm making ice," Liam bullshitted, following the old Krogan.

"Reports don't file themselves," Cora shrugged, leaving herself. Vetra stepped forward and then grabbed my hand.

"Making out," she answered, starting to pull me behind her. Well, I certainly won't complain to that excuse. I shrugged at Peebee and Jaal with a rather happy grin.

"It's an Angaran holiday," I heard Jaal state. Vetra started to slow now that we were out of sight of those two, and I was glad she did. I was curious myself.

"Uh… sex first, and then help me clean?" Peebee suggested.

"We had it earlier, and probably will later anyway," Jaal counted. I began to snort, but Vetra covered my face with her hand, quietly shushing me, but I saw her own grin.

"Uh… you can put it in my ass?" Peebee offered.

"Already done that," Jaal remarked.

"Ok, help me out here. I can't offer to suck you off, already done that, what do you want?" Peebee asked, starting to whisper.

"Hm… I have some ropes. Not for this purpose, but… they'll do," I heard Jaal step closer to her, starting to whisper himself, but not quietly enough. "In my room, I tie you down, and then I ravish
you. Tease you, watch as you squirm in pleasure…” he breathed heavily. I heard Peebee shudder.

"Done." was the Asari's simple reply. Quickly, so that they wouldn't see us when they came down, Vetra dragged me through the doors to the cargo bay and towards the lift down. I know I my cheeks must have been rosy. Not to mention, I was at full attention, so to speak. I suspect that if Vetra could, her own cheeks would be just as rosy as mine. Er, maybe that would be blue, given that's the color of Turian blood. Vetra continued dragging me along, all the way to my quarters. We both released a breath.

"I don't know what I expected, but THAT, was not it," Vetra began to chuckle.

"I would never have figured Jaal for that kinda guy," I muttered, my own chuckles breaking through.

"Yeah, that surprised me too," Vetra remarked, and then glanced down. "Certainly caught your attention." I shrugged, blushing a bit more.

"Not even one of my kinks, but… well it's got me in a mood," I muttered, rubbing a hand against the back of my head.

"It's not? You know it's not that different than when you used your biotics to keep me from rolling on top, right?" Vetra smirked. I shrugged again.

"Huh. Guess you're not wrong, but… just feels a lot different for some reason. The ropes getting involved. That just brings it to being weird to me. I dunno, I can't explain it."

"Fair enough," Vetra mused. Wandering over to the bed. I continued standing where I was, and she looked back over at me. "Well, what are you waiting for? I said we were gonna make out, didn't I? I need that too," Vetra urged. I shook my head clear and wasted no more time.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest landed on the Nexus without any delay or hassle, as expected. It was strange, slightly, seeing upon our approach the lack of the Turian ark docked, but still knowing it's been found. There was one thing I was very pleased to receive upon our landing. The tech I had asked to decrypt Spender's scrambler? He's finished, and sent over all the intel. It was incriminating, entirely. Spender armed the exiles for the mutiny, and then continued supplying them when the mutiny failed. Time to put that asshat out of his job. As we all began exiting the cargo bay, I hinted to Sid that she should keep an eye out for an invitation to an event before the night is up. I did, of course, pass it straight along to Drack that I should have the proof we need against Spender. He chuckled, and said he couldn't wait to tell Kesh.

Meanwhile, Jaal and Peebee were nowhere to be found. Not that anyone went looking. I figured that I shouldn't waste much time. I knew Vetra would be going to secure more deals or just supplies for the Tempest, and not sure what the others would be up to. It put a smile on my face seeing Angara walk around, the light of wonder in their eyes, still. But I didn't stay for any people watching. Drack and I went straight along to Drack that I should have the proof we need against Spender. He chuckled, and said he couldn't wait to tell Kesh.

"Kesh, we got him," Drack chuckled. "We finally fucking got him. The moment we've been waiting for, for about a year."

"Ready to take him down?" I asked. Kesh nodded, and pressed a button on her console.

"Addison, we need to talk. It's urgent. Bring Spender," Kesh requested. She then keyed her terminal again. "Kandros, we need you. Prepare for an arrest. Kesh stood from her chair and pulled another chair out of a corner of the room, placing it in the center.

"Be nice if we could bring his head back to Morda on a pike, you know, as a gift," Drack joked. Kind of.

"That is definitely one way to handle it. But..." I trailed off.

"Don't worry kid, I remember. As fun as ripping his head off would be, I know it wouldn't help anything," Drack reassured.

"Still, tempted to just let you," I murmured.

"You better not be joking because I absolutely will," Drack looked straight into my eyes. Set. "Tell me I'm not allowed. I'm barely holding back as it is, and if he says one wrong thing... I need you to tell me no, kid."

"You're not allowed to harm Spender," I ordered. Drack silently nodded his thanks. Kandros entered first, a Carnifex on his thigh, and raised a brow plate. I told him to wait. Addison then entered, looking annoyed, and Spender following, looking nervous.

"Sit, Spender," Kesh ordered.

"Kesh, we don't have the time for an interrogation," Addison scoffed.

"We have incriminating proof that Spender aided the exiles in the Mutiny, and then continued stealing supplies for a violent faction," I stated. "This isn't an interrogation, this is us giving him the chance to defend himself."

"Well, that does change things," Addison murmured, glaring at Spender as he began stuttering.

"Sit," Drack insisted. He shoved Spender down into the chair.

"We found Aroane's operation on Kadara. Found some messages traded back and forth between you two. About a scrambler he gave you to keep a few things quiet. Then I took it upon myself to go find this scrambler. Which I did. The tech who decrypted it can testify that it's illegal. While waiting for it to decrypt, we were on Elaaden when a transport from the Krogan colony was stolen. We tracked it down, and it was another operation being run by Aroane. Several times I've heard him, or his men mention how you, specifically, by name, blabbed. We have recordings. Aroane, by the way, is now deceased. Finally, the scrambler, when decrypted, gave us a conversation between you and Aroane. Where you explicitly stated that you provided the means for a man named Calix to arm himself and other mutineers. And then how you were supplying Aroane and his cronies," I explained. "Try to defend that." Addison's eyes were wide, before narrowing on Spender. I quickly sent her all the relevant data so she wouldn't question.

"I-I didn't have a choice! Aroane said they'd kill me!" Spender exclaimed.

"A threat that only works so long as you're with them. Could have easily warned anyone when you were away," I retorted. "Not to mention that other logs we have show you handing the access
codes, without distress, to other exiles."

"You helped the mutineers, Spender. That was a choice, right there," Addison glared.

"All you had to do was ask for help. Instead, you put everyone else at risk to save your own," Kandros growled. It clicked. If not for this son of a bitch… Sid would never have had to hide in that supply closet. She could have continued on her merry way, gotten those tech parts to ops. But no, instead she had a run in with a monster. Maybe I should let Drack tear his head off.

"How many people died? How many people suffered because of your choice Spender?" I snarled. I think that surprised everyone.

"They said no one would get hurt. I didn't hurt anyone. It's not my fault!" Spender argued.

"NO ONE WOULD GET HURT?! THEY WANTED ACCESS TO THE FUCKING ARMORY! ACCESS, YOU GAVE! WHAT THE FUCK ELSE WOULD HAPPEN?!" I exclaimed. Again, surprised them. Then Drack's eyes lit up. He must have made the same connection. He immediately began snarling himself.

"Please, keep it down a bit," Kandros whispered a groan.

"You're done, Spender. And with any luck, any shred of luck at all… they'll give you to me." The door opened, and the tech who decrypted the scrambler entered.

"Everything the Pathfinder says is true. This scrambler contains copies of everything. Just in case anyone has doubts about the validity of the logs on his end," the tech offered, handing the scrambler to Kandros. I quietly thanked him, and he left.

"Chock full of logs and credit transfers. All to exiles," Drack nodded, calming down slightly.

"This has been going on since the mutiny, when I began my investigation. Altered files, stolen supplies, and more communications," I explained.

"This is a massive security breach. I can't even begin to fathom the damage he's responsible for," Kandros muttered.

"Like your hands are clean, Kandros?" Spender stated much more calmly than before. Seems he's done with the charade. "We all wanted the Krogan gone. I just made it happen."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Kandros questioned. "Did you not pay attention to how eagerly I accepted the few Krogan who stayed into APEX? How I've essentially stopped dealing with Addison and Tann unless necessary, taking my discussions to Kesh? Do you know nothing about the common sentiment on the station?"

"The Krogan were a huge loss until Ryder brought them back. If we no one wanted them on the Initiative, they wouldn't have been here in the first place," Addison argued.

"The exiles think I work for them, just like you think I work for you. That's what real politics looks like," Spender remarked casually.

"Is that even a defense? Because it's not one anyone here agrees with," Kesh muttered.

"Right under our noses… Goddamnit, Spender!" Addison exclaimed.

"This is all on him, playing both sides just for a promotion. But he should have been dropped long
ago, you know that. The horrendously stupid decisions he's tried to order, but most of the damage was already done," I stated to Addison.

"You're right. I've been given ample reasons to suspect something. I just chose not to," Addison murmured.

"She just didn't want to throw away her boy toy unless she had to," Spender smirked. Addison tried to cut him off, and I think everyone's eyes widened, glancing between the two. "All those nights I fucked the stress right out of you, you didn't want to give that up. But you'll miss me, won't you?" God fucking damn it Addison, think with your brain not your vagina. At the very least, Addison slapped him across the face hard. And Spender shouted in pain.

"I should have acted long ago, but Tann just wouldn't shut up about the Krogan," Addison growled.

"I think we have a way to make up for it," I hinted.

"Like taking OUR side when my clan tries to negotiate a better deal with Tann," Drack suggested. "You need us. Frankly, we need you."

"Done," Addison sighed. "You're right. I'll back you up, and we'll do it right, this time. Now, what about this pig?" Addison lifted her leg up and then down right onto his crotch.

"If we exile him, he'll thrive out there. Conning them. Ignoring the off chance he gets killed by other means. I'm still tempted to throw him at the Krogan, but… Kandros, we have the means to hold him in a cell now? Feed him only gruel? That kinda shit?" I asked.

"Coincidentally, I had just started talking to the rest of leadership about groundwork for prisons going forward. That way we can get rid of the exile punishment, and if someone, like this asshat, we don't want doing much… community service, we can lock him in a cell. Great way to get it started, I think," Kandros explained.

"Perfect. Have at em," I smirked. Kandros happily stepped forward and clasped a hand on Spender's shoulder, pulling him up, and using his other arm to slap cuffs on his wrists, taking him away. Now, once more, it was just me, Drack, and Kesh. Drack let out a deep breath.

"Thanks kid," he murmured. "You have no idea how glad I am this business is settled."

"You and me both, old man."

_Vetra Nyx_

Scott and Drack were off to finish the whole Spender Fiasco, and Sid said she wanted to start moving that Hamster Scott gave her off the ship. Me? Well, where else would I be, other than cutting deals? Simple necessities. From rations, to ammo blocks, even toilet paper. Since our successes on the Outposts, the Nexus has started to get a bit of a marketplace started. Still some storefronts in various places across the Nexus, and the rest of them will one day be used in place of this little plaza. Or some of those buildings you can see lining the other end of the Nexus from the Tempest landing pad. The ones we haven't truly been able to use yet. Grassy walkways, trees, a place that makes the Nexus feel less like a space station and more like a home. We haven't used those yet because it's been deemed better off receiving minimal power, just enough to keep the plants over there alive. Soon though, that'll change.

But I digress. Because of this temporary marketplace, I don't necessarily need to just scroll through a list of contacts on my Omni-tool, or go to a warehouse and sort through a log for a certain item, I
can just... have a stroll. People watch. Get more of a personal business touch. For the moment, I
was browsing. Making a mental note of just about everything. I saw a human man running a stall.
He had customers, looked like they were checking out. He was selling food, and those weren't
MREs, or standard rations. Must be personal stores or luxuries that have been kept out of the way.
My eyes widened when I remembered.

I lost a bet. At some point, I was gonna have to try and cook something for him. But... what would
he want? Assuming I can somehow manage to properly cook it, that is. I racked my brains trying to
remember if he ever said anything that would help me figure it out. Right! On Eos, after we took
down the Kett base there. We were talking about favorite foods because Jaal called our rations
bland, and assumed it was our standard. What was it Scott said? Steak, I think. Cooked...
something. Maybe he could help. The man running the stall waved a friendly goodbye to the
customers that were checking out, and I approached.

"Sorry ma'am, I don't sell anything Dextro. Nexius over there though," the man suggested, still
keeping the friendly smile.

"Not shopping for me, for a friend. I lost a bet and need to cook a meal, of all things," I chuckled.

"Ah, I see, what was the bet, if I may?" he asked, chuckling slightly as the glint of remembrance of
good times appeared in his eyes.

"Which of us killed the most bandits on an op the other day. Lost by one," I answered.

"Ah, you APEX then?" he nodded.

"Pathfinder team," I clarified. The man's eyes widened.

"Oh! Well, my thanks to you, the Pathfinder, and the rest of the crew for everything they've done.
I'm sorry that I've been the one asking all the questions, but was the bet, by any chance..." he
trailed off.

"Yeah, it was with him," I chuckled. "Appreciated, by the way."

"Of course! Of course! I'm Marcus Winsor, pleasure to meet you. And you are?"

"Vetra. Vetra Nyx. Good to meet you too, Marcus. So, I recall Scott mentioning once that his
favorite food was... steak? I think? And he said something about it being cooked a certain way?
Something about it being juicy?" I questioned, struggling to get the right words. The man whistled.

"Steak, huh? Hard thing to find 'round here right now. But... you came to the right guy. I managed
to get my hands on some of what has been stored away. It's all freeze dried, of course, the juices
should all still be there," Marcus reassured. "Though I warn you. While it's not the hardest meal to
cook, it's not hard to mess up either. And if you said he wants it juicy, then he's either looking for
rare, or medium rare," the man explained. "Probably safer for you to go with medium rare, since I
assume this is your first time cooking it. It's also not cheap, but I'll give you a discount since it's for
the Pathfinder." Quickly, I thought it through. The creds for it won't be a problem with or without
the discount. As for the cooking, I could go with something easier, less risky. But... it's also Scott's
favorite, and as Marcus said, still not that hard to do. If I do this right, he'll get his favorite meal.
And with everything he's done for Sid and I, for everything he told me about Laura? For being as
patient as he has? I want to treat him.

"Thanks for the discount," my mandibles flared in a grin. "And for the warning, but I think I'll stick
with the steak. Call it my own little thank you."
"Sure, sure. Hang on, I'll go get it," Marcus stated, and walked away from his stall to a nearby storeroom. Moments later, he returned, holding a grey, plastic, rectangular bag. Freeze dried, vacuum sealed. As I expected. Marcus presented it, and the fee, and I gladly paid it. We thanked one another, and parted ways. I'd go leave this back on the Tempest. Something to celebrate with if we make it out alive. I read the label on the packaging. Earth Cow. Beef. Fourteen Inch Sirloin Steak. Angus.

What the fuck does any of that mean? Obviously, I know Earth is the human home world. Cow? I think Scott mentioned that was what steak came from? Beef? I don't know at all. Fourteen inches, a measurement, that translates. Sirloin Steak? Are there different kinds? And what the hell does Angus mean? I shook my head. I want to do this right.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Spender would be rotting for a while, I hope. I had barely remembered to even give Kesh the flower, as Vorn asked. I was just too happy to see that asshole go. At first, Kesh wasn't too fond of the sentimentality, but was relatively easily convinced to relent and keep it, to take care of it. I had then checked in with Kandros, see how quickly that was being settled. Spender was in one of the cells across the way, and Kandros remarked as to how happy his people in the Militia were to at least have survivors on what's left of their Ark, and a Pathfinder. He admitted without blatantly saying it, that he and his men and women partied the previous night. Explains why he seemed to have a headache earlier.

Speaking of Pathfinder, I made my way to the Pathfinder lounge. Heh, they've installed a board detailing what the current Pathfinder's are up to. In real time. Vederia was out on an APEX mission, and Avitus was 'checked in' to the lounge. I made my way up. There were three holographic memorials now. My dad, Matriarch Ishara, and Macen Barro. I imagine Avitus is either staring at the Macen one, or keeping his eyes entirely off it. It was the latter. He sat at one of the couches, head lowered. I made my way over. He had a bottle of Turian brandy open, and a glass. The bottle was near empty. I placed a hand on his shoulder as I sat down.

"You doing alright?" I asked gently. He looked right up.

"Fine! I'm fine!" he hastily stated. Convincing no one.

"If you ever want to talk, you know where to find me. I know what it's like…" I murmured.

"Yeah… thanks, Ryder. Really. I'm just… not ready…" Avitus whispered.

"Course. Take your time," I patted him on the shoulder.

"Ryder, I know I was hesitant, but… I made the right choice," he sighed, looking back up at me. "Thanks for giving me the push I needed."

"Hey, that's what I'm here for. I love pushing people around," I joked.

"So I've heard," the ghost of a smirk appeared across Avitus' features.

"So, how goes everything with Natanus?" I asked.

"Slowly but steadily. Brought in another batch yesterday. Plenty more to go, and still plenty MIA, but we're getting there," he answered. "Those we find, including myself, are just happy to have clean, running water."
"I can imagine," I chuckled. "So, done much else?"

"No, not yet. But I'll be out there soon enough. Met Vederia, got acquainted with her. Good kid, seems to be getting along well. I won't need the amount of training she's needed, obviously, but point is, I'll be out in the field soon enough. Though, you've done most of the hard work for us," Avitus smirked.

"Oh I'm sure they'll have plenty for you to do. Kett are still a big threat, remaining Roekaar cells, lingering Outcasts with a bone to pick with Sloane being dead," I listed off.

"True. Just need to get a ship, a team. But I'll get there," Avitus shrugged.

"That you will. And like I said, I'll be here," I patted him on the back again. "See ya 'round, Rix."

"Bye, Ryder." As I was leaving the Pathfinder lounge, SAM told me I had more memories from Dad to view. Remembering what we learned in the last ones, the Benefactor, I wasted no time in rushing over to SAM node. Upon arrival, I immediately told SAM to play the memory. Though I quickly wished I hadn't been so eager. It was the day Mom died. I froze in place as SAM changed my vision from the present, to dad's memories of the past. Mom was lying in bed, the covers up to her waist, and the hospital gown over the rest. Tubes poking into her arms, oxygen pumping into her nose. She was bald, her hair having fallen off from the chemotherapy. The tumors may have been Eezo based rather than normal cancer, but, well, those methods still have a chance to work. Her normally olive skin was pale.

Sara was standing by the bed, closest to mom's head, and I was just to my sister's side. Both of us were on the brink of tears. I don't even remember what dad looked like. He wasn't my focus. Dad stepped closer to the bed. Both Sara and I glanced at him before looking back at mom. She slowly turned her head to face dad, a tired, strained smile appearing.

"It was a good fight, soldier," she struggled to speak.

"It's not over yet," Dad murmured, running a hand along her head.

"Alec," Mom whispered, leaning into dad's hands, the sad look in her eyes that even now, Dad wouldn't accept it.

"No," he choked, looking down and away.

"Alec, we have a few hours. Let's enjoy them," Mom pleaded, raising her hand to Dad's cheek and turning his head to look at her again.

"And after that?" he questioned sadly.

"You still have each other," Mom reassured.

"But we want you," Sara struggled to speak herself. Dad looked at his daughter, her face was twitching, as she did her best not to cry.

"I love you mom," I heard myself murmur, dad looking back at me now. I too was struggling. But having a much harder time. I had just lost Laura. And then I was losing my mother.

"I love you. Both of you," Mom responded, the same, tired smile. "Live your lives. Do great things. I see so much potential in you." Mom coughed. Then she and dad locked eyes once more. "And remember… fall in love. At least once…" I knew back then as I do now, she said that mostly for Sara's sake. Though I suspected she was also hinting that I should try again in the future. I was
still bitter about Laura then. I had wanted to say that I already had, but… how the hell do you say something like that at your mother's deathbed? And I'm glad I kept my mouth shut. Dad looked down at mom's hand as he gently took hold of it, one last time.

"Kids… can we… have a moment?" Dad barely managed to speak. He was on the verge of tears himself. Wordlessly, Sara and I left. Sara had grabbed my arm, gently, rubbing it slightly, and I put my other arm around her in a half hug.

"Say it, Alec," Mom requested as we left. "Say it." Dad remained silent, looking back down. Mom would have shaken her head if she had the strength. But she sighed. "Then I will. Goodbye. Watch out for the kids. Be there for them?"

"I will."

"Mourn me, Alec. But don't let this destroy you. What did you used to say when you were an N7?" Mom gained another tired smile as she remembered better times. Dad leaned closer to her.

"When your back's against the wall… if you can't run from it, use it."

"Remember that. Be strong," Mom told him.

"Never as strong as you…" Dad began to cry. "I love you, Ellen." And the memory faded to black. My vision returned to SAM node, I leaned against the wall, and slid down onto the floor. I sighed. 

"I… I didn't expect that…" I murmured.

"Death remains an elusive concept for me. A finite end in a cosmos otherwise filed with infinite possibilities," SAM explained.

"Well… even the universe will end someday. But… so long as someone remembers you… knows your name, in a way, you don't really die. As for beyond that… well, you've already heard me tell others. Hopefully something continues, or maybe it doesn't. Not anything you can really do about that…"

"And yet this belief, that everything will end someday, serves as a form of motivation for many organic lifeforms," SAM remarked.

"Well, sure, make it last as long as you can, make it be a meaningful as you can, enjoy as much of it as you can… It's part of why you exist. Dad hoped you could save her," I explained.

"And I failed." SAM stated.


"And yet, paradoxically, it was in that moment I gained a greater understanding of life," SAM stated. I raised a brow.

"How so?"

"In the depth of feeling your father had for Ellen."

"Huh. He didn't show it very often, but when he did…"

"It was a fact which he regretted. I detect an additional memory, but it remains locked through an extra layer of security. I apologize, but I do not know what it could be, or how to unlock it. And
there are no unlocked logs on your father's terminal. I am sorry," SAM explained.

"Not your fault, SAM," I sighed. I stood and returned to the tram. I want to see my sister.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

I entered my sister's room in the Hyperion med-bay. Still hooked up to an IV, still has a machine reading her heartbeat and neural activity. And I could still see the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. Given I had just watched my mother's last day, as she lay in a hospital bed, this gave me an eerie contrast. Not one truly based in reality, but still, can't help but feel some discomfort from that. I told SAM to connect to her implant. A moment later, she jerked as the connection was established.

"Hey Sara, still in there?" I greeted, sadness still lingering in my tone. Through the speaker that would be speaking her thoughts aloud, I heard my sister groan.

"Yeah, yeah I'm here. Something wrong? You sound… off," Sara asked. Even in a comatose state, she knows me well enough to notice right away.

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Think I told you about how I've seen some of dad's memories through SAM? Yeah, just saw an… unpleasant one," I murmured.

"Oh, sorry, Scott. So, been up to much else? Been a while since your last visit," she remarked. I considered telling her about Vetra, but… if we don't make it back, that will likely just make it worse for her. I'll tell her if Vetra and I both make it back out alive.

"Well, Kadara is taken care of, mostly. Had a change of leadership, and there's an Initiative outpost there. Remember how I told you how the two factions were Sloane Kelly and her outcasts, and the Charlatan's Collective?" I asked.

"Yeah, I remember," Sara answered. I glanced around and back at the door. We were alone.

"Reyes Vidal was the goddamn Charlatan," I whispered.

"Woah, that smuggler you told me about? He leads them all?"

"Yeah… I can't exactly say I trust him that much anymore, but… it's better than Sloane," I shrugged. "Other than that, we also reconciled with the Krogan, had an outpost join their colony, New Tuchanka. Found Ark Natanus. We also helped Jaal put an end to the Roekaar movement," I informed.

"Put an end to a whole terrorist group? How'd you manage that?" Sara asked, chuckling.

"Well, not entirely. There are still some fanatics lingering. But anyways. Resistance got Roekaar activity on their home world near an important historical site. My team went in, found out what they were planning. They wanted to blow the site up with Milky Way explosives, frame it on us. We stopped it, their leader confronted us. He aimed his gun at Jaal, and I called his bluff. He shot, I didn't. Jaal lived, and the Roekaar watching, all of them, they just… left," I explained.

"Damn, wish I could have seen that," Sara muttered.

"It was… something else. Let's see… we got a piece of Raw Remnant Programming tech, should help us use and merge their tech with our own a lot down the line. Oh, and the first Milky Way baby was born a few days ago," I smiled.
"Really? This soon?" Sara remarked.

"Yeah. Parents left in the mutiny, got off the blockers, and made a baby. We had to save them from Roekaar and Kett trying to capture them. While she was in labor!" I exclaimed. Sara groaned at the thought. "Healthy, Human, baby boy. David Edward Kennedy. Apparently, the mother knew the Human councilor in college, was a good friend, and named her kid after him," I explained.

"Can SAM show me a picture of him?" Sara asked. The AI did not respond, and simply followed through. How do I know? My sister began cooing, chuckling. Must have been a video of when we saw the baby. Soon, her focus returned.

"Thanks SAM. So, what's next for you, Scott?" she asked.

"Well… tomorrow, we're going to the Archon's ship," I answered, letting out a deep breath.

"Well… shit…" Sara murmured. "Why?"

"Well, he has a Remnant artifact that gives him the location of the heart of the Remnant Terraforming network. We need to get there, figure the place out before he does. We know where his ship is, and… we head out first thing in the morning."


"Count on it."

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

It was getting later in the day. I had left Sara in her bed, asleep, and sent Vetra a message asking if she could pick up some treats for the movie night we'd probably have tonight. With the personal request of a few cans of a certain kind of soda. Should probably try to not have a beer EVERY night after all. Besides, kinda craving it. I was in the docking bay, and wandered into the cultural center's upper level. I was curious to see if any of the Angaran diplomats were in there. See how they were doing. I stepped inside. Ambassador Isa had his back turned to the door, speaking with the Cultural Center Liaison. The other diplomats were either reading through books or data pads, or speaking with the VI, or studying the holograms of the Ark, or Citadel.

"Oh? Your people are monogendered? And I've been referring to you as a 'she' this whole time, my apologies," the Ambassador stated. The Liaison merely laughed.

"Please, Ambassador, you have nothing to worry about. My people have a pronoun for ourselves, and some for the two different sexes, but as the language was developed on Thessia, and for non-sentient life, they have a 'lesser' connotation about them. When we made first contact with the Salarians, and were developing the translators, we simply adopted their masculine and feminine pronouns into our own language. And for these translators, Salarians can use their feminine pronoun when speaking with us, as we are aware that our reproductive organs are very similar to that of females of most other species, and it simply translates into our own pronoun for ourselves," the Ambassador reassured. "You say a feminine pronoun, and we hear our monogendered pronoun." Ambassador Isa was both relieved and intrigued at this little revelation. I'll admit, I took a moment to think as well. It's funny the way languages and translators work like that. All the kinds of things that we simply never think about.

I didn't want to bug the ambassador or Liaison as they were still conversing, but I did, surprisingly, see Jaal tucked away in a corner of the cultural center, reading. I was surprised to see that he and
Peebee were done already. But, then again, I hadn't been keeping that close a track of time. I made my way down and greeted him.

"Ah, hello Scott," he greeted, smiling in reply as he swallowed a snack he had been chewing.

"Didn't see you, or Peebee, when we left the ship. Still managing to enjoy yourself?" I teased. Jaal glanced down, a bit embarrassed.

"Er, yes," he slightly chuckled. "I had heard it mentioned before, and thought that I should read about this. I just finished. The most fascinating histories about the conflict between the Geth and their Quarian creators," Jaal stated. "I feel like the Angara and the Quarians have so much in common."

"How's that?" I asked, interested in his viewpoint.

"We're both displaced, struggling against cruel enemies to save our home worlds," Jaal explained.

"True, but you still have your home worlds. The Quarians lost them all," I remarked.

"But we have still lost many worlds. And those we still have are still under threat. Home, is home. When home is not safe, the heart is sick from yearning," Jaal countered.

"I like that. Good way to describe it. I'm curious, what about your thoughts on the conflict itself? How it began, everything?"

"I understand the fears of the Quarians. I do not agree with the course of action, but, when they had all been told that true AI were dangerous, and then suddenly, the simple machines they had created to aid them in their lives became AI, how could they not feel fear? And then, the billions of their people killed, the few remaining forced into exile, how could one not sympathize with them?" he asked rhetorically.

"You'd be surprised…" I muttered under my breath. "Yeah, I just hope someday they'll get their home back.

"I'd have hoped there was a chance for reconciliation between the Geth and Quarians, but… if the Geth attacked your Citadel shortly before we left, well, small chance of that, I suppose," Jaal sighed. Peace with the Geth. Something I had wondered about occasionally long ago. But ever since Eden Prime? No. That was out of the question. "So, something about a movie night tonight?"

"Yeah, you said you had something to work on with Gil, right?" I remarked.

"Yes. Angaran films, you can FEEL the emotions within. So to speak. I'm working with Gil on the schematics and construction of a device that should allow your movies to do the same," he explained. "Won't be ready for tonight, unfortunately."

"Well, if we get the movie I'm thinking we might see tonight, then the one it might be ready for? Well, I'm very interested to see how THAT could be done," I nodded.
Artificial night had fallen on the Nexus. The artificial sunlight was now dimmed, and activity was winding down. But we Tempest crew weren't settling in just yet. Everyone had been called down to my quarters. The couch was in place, Vetra had the drinks and the snacks. Like I had asked, she had managed to get me a few cans of my personal favorite soda, Dr. Pepper. They were all in my mini-fridge until the movie started, getting nice and chilled. As for snacks, we still have the popcorn and Graxen, but she managed to snag some candy bars too. I wouldn't be too interested in that, but, hey, should make the crew happy. Speaking of which, they were now gathered, Sid included, in the same spots on the sofa as before. Though all I really cared about was that I was on the end of the couch, and Vetra was beside me. Even though there won't be any decent romantic scenes in the movie I have planned, well, putting an arm around her probably won't gather any complaints.

Satisfied with everyone being present, I stood, and gained their attention, their side conversations stopping.

"Evening guys, so, anyone have any suggestions? If not… I think you have some idea," I remarked. No one spoke. "Come on, someday you guys are gonna have to speak up," I joked. "Anyways, since that's the case, we're watching one of the Star Wars Prequels. Episode Two, Attack of the Clones. It's not the best of the Prequels, but ANYTHING is better than the abomination that was Phantom Menace," I groaned, and the human crew chuckled. "And, to ensure that no one still gets confused about anything, I'll try to make this brief. So, context. Obi-Wan was a Padawan in that movie, learning from Qui-Gon Jin. A Trade Federation had formed a blockade around the peaceful planet of Naboo. Representing the Jedi and the Galactic Republic, they tried to negotiate its end. The Negotiations were short. The Trade Feds invaded Naboo with battle droids, the Jedi went down, got Naboo's queen and some others out, and escaped to Tatooine. R2-D2 was on that ship, by the way. Had to land for repairs. They met a small, enslaved boy and his mother. Anakin Skywalker," I trailed off. Leaving the meaning of that clear. They all remembered Vader's true identity.

"You got to see some of Anakin's piloting skills, and a Protocol droid he had built. C-3P0. Qui-Gon knew the boy was force sensitive and managed to win his freedom, but not his mother's, and they took Anakin with him back to Coruscant, home of the Jedi Order and the Republic. But before they could leave, they were attacked by a mysterious figure with a dual bladed red lightsaber." I saw some eyes widen as they made that connection. I wouldn't say out of surprise, but more curiosity as to plot. "They don't get to accomplish anything at Coruscant, and return to Naboo to help the insurgency fight off the Trade Feds, all the while Anakin was starting to have feelings, and vice versa, for a woman among the Naboo who escaped with him named Padme. All rather forced in the first movie, my opinion. Anyways, Anakin being a skilled pilot joins the Naboo fighters, without permission, and manages to take out a droid control ship, crippling the army. Meanwhile, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon engage the mysterious figure once more. SAM, show us an image of Darth Maul," I requested. The holoscreen lit up from the scene of the movie where Maul, the black and red Zabrak, son of Dathomir, fully reveals himself, ready to combat the Jedi. "Now show a small little clip of their duel." The AI obliged, and the crew witnessed the first REAL saber-fight.

"So! Qui-Gon dies, Obi-Wan kills Maul, and agrees to take up Anakin as his apprentice." I finished.

"Everything you described sounds like it would be a good movie to see, why not watch it?" Jaal described.
"The reason you think that, is because I left out all the horrible parts. The entire Gungan race, the poor logic of both sides for their problems and solutions, just... we're better off skipping it." I explained. Jaal shrugged.

"Come on, let's get started," Liam insisted.

"Just finished. Go ahead SAM, play it," I stated. Just like before, SAM skipped through all the legal bits and previews and the title screen. If it wasn't part of the movie, we didn't give a shit. I grabbed one of my cans from out of the Mini-fridge, happy to see it felt nice and cold in my hand, and took my seat next to Vetra. One arm resting on the arm of the couch, leaning into that direction, though, not for TOO much longer...

The opening crawl slowly passed along the screen.

"So, why is it even a problem that people want to leave the Republic? Just, let them go and be at peace? I don't get it," Kallo questioned.

"Normally, you'd be right. But, well, they couldn't make a good movie if those Separatists had peaceful intentions, could they?" I remarked. The Naboo ambassador ship covered in silver touched down on Coruscant, and a pilot, guarding them now felt confident.

"I guess I was wrong. There was no danger at all."

"Three, two, and-" The ship exploded. The 'Queen,' and her personal guard were killed. But one of the pilots quickly removed her helmet revealing that she was in fact Padme.

"Ok, ok, hold on, you're a body double, meant to keep the one your doubling as safe. You get killed in an assassination attempt meant for who you're doubling as, and you say you failed? You did your job! Fully!" Cora exclaimed. No one responded, but there were chuckles.

I opened my can of soda and took a satisfied sip of my drink. Nice and cool, nice and carbonated. As Padme and her other guard left, the scene changed to within the chambers of Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, and members of the Jedi council inside. Some people seemed to lean closer at the sound of his voice. And then we saw his face.

"Hold on, is that..." Vetra began to question.

"And ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner," I joked, confirming for Vetra.

"He looks a lot less wrinkly," Drack murmured.

"You'll see why eventually," Gil shrugged. I cringed internally as the Naboo ambassadors arrived, and the one who shall not be named was shown. At least the scene didn't last too much longer. Palpatine suggesting Padme be under the protection of the Jedi, specifically, Kenobi. And thus, Anakin. Who, as the next scene showed, was nervous. Kenobi's little jibe at said nervousness showing some of the friendship and brotherhood the two shared.

"Aw, it's just like how you were, Scott," Sid teased. I gave her the finger, playfully. I was half tempted to just skip as He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named had another scene, being the first to greet the Jedi in his more than annoying disposition.

"If you want to know why we skipped the last one, this thing is why," I groaned.

"Ugh, his voice is like nails on a chalkboard," Cora sneered.
The Jedi and Padme reunited, and I noticed just how fake and forced the smiles appeared. To me. At least. Not to mention her word choice just appeared more sophisticated than necessary. 'If you will excuse me, I must retire.' I mean who the hell says that? Still, at least some of the signs of Anakin's willingness to ignore orders, one which in truth, can hardly be blamed, was a decent foreshadow to who he would become. In my own opinion, the Clone Wars series did a much better job of showing Anakin's personality, and WHY he doesn't always obey orders. And then, how it normally works out.

"He looks familiar," Lexi murmured, seeing a bounty hunter, in the armor of Mandalore, step from the shadows as another bounty hunter approached him. Afterwards, Anakin and Obi-Wan were discussing the security, and what the overall goal was. We saw Padme sleeping in her bed. Leaning up onto a pillow. A hand holding her head up.

"Who the hell ever sleeps like that?" Peebee remarked. Obi-Wan then caught on that there was another plan at work. Padme using herself as bait for the killer.

"I would much rather dream about Padme," Anakin admitted. Sid snorted in laughter, before beginning to laugh.

"Did he really just admit, to what is essentially his teacher, that he wants to be having wet dreams of the very woman they're trying to protect?" Lexi questioned.

"Totally not creepy in the slightest," Cora muttered.

As Anakin and Kenobi began arguing, they were distracted from the droid quietly parting the shields, and then cutting the glass to insert its payload. A pair of centipede things. Below R2's sensor grid. The things began sneaking towards Padme, and the two sensed the danger in the nick of time, slicing both insects in two.

And then Obi-Wan just fucking threw himself out the window, latching onto the droid.

"Fucking YEET!" Sid laughed. Then I burst into laughter myself, that she knows those old, stupid memes too. Obi-Wan was still dangling from the droid amongst Coruscant's highways as Anakin ran for a car.

"This place is reminding me a lot of Illium. The lanes of sky-cars, the night-lights, the massive buildings everywhere," Vetra listed off.

"Never been to Illium, or seen pictures. Just heard of it. Weird," I shrugged. Anakin caught his master from a very long fall as the two began pursuing the bounty hunter. Anakin was having the time of his life while Kenobi was more than a bit nervous. Earning a few chuckles.

"Couldn't they just fly over all that industrial shit?" It really wouldn't be that hard," Drack muttered. He was right.

Could have saved themselves some of the heat from flames or the electrical shot by literally just flying a bit higher.

"Damn, even the road through that building is just like Illium," Vetra muttered.

The two Jedi lost and then found the bounty hunter. Though Anakin finding her again involved just jumping out of their car and onto the bounty hunters. Barely managing to stay on. As Anakin began wrestling with the not so human bounty hunter, the engine was shot, and it began to crash down towards Coruscant's street level. And now they were running through the crowds. The two Jedi met back up and followed her into a club.
'Why do I get the feeling you’re going to be the death of me,' Kenobi chastised his apprentice. Peebee snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Ya wanna buy some Death stickssssss," A man with bug like antennas asked Obi-Wan.

"You don't want to sell me Death sticks," the Jedi responded with a wave of his hand. The man flicked the glowing stick back into his sleeve.

"I don't want to sell you death sticks," he muttered uncomfortably. I heard a chuckle or two at the Jedi mind trick.

"You want to go home and re-think your life," Obi-Wan continued.

"I want to go home, and re-think my life," the Ant-Man stated, leaving the bar. I admit, I laughed. As did Sid, Vetra, Jaal, Peebee, and Suvi.

"And just like that, he changed that man's life," Gil chuckled.

"Honestly that scene was pretty damn good, I have to be honest," I snickered.

The bounty hunter was soon caught and dragged outside for questioning. Well, didn't last that long. Just as she was about to give the name of the hunter who hired her, but then a dart struck her in the neck. And they saw the familiar looking hunter fly away on a Jetpack.

The next morning, the council ordered Kenobi to track down the bounty hunter, while Anakin would handle Padme's protection. Anakin spoke with Palpatine to convince Padme to go back to Naboo with him. And he began stroking the young Jedi's ego.

"He's been planning that for quite some time," Peebee murmured.

"Please don't look at me like that," Padme requested of Anakin. Just after he ranted about Kenobi's criticism, and Padme calmed him down. Shit, if I had remembered this I might have given Sid reason to leave for another moment. Because Anakin then only gave a stronger emphasis to the kinda creepy look he was giving to her. Asking why. I glanced over and saw Sid shuffle uncomfortably in place, slightly, as Padme responded, saying that she felt uncomfortable. I reached an arm around and behind Vetra to tap Sid on the shoulder, mouthing 'Sorry.' She just nodded and took a deep breath, leaning back into her seat. I returned my arm to my side, this didn't feel like a good time to keep it around Vetra.

Obi-Wan walked into a diner on the streets of Coruscant. It occurred to me that it was a nice way to attempt to give people a taste of what normal, everyday life might have been like for people a long time ago, in a Galaxy far, far away, on a city-planet such as this. I remember passing by small, diner like establishments in the wards on the Citadel. Other restaurants, residential districts, and of course, much of the same back on other worlds. Even Earth. Such places like this diner, were still common place in the cities. The cities were, of course, much larger, and there were both sky cars in the air, and wheeled cars on the ground, but an element was still much the same. Suburbs were still like the older depictions of suburbs, just different styles. Sometimes that new couple moving into the neighborhood could be someone with an Asari spouse, for example. Everything's the same, but different, one could say.

Kenobi spoke with his greasy old friend, got the lead that the dart was from Kamino, that they were cloners on Kamino. And yet, it did not appear in the Jedi archives.
"You are the exactly the way I remember you in my dreams..." Anakin murmured.

"Spirits, he is really, really bad at this..." Vetra muttered.

"Damn, and here I was taking notes," I joked.

"Better be notes on what NOT to do, Scott," Vetra playfully punched me on the shoulder.

The screen transitioned to Obi-Wan walking through the temple. The only Jedi seen that I could put a name to being the Twi'Lek, Aayla Secura. Obi-Wan then stepped into a room where Yoda was training some younglings. He needed the old master's help to find the missing planet. It was still missing from the archives, but with gravity, they had a location. After a scene on Naboo, Anakin acting a bit like a little bitch, we returned once more to where the plot was actually moving forward. Kenobi had found Kamino. A planet of ocean and storms. He ventured down towards a city and left his ship on a landing pad, stepping inside to be greeted by one of the long-necked Kaminoans. A woman, whose name I currently forget. But here's a surprise. Kenobi was expected. The woman led Kenobi through the bright, white halls to speak with their minister, a man in a black robe. Lama Su. A spoon like chair descended from the ceiling to seat Kenobi.

"And now to business. You will be delighted to hear that we are on schedule. Two-hundred thousand units are ready, with a million more well on the way," the Prime minister reassured. Kenobi, was understandably, confused as hell.

"That's... great news," Kenobi answered.

"Please tell your master, Sifo-Diyas that his order will be met, on time," the Minister requested. That struck Kenobi as a surprise.

He explained that the master had been killed. The minister was saddened, but believed that he would have been proud of the army that had been built. A Clone army. A Grand Army of the Republic. Kenobi agreed to inspect the army. But first, we had to see Anakin and Padme on their island retreat together. It was a pretty sight, the island. But then...

"I don't like sand. It's coarse, rough, irritating, and it gets everywhere," Anakin complained. He managed a KIND of recovery. With how everything there was soft and smooth, running his hand along Padme. They kissed, before she pulled herself away. Others sighed, groaned, I don't think they enjoyed their half of the movie much themselves. At least we got back to the clones on Kamino. Seeing the many, many incubation pods with clone babies growing within. Ah but the baby clones are not the ones to be focused on.

"Wouldn't an army of clones take much longer than the ten years they were first ordered to grow?" Lexi questioned.

"This group was created five years ago," The Minister stated, showing children seated, working on terminals.

"You mentioned growth acceleration?" Obi-Wan asked, and thus answered Lexi's question. With that it takes half the time to grow a clone to maturity. Now we saw a fully-grown clone sitting, eating lunch amongst many of his brothers.

"They are totally obedient. Obeying any order without question." A slight exaggeration to be sure, they are still people, after all. Just, cloned. Their genetic structure was modified to be less independent than the original host.

"And who was the original host?" Kenobi questioned.
"A bounty hunter named Jango Fett."

"Wasn't Fett the last name of the other one from the older movies?" Drack asked.

"Boba Fett. Yeah," I answered. The minister explained then that Jango stays on Kamino, mostly. He is paid considerably, but was also given one single, unaltered clone for himself. Like a son. We then saw lines and lines of Clone Troopers, armored up, moving to receive their helmets. The new batch of Shinies were ready for action. Trumpets and drums began to play as the Minister, Kenobi, and the woman who had greeted Kenobi stepped onto an observation deck. Legions of clones, in formation, boarding a starship. A Truly, Grand army of the republic.

"Magnificent, aren't they?"

"Reminding me a lot of those Stormtroopers," Vetra whispered.

"I think there might be a reason for that," I chuckled a whisper in reply. I wonder if Cody and Rex were anywhere within that group of clones. Probably not, unfortunately. Rex was 501st, Cody was 212th. Granted, that didn't stop them from being on several ops together.

Another scene of Anakin and Padme. Anakin hinting the future Empire 'teasing' Padme before the two frolicked and played in the fields like it was a fairytale. People stopped paying attention for them, but returned when it was back to Kamino. Kenobi and the woman were at a door, and a boy opened. Boba, the woman greeted. Jango was present, and ready to be seen. Taun We, that was her name, right. Thanks for the reminder, Boba. There was the immediate, mutual understanding between both Jango and Kenobi. They knew who each other was.

"How many times is that woman going to change her outfit in a single day?" Vetra exclaimed. I hadn't actually noticed. Several different outfits, looks like all the same day. Anakin, seemed to aggressively beg that Padme admit feelings herself. Looking back, it did seem like Anakin forced her into that relationship, like Stockholm syndrome, without truly being kidnapped. Maybe it's just poor acting, maybe it was intentional. At least we relatively soon returned to Kamino. Kenobi was making the appearance of leaving. Contacting the council. Debriefing them on the situation. He was ordered to bring Fett for questioning.

Meanwhile, thanks to visions, Anakin was being drawn back to Tatooine. While Kenobi went to confront Jango as he and Boba prepared to board Slave 1. Jango used his dual pistols and Jetpack to attack the Jedi, while Boba used the guns on Slave 1. The ground being as slippery as it was from the rain didn't help either. And the two adversaries were left in a near literal cliffhanger, a cable holding Kenobi off the edge, and Jango almost following him, till the cord was cut. Kenobi was fortunate to not fall into the sea, and did not return to the platform until Slave 1 was lifting off, though he managed to place a tracker, in order to pursue. I just want them to be on Geonosis already.

There we go, Slave 1 arrived in orbit around the world, with Kenobi hot on his tail. And not unnoticed. The Fetts left behind a little gift in the planet's asteroid belt. A seismic charge. I smiled as I waited for the wonderful noise approaching. The charge detonated, enveloped in a blue bubble, and streams of light going both up and down like a quasar and everything went silent.

BWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM! The noise filled our ears and my smile grew wider as the blue bubble popped and expanded. I chuckled. It was such a satisfying noise.

The nearby asteroids were shattered. Kenobi narrowly escaped the debris, but there was another.
Again, Kenobi narrowly escaped. And the hunters resorted to different methods. Now they were behind the Jedi. Rapid blaster fire. Kenobi began taking damage but was still flying. Good thing too, now there was a homing missile getting closer and closer to his rear. So, he jettisoned his spare parts, detonating the missile as it hit the junk, and Kenobi hid himself, so he could follow safely soon. Into the caverns of Geonosis. Amongst the Trade Federation core ships, and the growing Separatist army. Kenobi left his droid, and under the cover of night, began his investigation.

As we returned once more to Anakin and Padme, now people began to pay attention. This homestead was very familiar amongst the sands of Tatooine. The same homestead that would nurture Luke. And 3P0 was present, plated in grey. Introduced Owen Lars, and Beru. Future scorched skeletons. It was explained that Shmi had been kidnapped by Tusken Raiders. Anakin was determined to find her. Riding off into the sands after them. Not just the men. But the women and children too.

Geonosis. Daylight was starting to shine. Kenobi was still unnoticed as he entered a structure. A massive assembly line creating battle droid after battle droid. Now the Jedi was looking over a group of people walking along, led by Count Dooku. Poggle the Lesser was at his side, and Viceroy Nute Gunray behind him. This group were discussing their allegiance and their decisions. The Count had the Techno-Union, and the Banking clan, and the Trade Federation. The Republic would agree to any of their demands. Though, Dooku was the only one seated at that table who knew, things were not so simple. He knew of the massive puppet show the galaxy was a part of. With his master pulling the strings safely within the chambers of the Supreme Chancellor on Coruscant.

"Little do they know…" Peebee murmured. I chuckled internally. Little did SHE know.

Meanwhile, Anakin found the Tusken, and his mother, who had been tortured. He cut her down from her post, holding her. And she died in her arms. Given what I saw earlier today… I struggled to not cry. This scene wasn't even done to a point where it would normally bring about tears. But… well…

Anakin was furious. He stepped out of the hut and began his slaughter. And Yoda had a vison, clouded by darkness. Felt the pain and suffering, felt by Skywalker, that would be caused by Skywalker.

"And his path to the Dark side, begins…" Jaal murmured.

"If only… Senator Amidala, were here," Palpatine's aid remarked, after stating that there should be a vote to give Palpatine emergency powers, and to approve the clone army.

"He's in on it. He's a damn puppet master," Cora muttered.

"Bingo," I replied, and we returned to Geonosis.

The Bugs with dick-shaped heads. "You know, these guys always bugged me," I joked. And got another punch in the shoulder form Vetra. Chuckling, I put my arm around her and lightly pulled her towards me. She rolled her eyes and went with it, leaning into me a bit, her head resting against mine.

Dooku moved into Kenobi's cell as he was held in a kind of stasis, Dooku playing the part of a sympathetic friend to him. He blatantly told Kenobi the truth that the Republic was under the control of the Dark Lord of the Sith, but Kenobi didn't believe him. Understandably, given the
circumstances, ah but he was so close. That so many senators were under the influence of Darth Sidious.

"So close, but so far," Peebee muttered.

Back on Coruscant, he who shall not be named, proposed the emergency powers act. Laying the foundation that will secure the future Empire. Yoda would now go to Kamino for the clones, while Mace Windu would gather Jedi to help Obi-Wan. Anakin and Padme were not content to wait, and instead, infiltrated a droid foundry on Geonosis. Through a back entrance. And R2, by being R2, dragged 3P0 to follow the two of them through the catacombs. Behind the pair, Geonosians came out of hiding, attacking, driving them into the factory. The door closed behind them, and the floor came out from under, leaving them to fall onto the assembly line and the treacherous machinery, threatening to smash and cut them at the wrong moment. Padme simply focused on running along, getting separated from the Jedi, as he took most of the attention, fighting off the Geonosians. While 3P0 and R2 went back to doing what they do best. Being the comic relief.

3P0 lost his head Literally having it knocked off and replacing that of a Battle droid elsewhere on the Assembly line, and his body stumbled over to where the droids were gaining their heads. So, an unfortunate B1 unit, found himself with a body not designed for combat.

"Uh oh," it's mechanic voice stated. Simultaneously, a confused 3P0 was attached to the body of a battle droid.

Anakin and Padme were both having as rough a time as the protocol droid. Padme was stuck in a container that would soon be filled with molten ore, and Anakin had his hand trapped within a piece of metal that would soon be crushed and cut. Fortunately, everyone's favorite little Astromech was in the factory systems, working to save the pair. In true dramatic fashion, he succeeded in the nick of time. Releasing Padme's container from the assembly line, but it was Anakin's own work that saved himself, but still resulted in his lightsaber being sliced in two. Though saved from an immediate death, they were captured, to be given to a later death. In the Geonosian coliseum. Would be quite a spectacle.

"So, like the Romans than," Cora murmured.

As they were approaching their death, Anakin and Padme hit fuck it, and just stopped hiding their feelings. No one was surprised though. Half the movie had been building up to it. Though I think the others were happy to see that the painful bits would be at an end. Mostly.

Kenobi was already chained to a pillar in the colosseum, the others were in the process of being chained themselves. Though Padme literally had something up her sleeve.

"Then we decided to come rescue you," Anakin answered his master. Obi-Wan snarkily looked up at his chains and back at his apprentice.

"Good job." Sid giggled at the sass of Kenobi. Dooku, Poggle, and the other Separatists leaders stepped out onto their personal viewing platform. The executions would now begin. Three gates began to rise, revealing the beasts that were meant to spell doom for the Jedi and the Senator. The first, a tri-horned bull like reptile, red on the upper part of his head and back, black everywhere else. It roared.

The second, the Acklay. A six-legged, large insectoid creature native to Felucia. Also known as Space Vietnam. Its teeth were sharp, as were its spear like legs. And it was not easily tamed, lashing out at the nearest Geonosian guiding it along with electric spears.
Third, a beast that looked like a mix between reptile and feline. Large, six eyes, a large, permanently grinning maw filled with razor sharp teeth, and dagger like claws. It was stripped white and grey, a pattern like a Zebra, with black quill like hair on its lower back, and a forked rat-like tail. When stabbed by the electric spear, this one did more than lash out, it pounced, leaping and taking the Geonosian's head within its jaws. As the beasts were being led to their victims, Padme was working on picking the locks on her cuffs. And she succeeded. Though only released one wrist, so that it would be easier to use the chain to climb to the top of the pillar.

"What about Padme?" Anakin questioned, not seeing her start her climb.

"She seems to be on top of things," Obi-Wan casually reassured. Making a pun himself, resulting in snorts of laughter. I both heard and felt Vetra groan, as her head was still leaning against mine. I noticed I had begun gently rubbing her side. I didn't stop.

The Acklay attempted to drive its legs into Obi-Wan, but instead, separated the chains keeping him bound to the pillar. Giving the Jedi a much better chance of evasion and survival. The Reptilian boar charged Anakin, but he nimbly jumped over and onto its back, using the chain as a rein to take control of the beast, as it broke from the pillar. While the carnivorous feline hungrily began to climb Padme's pillar, eager for a meal.

"Here, kitty kitty," Peebee chuckled.

Padme lashed out with the chain, striking it with the cold, hard metal. But it only served to anger the beast. And its claws scratched across her back, leaving a trio of red gashes. But she was still alive, and the Beast retreaded to the bottom of the pillar. Meanwhile, Anakin was having trouble keeping control of his new mount, and Padme managed to use the chain to swing around, and kick her cat-rat-thing off the pillar as it tried to climb again.

As for the Acklay? Still not making it easy for Obi-Wan. But Anakin was getting a hang of his beast. Obi-Wan took one of the shock spears to use against the Acklay, barely keeping it at bay. Padme prepared to repel the cat-rat again, as she freed her other wrist, but Anakin charged the beast into it, rolling it over onto its back. Either killing, or knocking it unconscious.

"It is just not his day," Drack remarked as Obi-Wan threw a spear into the Acklay, only for it to rip out said spear and bite it in half. So, he ran to join his apprentice. But they had their fun. Droidekas rolled out into the field. Surrounding them. While a robed Mothafucka approached the Separatists leaders from behind. A purple lightsaber was drawn, just in front of the neck of Jango Fett.

"This party's over."

"Mothafucka," Liam followed up, earning some laughs from the human crew.

Except Cora. Aayla Secura, Plo Koon, and Ki-Adi-Mundi also revealed themselves, drawing their lightsabers. Elsewhere, so did Shaak Ti, and Luminara Unduli, Kit Fisto and… some other guy. Eeth Koth, and future traitor Bariss Offee. An Asian woman and a guy with a dinosaur head and… you get the idea.

A squadron of B2 Super Battle Droids arrived to attack Windu, watch those wrist rockets. Legions of Battle droids, both standard and Super now filled the colosseum as well, and that is where the Jedi congregated. Meeting the droid forces head on. Green and blue light everywhere. Kenobi and Anakin got new sabers given to them, and removed their cuffs, still riding their new mount.

And then 3P0's battle droid controlled body waddled into the fray. Earning some chuckles. Jedi began taking losses. But the fight would not end so quickly. 3P0's head on a droid body marched
into the arena, panicking that this wasn't what he was built for. Luckily for the Protocol droid, his body had its battle droid head removed, with the rest of the body unharmed, while Jango got his first, and last, Jedi kill of the day. Jango attempted to shoot Windu, but he kept deflecting the bolts, before getting close enough to separate his head from his body. Giving Boba the motivation to become the pest to the Jedi Master he would in the future.

At least for 3P0, Kit Fisto, while smiling of all things, neutralized 3P0 by pushing him over, and a Super Battle droid landed on him. Letting R2 have the opportunity to fix his little problem later. Overall, the battle was turning against the Jedi. Their numbers were slowly thinning, and the hordes of droids would not stop. They were getting surrounded. And Dooku ordered his droids to stand down. Offering surrender to the Jedi.

"Cue the clones in three… two… one…" Vetra counted off as the offer was rejected. The roar of engines, the they looked to the sky. LAAT gunships, arriving to the rescue, with Republic ships in the sky. Not their magnificent Venator class star destroyers, no, but good ships nonetheless. And Yoda, accompanied by a ship full of clones, was the first to descend to the arena floor. The Gunships lasers literally carving through the droids, and the blasters and missiles doing the rest. The gunships began touching down, allowing squads of the now former shinies to engage the clankers in the first battle of the Clone Wars, as the remaining Jedi were evacuated. The arena was abandoned, the war was elsewhere on the planet. I was glad knowing that somewhere, Delta Squad was out kicking ass. 38, Scorch, Fixer, and Sev, Clone Commandos on their first mission. The Squadrons of gunships as they joined the fray attacked Trade Federation evac ships, and the Clone Army, supplemented by AT-TE walkers attacking the massive droid armies. Supplemented by Hailfire droids and Spider walkers. So many droids, so much blaster fire.

"Ha! Now the movie getting good!" Drack laughed. As the trade federation were ordering a retreat, back in their war room, Poggle walked to a hologram of a very familiar, and iconic weapon, took the plans into a data drive, and handed it to Dooku.

"Wasting no time foreshadowing that, eh?" Jaal remarked.

Back to the frontlines, explosion after explosion, the Clones continuing to push the droid lines. Trade federation ships began their retreats, but Republic beam weapons carved through its armor, and sent some crashing back down to the dust, a sandstorm engulfing the field. Yet the battle continued to rage. In the meantime, the gunship Skywalker, Kenobi, and Padme began a pursuit of Dooku. Though Padme and a clone were soon knocked out of the ship. Alive, of course. Anakin demanded the ship land to help her, but Obi-Wan countered, ordering they chase Dooku, potentially ending the war. It was of course, the right choice. It wasn't a long fall, and she wasn't alone.

The Jedi caught up with Dooku, but the gunship was then shot down. And Yoda was on his way. Anakin lacked the patience to take Dooku alongside his master, instead charging headlong into the fray.

"A shocking result," I joked as lightning streamed from the Count's fingertips into Skywalker's body, knocking him out of the fight for a small while, leaving Kenobi to face him all alone. But he would not be dispatched as easily as his Apprentice. The crew seemed to enjoy seeing their first saber fight that was actually lively, acrobatic. Moving around the field of battle, evading the enemy's attack. But Dooku got a pair of lucky hits in, at the leg and arm. He would live, but it would hurt. Anakin returned to the fight to save his master, and Kenobi gave Anakin his own saber to help combat the Sith.

"Lotta good that did him," Peebee muttered as his other saber was cut in two. Skywalker cut a
power cord, and now the two fought, illuminated by the light of one another's sabers. Anakin faltered, and was disarmed. Literally. And pushed towards Kenobi.

"So, lemme guess, he's his father?" Cora chuckled. Earning a few laughs from the others. Then the old man arrived.

"I don't see this being easy for the little man," Peebee mused.

An understandable perception, he was still using a cane to walk. Dooku attempted to throw objects at Yoda, but he easily countered them with his own mastery of the force, tossing the cane aside. Dooku sent out lighting, but Yoda absorbed the energy in his three fingered palm, and reflected it. Dooku drew his saber, and Yoda drew his significantly smaller one. Jumping all over the dam place, twirling and spinning.

"Oh, little man got moves," Peebee laughed.

But Dooku got his escape by sending a pillar about to crash onto the other Jedi, and Yoda would not allow that to happen. Despite knowing that Dooku would then escape in his Solar Sailor. His destination? Coruscant. The first battle of Geonosis was won.

"Begun, the Clone War, has," Yoda stated sadly.

The scene immediately shifted to be right in front of the helmet of a Phase 1 Clone trooper, Acclamator cruisers behind them, some lifting off into the dusk sky of Coruscant. The legion of clone troopers in formation, rifles at their shoulder, marching onto those starships. The Imperial march playing as both clones and vehicles were organizing themselves, getting to where they needed to be for the war. Such an aesthetically pleasing scene replaced by a hidden marriage between Padme and Anakin. And still, I may or may not have held Vetra a little bit closer, feeling her rock herself a bit closer to me in turn as the credits began to roll.

"Well, I liked half of the movie. And the war stuff at the end was pretty good," Peebee remarked.

"Yeah, if I could have skipped all of the Anakin-Padme stuff without making confusion, I would have," I shrugged. Then I yawned. Followed by Vetra. Her mandibles going as far out to the sides as they could and her tongue rolling out of her large mouth a bit. People began to stand.

"Alright everyone. Get some sleep. We got a busy day tomorrow," I stated a bit sadly. There were some murmurs, I don't think anyone was looking forward to it. Vetra and Sid helped me move the couch back and clean up, Jaal and Peebee walking away hand in hand. If they wanted to fool around a bit before going to sleep, well, I can understand that. No one knows how this mission is going to play out.

"Want us to walk you home, Sid?" I offered. She nodded. Vetra walked between us. I held Vetra's hand, and she held her sisters. We walked out of the ship and towards Kesh's apartment. Outside the door. Vetra and I both hugged the 'little' Turian who was still just as tall as me.

"Stay safe, ok?" Sid requested nervously.

"Always. We'll come back, sis," Vetra reassured, running a hand along the back of her sister's head. They tapped their foreheads against one another. Sid looked at me and tapped hers against mine. Uh…

"You too, Scott." Vetra appeared unfazed, and let out a deep breath as Sid broke away, and entered the apartment, one last wave.
"She looks at you like a brother, you know," Vetra whispered as we began to return to the Tempest. I smirked.

"Yeah, well, I look at her as a little sister. But… why did she tap me?" I asked a bit awkwardly. Vetra looked back down, with a plate raised, before her eyes widened.

"Oh!" she chuckled. "No, no. It's not exclusive to partners, Scott. Also with family," she reassured.

"Ok, good," I chuckled nervously. "Was a bit scared there."

"Good," Vetra laughed. We returned to the ship, still hand in hand. Vetra began to pull towards her room, and me towards mine. We didn't get anywhere, looking back to one another and chuckling awkwardly. Still, neither of us let go of the other.

"Do you… uh… want to stay? Tonight?" I asked meekly. Before she answered, I began stuttering. "It's fine if you don't! And I'm not asking that we… er… do anything just… uh… just in case… tomorrow…" Vetra put a hand against my cheek and lightly tugged it up to look at her. I looked into her eyes. She had the same fears. The same… longing. I let out a deep breath. "I just want to be able to hold you, tonight. Just in case…" Vetra smiled. And tapped her forehead against mine.

"Lead the way," I smiled, and released another breath.

I led her to my quarters. Towards my bed. I lay down first, on my back, and she followed, scooting herself up against me. Resting her head in the crook of my neck, an arm draped across my chest. I had an arm going around her back, and resting on the curve of her side, between her upper and lower back, stroking it lightly, slowly. I turned my head to look down at her, and she turned hers to look up at me. Gazing into one another's eyes. Without a word, our lips joined, followed by tongues. There was a longing in them, a want for more, perhaps. I poured as much care as I could into it. And I think she did too. It was not a long kiss. But it was… a loving one. We parted, tapped our foreheads together. Beneath the covers, in each other's arms, we slept.
The Storm

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest was beginning to come out of FTL. The crew was all suited up and ready in the cargo bay, even helmets, and I was standing in the bridge suited and armed, hands behind my back, letting out a deep breath. I had deemed helmets necessary as we'd be infiltrating an enemy ship. We don't want them draining the oxygen from the room we're in, after all. And that's ignoring just getting a bit more protection. We had no other pressing matters. No major concerns, no real distractions. Since I had left Davis Qar with a message to start releasing the Three Sabers info we got so long ago, implicating Addison in that mess, our to-do list was nothing but this very ship.

Kallo doubled checked the IES stealth systems one more time to ensure it was active. We didn't want the Kett to know we were here for as long as possible. With that final check passed, the dark veil of FTL was lifted away. We were on the outskirts of the Tafeno system. As the ship re-settled back into normal physics, Suvi got to work on her search.

"Detecting a lot of Kett comm chatter. Trying to narrow it down," she informed. There was nothing inherently unique about this system. Bright yellow star, and a handful of uninhabitable worlds. Be they gas giant, or solid rock world. "Let's see… the signal from the transponder, plus a focal point of most of the Kett comm chatter, points towards one of the gas giants. Within its atmosphere," Suvi explained.

"Got specifics?" I asked.

"Of course. Uploading now," Suvi nodded. We entered FTL once more, only for a few seconds as we approached the gas giant on the other side of the system. We kept our entry into the planet's atmosphere as gentle as we could. We don't want to give them any signs of our presence. Once we successfully re-entered the atmo, nearly enveloped in the pale-green clouds of gas, we began to narrow in on the source. Shapes started to appear, silhouettes. The lights of a Kett ship, just barely visible, almost perfectly camouflaged within these clouds. But… it was attached to something. Its shape was unmistakable.

Those bastards had Ark Paarchero.

"No… no, no, no, no, no…" Kallo began muttering, anxiously, repeatedly.

"Suvi, what's the ark's condition?" I questioned.

"Reading no damage to any ark systems. It's all on standby. As for pods, I'm not sure. I'm definitely reading some on board, but the systems that should tell me are shut down," she answered. Shit. It wouldn't take a genius to figure out what the Kett are doing with the Salarians. I keyed the intercom.

"Crew, this op just got a lot more complicated. The Verakan is hooked up to the Salarian ark. Tethered. And we're not leaving without them. Good news is, that at least this gives us a more reliable entry plan. Tempest docks on Paarchero, we get off, wake up flight crew, Pathfinder if we can find her, infiltrate the Verakan, then find both Meridian, and a means for the Ark to escape," I explained. I turned off the intercom. "SAM, can you get me the Moshae?" Moments passed, and then her face appeared on the screen.

"Ryder, how goes the search for the Verakan?" she asked warmly.
"Mix of bad and good. They have the Salarian ark tethered to their ship. Any chance you can help us know exactly where the Meridian artifact is? What it is?” I asked. The Moshae wasted no time, complete professionalism.

"It was a large relic depicting Meridian, the same symbol we saw on Aya. It's in his private chamber, his 'Sanctuary.' He's very proud of that relic,” the Moshae cautioned.

"Oh, only until we swipe it right out from under his nose alongside the ark, because it'll totally be that easy," I joked sarcastically. "Thanks, Moshae. Appreciated," I nodded.

"And I appreciate what you're doing for all of us. But be careful. I've seen the Archon's cruelty. I hope you don't."


"Scott…” Kallo began, getting my attention. He looked up at me from his seat. The fear in his eyes, twitching of his features, his shoulders. "Whatever you need. Those are my people…” The meaning was clear. He'd do whatever he could, he wanted us to do whatever we could. So long as his people were saved. Meridian just became secondary to him.

"We'll get them back," I reassured. "Now, let's go make this one count," I stated as I marched down to the cargo hold.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The Tempest dropped us off unnoticed, then subsequently vacated the area. Why? The IES system can only go so long before it needs to be vented. True, even at the ship's top speed it can last hours, but better safe than sorry. The Tempest would be waiting within the nearby clouds, running on minimal power so that the stealth system wouldn't have many emissions to store in the first place. But they were ready to do anything at the drop of the hat.

The hangar we entered was just nearby one of the Ark's cryo bays, with their neighboring med-bay. We needed a console to fully assess the Ark's status, and we knew there would be a terminal there, so that's where we began the search. It was… quiet. Empty. The only signs of activity in the Med-bay were some papers scattered on the floor, a few Kett crates that had been moved inside, and a data pad. Though it contained no useful information. Just an alert to the crew that they detected Alien ships, and tried to hide. Well, we know how THAT worked out. We made our way over to the console, and activated it. As SA accessed the systems, the console flaring to life, an image of three Salarians in blue and white armor appeared on the screen, much like the one on Ark Hyperion when we first woke up, though, obviously, that one showed humans.

"A moment. Additional data encryption has been added," SAM informed.

"When has that ever stopped you, SAM?" I remarked.

"Sounds like they left something for us. Hide it from the Kett," Liam mused.

"It has never stopped me. It was a cryptography key associated with Salarian intelligence services, specifically, the STG," SAM explained.

"Special Tasks Group. Heh, crafty, sneaky bastards. Back in the Rebellions, they were the Salarian forces that gave the Krogan the most trouble. Bombs, assassinations, anything cloak and dagger,” Drack muttered.
"Think I remember that the STG were the inspiration to make Spectres," Cora remarked. I turned back to the console. I'd get the mission status, and then see about finding Zevin Raeka, the Salarian Pathfinder.

"At present, Ark Paarchero has arrived in the Heleus Cluster. Location of Nexus is: Unknown," the interface explained. Well damn it, that wasn't the kind of mission status I was looking to get. The screen turned red, a triangle with an exclamation mark in the center to signify an alert. Behind it, the face of who I would assume was the Captain of the Ark.

"This is Captain Hajer of Ark Paarchero. If you are receiving this message, hostile aliens have captured our ship. Please look for our Pathfinder, Zevin Raeka. Situation urgent," he pleaded.

"So, she's alive, sounds like. Would be nice to have one of the original Pathfinder's out and about," Cora nodded.

"Heh, yeah, no training or preparation required, ready to get out in the field and kick ass," I chuckled. A week ago, I would probably have thought that was a jab at me. But, given events on the Asari ark, Cora's own personal revelations, I know she didn't mean it that way. SAM unlocked the bulkhead into a cryo pod storage room that would lead us to another med-bay. Hopefully, find Raeka. SAM also confirmed that the Ark was flight ready. Tethers could probably be torn off without problem as it flew away, but there are likely guns trained on the ark.

The cryo pod bay still had a lot of pods within, though many were clearly missing. Kett crates and tech were scattered about.

"No bodies… no signs of a fight…" Vetra murmured.

"Did they give up?" Peebee questioned.

"Remember how I said cloak and dagger? Salarians rarely ever do anything one on one, face to face. No, they would wait for their chance, and take it," Drack retorted. We entered the next medical bay. Same scene as the last. Mostly. Another data pad, an order to cease defensive operations against the Kett. Risks to ship and personnel too high. There were also two dead Salarians. Both on the medical beds. One seemed to die of heart failure during stasis revival, while the other couldn't be determined by my scan. Fortunately, there was a medical terminal next to the corpse. Online. SAM pulled the terminal's report.

"He is identified as Pathfinder Zevin Raeka," SAM informed. I heard Jaal, Liam, Vetra, and Peebee curse, mutter under their breath. But there was a problem.

Zevin Raeka is a woman.

"Those sneaky bastards…" I muttered. "They swapped places. Zevin Raeka is a woman, guys. SAM, which pod belonged to this Salarian?" I questioned.

"Cross referencing the man's DNA with Initiative files… Jeks Arlan. I can lead you to his pod," SAM stated. We quickly returned to the cryo pod bay beside us, Drack muttering about smoke and mirrors. We found Arlan's pod, and there was indeed a female Salarian inside. I activated the stasis controls from a nearby console, the pod being lowered to our level. The pod came to life, lights inside and outside the pod, illuminating her slumbering face. The pod slowly began to open, with her still sat inside. And, suited up in orange and black armor. Drack helped me lift her up and out of the pod, and brought her into the med-bay, laying her down on one of the beds. Zevin had a kind of orange face paint over her forehead and cheeks. Her nostrils began to flare, her mouth, starting to twitch, followed by the rest of her face. Scrunching up, her eyes starting to open. They rapidly
flickered open and closed a few times and she immediately began sitting up, looking at her surroundings.

"Hey, hey, hey, take it slow," I cautioned, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. She looked me over. I had removed my helmet for the revival. She studied my face, and then my armor. Specifically, the N7 on it.

"No need," Zevin shook her head. "I'm fine. Salarian stasis recovery is almost immediate." She sat up fully.

"That would have been nice," I heard Liam chuckle.

"Who are you?" she questioned.


"Scott. Your father mentioned you and your sister. Where is Alec?" I glanced down, Vetra stepped a bit closer, a hand gently pressing against my back, reassuringly.

"Didn't make it," I muttered. Raeka glanced back down at the medical bed, closing her eyes.

"I'm sorry." She looked at the rest of my crew, and her eyes fell, and locked on Jaal. "What… who… are you?" Raeka asked.

"Jaal Ama Darav, of the Angara. I've been a member of the team since first contact. Our people have been fighting the Kett invaders, the aliens who captured your ark, for many, many years," Jaal explained quickly. Raeka didn't seem to need any more than that, simply nodding as we returned to the task at hand, and she placed her feet off the bed, standing herself up.

"This is madness. Going back into stasis was a mistake. I should never have agreed to it," Raeka murmured. Still getting her bearings. She slowly made her way towards a console.

"Why not?" I asked.

"A leader leads," she began typing in the console. "She doesn't go to sleep. A hostile species, these, Kett, as your friend named them. An armada of them set upon us. Our captain saw no choice but surrender. Said we'd live to fight another day," she explained.

"Leusinia was being chased by Kett. They kept running till we found them," Cora remarked.

"Running also wasn't an option we had. They had us blocked off," she countered. "Captain Hajer convinced me to hide in the general population and to dismantle my SAM, so neither of us would fall into enemy hands. Yet… we're still in their grasp, I see…"

"Not for long…" Drack trailed off.

"My team and I are heading into the Kett vessel to gather critical intel. Wake up a flight crew and be ready to get the hell out, my signal," I informed.

"That'll be no trouble. After I wake up the crew, I'll work on freeing the ark, so you can focus on your objective," she offered.

"You don't know what they're capable of, and you're alone, better if you stay here," I countered. "We'll handle it." Raeka took a deep breath.

"One thing at a time. Of course." I lifted my arm and my Omni-tool glowed to life. I pressed a few
"Keying you into our comms. Stay in touch."

"Hello, Pathfinder Raeka," SAM greeted. She looked down, closed her eyes.

"Ah," she smiled. "Feels good to have a SAM in my head again. I'm back in the game. We'll be ready."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

We allowed Raeka to take care of the flight crew, and made our way into one of the tethers. I'll admit, I know better than to expect Raeka to stay put, but, one can hope. One way or another, I won't be able to stop her. It felt... weird, travelling through a small, narrow metal tube, dangling between the Kett flagship and the ark. It rocked back and forth as the wind was blowing. Suvi had confirmed that the Kett ship gave no sign to indicate they were aware of us. Finally, we reached the end of the tube, to one of the ship's airlocks. I ordered us into a breaching position. We'd open the door, and silently storm in.

"Okay, we keep this quick and quiet, they'll never notice," I stated, preparing to open the door.

"You know as well as I do it won't be that easy," Drack mumbled.

"Yeah, well, one can hope," I sighed, and opened the door. We stepped in, and a Chosen who had just been standing on an upper level staggered back. He began shouting as a round from Jaal's rifle entered and exited his skull. We heard more shouting, and more footsteps.

"I think they noticed," Vetra remarked as the team began to open fire on the few Kett moving to engage. Two Chosen, one Anointed.

" Fucking perfect, right?" I muttered, annoyed. At least the Kett here fell quickly.

"More hostiles entering from a door upstairs," SAM informed. We rushed to the second level just as they turned the corner. They staggered upon seeing a squad of this size with weapons all trained on them. The Chosen began lifting their rifles to meet us, but were only riddled by bullets.

"So much for sneaking in," I grumbled.

"If you locate a terminal, I may be able to analyze their systems, and locate the Archon's quarters," SAM offered. No response required, we just immediately searched for a console. I found it, on a raised platform looking out over Ark Paarchero. "Accessing the ship's systems now," SAM informed. Another moment passed as he sifted through the information. "I have located the Archon's private chamber."

"What about the Archon himself?" Jaal questioned.

"That information is not accessible. I only know the room's location," SAM answered. Jaal sighed.

"What about their security situation?" I asked.

"An alert was issued, but I countermanded it. The delay is only temporary," SAM cautioned.

"So, we hurry," I remarked. "Let's go."

"Uh, Scott, looks like we have backup," Peebee called out. Figured. Without a word, I left the
console and found that Raeka, accompanied by three other Salarians, had stepped out of the tether and up to the second level. I tilted my head to the side, looking straight at Raeka, the question clear.

"Too many of our people are missing," she answered.

"If we don't find them now, we never will," another Salarian supported. Sounded just like Captain Hajer from the message left behind. Unlike most male Salarians, his voice had some gravel to it. Some grit. Must be a bit on the older side of things, I suppose.

"We'll focus on the rescue, while you push ahead, Ryder," Raeka stated. Her lighter voice.

"A secondary route is available. I will provide support for you when I can, but Scott will take my priority," SAM explained.

"Understood, thanks," Raeka responded. I followed them to help them find their way. One of the Salarians with Raeka began whispering. He was nervous. He was a professor, and never fought before. Hajer tried to reassure him by saying that he's only ever flown, but kept confidence.

Another one of the team used to work on FTL drives on Sur'Kesh. Could rig some explosives. I used a console to open their door.

"Wish we could help you, but we need this intel," I apologized.

"We understand. Good luck, Pathfinder," Raeka nodded, turning to lead her men to search for their people.

"And to you, Pathfinder." Felt weird saying that.

"So, what's our route?" Liam asked.

"Marking. You may proceed," SAM answered. A nav-point appeared on our HUD. An arrow along the compass. Normally, a compass works with the magnetic field of the planet. But this planet is a Gas giant, and we are barely within its atmosphere. So instead, it's linked with our map of the ship. North leads towards the front, south leads to the rear. Our route, was to the south.

"Seven of us against a ship full of Kett, huh?" Vetra murmured.

"Eight. I count double," Drack chuckled. The joke seemed to help ease the tension a bit, I saw Vetra relax, just slightly. We passed through our own set of doors. No hostiles greeted us. Instead, a kind of storeroom. Crates, weapon racks, workbenches.

"Looks like an armory," Cora remarked.

"Scott, over there, on the workbench," Jaal pointed it out. Leading me over. There was a weapon, Kett, obviously. Not one I had seen in use before. "It's a Dhan. Very rare, very deadly." I started taking a closer look. "What's the best way to compare it... hm... Ah! Yes. Cora's Crusader shotgun fires a single round. Accurately, and powerful, yet short range, correct?" I nodded my confirmation. "This weapon does something similar. It launches a projectile that is surrounded by a plasma bubble. They are large, and dense. If they don't kill you, they will knock you to the ground." I took hold of the weapon, feeling it in my grip. I aimed it at one of the crates, and pulled the trigger. There was a satisfying ker-thunk sound, and little kickback. The projectile was essentially a fast-moving orange ball that I saw for only a moment before it impacted against one of the crates. It was knocked over onto its side, a large smoking hole where the ball impacted. I might like this gun. I took the Piranha shotgun from my back and tossed it to Liam. He's more short range anyway with that SMG, and he fights aggressively. Could have given it to Vetra, or Peebee, or Jaal, but they all tend to hang back more. I clipped the Dhan to my back, and Jaal found, and gave me a
pack of power cells to use as ammo. We made our way to the next set of doors, another breaching procedure.

It was a large, open room. A viewport to our left taking up the entire wall. There was the central level, which we entered from, and there were walkways up to an upper level. Ahead, there was a large rectangular hole in the floor revealing the presence of a lower level as well. Our nav-point was leading us to the upper, far end of the room. We entered, and the purpose of this room was made clear. It was a minor hangar. A Kett shuttle was floating in the air, a squad of troops just released. The shuttle departed. The troops within the hangar had their backs turned to this door. They were still unaware of our presence.

"They haven't seen us yet," I whispered to the crew.

"That won't last long." Peebee murmured.

"Jaal, you and I cloak, try to get to the upper level, get the advantage," I ordered. "The rest of you, stay here, stay ready."

"I would advise against that, Pathfinder. If the Kett become aware of your presence before you are ready, they could seal this door, and separate the crew," SAM cautioned.

"Shit," I muttered. "Fine. Let's... try to get everyone into the lower level first. Get across from under there, then back up on the other side." Weapons ready, we stepped around the corner.

Right into the face of a Destined. Both our eyes went wide, and my hand immediately went to cover his mouth, while the other clipped my Sweeper onto my back, as I pulled the Destined back into our room. I drew the sword from my belt and sent it into his skull. He was dead, a silent kill.

"Ok, take two," I grumbled. We stepped out again, without any Kett bumping into us. The Kett dropped off by the shuttle had dispersed. There was a Chosen patrolling the central level to our right, walking down, his back turned to us.

"Jaal, take out that Chosen up there and meet us back when we come up," I ordered. Jaal nodded, and vanished from sight. Carefully, I led the others creeping forward, peering over the edge. A Chosen was patrolling down there as well. Fortunately, he had just turned in his routine, his back turned. He was scratching at his back, muttering to himself. He began to step forward. I jumped, quietly using my biotics to keep my fall silent. As my feet hit the ground, I lunged forward, my left hand covering his mouth, as my right guided the Asari sword across his throat, green blood spurting out. He crumpled to the ground, and I drew the sword into the back of his head. You can still make noise while you suffocate, after all. It's just not vocal. The others than followed me down, I used biotics to help make their own falls silent as well. Though with Drack, I had Peebee give me a hand. Doesn't hurt to be safe.

We made it to the end of the passage, and once more, biotics silently guided us up. Jaal joined us again, and they guided us up yet another level, using crates as large stairs. I was helping Drack up, when a Kett shouted out. Rounds began pinging off his shields, and so he just used his jump-jet, quickly joining us by the door. Shit, locked.

"Attempting to find alternate route," SAM informed.

"Keep em at bay! Stay safe!" I ordered. The squads of Kett that had been dropped off, patrolling the landing pads and the upper levels opened fire.

"This is gonna get worse before it gets better, dropships inbound!" Drack called out. Shit, he was
right, a pair of Kett shuttles passed through the forcefield, and began unloading troops.

"Dropships? Oh, that's just unfair," Vetra groaned.

"So, Singularity?" Jaal suggested.

"Can't," I shouted, controlling my breathing. "All that lifting wore me out, need to recharge a bit," I explained. Yeah, frying out my brain isn't really something I'd be keen to do. Jaal shrugged, continuing his sniping. Cora and Peebee continued combining their biotic abilities for detonations, and Vetra continued her suppressing fire, keeping anyone she could down. Drack was uncomfortable, as the range of the Kett were rendering his Ruzad ineffective, and there were too many for him to charge. Liam tried doing what he could, but a rapid-fire SMG, is still a rapid-fire SMG. At a distance. Still, we were managing to do work. The Destined were leading the Chosen, trying to focus their attacks. And an Anointed had begun trying to rain hellfire on us, but a Grenade managed to put him down. Unfortunately, the Kett were starting to learn about spacing. So, only managed to kill that Anointed, and one Chosen who was smacked in the head, hard, by what may have been the Anointed's arm. Doors at what was now the far side of the hangar opened, and more troops entered. Destined with mist pouring out of their armor, cloaking them and their men. I could see their ripples moving closer along the upper level.

"Drack, keep those fuckers back!" I ordered.

"With pleasure," he laughed, sending a pair of flak rounds right into the center of the mist. Upon detonation, the mist began to dissipate, and the walkway was covered in both dark green blood, and Kett corpses. Oh, for fucks sake.

"Goddamnit more inbound!" I exclaimed.

"Why can't we have a dropship?" Vetra cried out. I heard several shouts of agreement as we continued taking down what Kett we could.

"Well, we're supposed to be the goddamn cavalary!" I shouted, rising out of cover to put a round in the skull of yet another Chosen. Vetra keyed her Omni-tool and removed some of her armor's safeties. She swept her rifle back and forth as her tech armor glowed. Some Kett were killed, some went into cover. We all did our best to take advantage of this as best we could. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her tech armor flicker and fail, her shields did the same. Vetra cried out in pain, clutching her side.

"DAMN IT!" she exclaimed. Fearful, I lowered myself back into cover to check on her. Her hand was still clutched over her side and she was cursing up a storm. I took a glob of Medi-Gel and removed her hand. Good, just a flesh wound. Right at her side. Millimeters more to the side and it would have been a minor graze. Obviously, the armor there was broke, but, good news with energy weapons, is that it's an immediate cauterization. She won't be bleeding, but the Medi-Gel will help the pain.

"She alright? We need you back Scott," Cora called out.

"Yeah, yeah I'm just fucking wonderful. Motherfucker only gave me a flesh wound, got Medi-gel. Let me bitch and I'll be right back to take out the spirits damned piece of shit bitch ass motherfucking cunt who shot me," Vetra grumbled. She looked at me, and nodded, hand on my shoulder. "Go," she urged. I nodded in reply, quickly tapping my forehead to hers as I returned to shooting as many of the Kett as I could.

"Cursing like that? You sure you're not Krogan at all?" Drack chuckled.
"If I was, I wouldn't even feel this damn thing," Vetra managed to chuckle back. The Kett would still try to charge us, occasionally. Especially after Vetra went down. But Drack and Liam kept them at bay.

"Thank fuck! They're starting to thin out!" Peebee exclaimed. She was right. No more reinforcements had entered the room. The amount of gunfire heading our way was getting less and less.

"Wipe the fuckers out!" I ordered. And that's what we did. We fired, and fired, and fired. Now there was just a handful left. But a Destined then jumped up to the third level the same way we did. Just beside Jaal, catching him by surprise. But then, Vetra's Cyclone went off, bullet after bullet impacting his shields, and then riddling him with bullet after bullet, and he fell back off the ledge, dead. And Vetra was getting back on her feet.

"Fuck you," she growled. Jaal nodded his thanks, and the last of the Kett fell.

"That's it, we got em," Cora called out.

"Thank fuck for that," Liam let out a deep breath.

"Let's just get the hell out of here," I murmured. The alarms had been going off the entire firefight. Now they were just annoying. At least the door worked.

"Ryder, this is Raeka," she contacted us over the comms. "I assume those alarms are because of you?"

"Yeah, had a little dispute to settle. You?"

"Undetected so far. Still looking for our people. Take it as you will, but I think you're making our job easier," she remarked. "Raeka out." Making their job easier for them. Glad for them, just fucking wonderful for us. The following room was lit in a blue light emanating from some Kett machinery built into the walls. No idea about purpose though, and not enough care to try and find out. But we pushed forward into the next hall. To the left, a dead end. To the right, a Kett, that looked much like a Destined, but clothed in a red robe compared to green armor stood inspecting crates, or something behind the crates. He was unarmed. He looked up and stared at us in shock as he ran. I charged him biotically and knocked him to the ground. I looked back up. He was looking at stasis pods. He began talking. He was afraid, I think. But none of it came through the translator.

"Pods are empty. I can only think of one reason why…" Peebee murmured.

"He's a scientist. We've raided facilities with them before. Either… dissecting our people, or running tests on them," Jaal growled. "They research exaltation." Jaal looked right at me. An unspoken request. I nodded, got off the scientist as Jaal drew his pistol. Aimed. Fired. The scientist left dead on the floor. "The Resistance deals with the Kett in only one way. Yes, we have rules of engagement. Though we haven't exactly faced true Kett civilians. Quick, and painless. That's how we do it." Jaal muttered, and holstered his pistol.

"These pods both contained senior members of Ark Paarchero's leadership," SAM informed.

"Target the leaders, sow confusion. Common Kett tactic," Jaal stated, calm once more. We continued following the nav-point. It brought us to another room, similarly large and open, like the hangar. Though this bay instead had large metal tubes poking through an energy barrier, and outside. The design may be different, but there's no mistaking the purpose.

"Gun battery. Think we can deactivate them?" Drack suggested.
"Perhaps. Find a terminal, and I shall try," SAM answered. There must be Kett somewhere here… We took a left, outside the gun battery was Ark Paarchero. Each of the guns were pointed right at the ark. The console was unmanned. I connected with my Omni-tool.

"Unfortunately, disabling the guns would require authorization from the Archon," SAM explained.

"Maybe if we ask nicely," Peebee joked.

"Those guns won't miss. The moment the Ark starts to move, you can scratch us, the mission the relic… everything," Vetra murmured. Well, the Tempest wasn't on board. We could possibly manage an evac, but wouldn't be worth losing the Salarian ark. I didn't voice my thoughts. Instead, we kept moving. And not a Kett in sight.

"I don't like this…" Jaal whispered. Yeah, neither do I. We approached the door. Half of us ready to fight anything on the other side, the rest, covering our backs. The door's holographic interface was blue. A good sign. But as soon as I began to connect, it went red. Locked.

"That's not an accident," Drack called out. We turned to join the others in watching the way we came. The door on an upper level opened, several squads of Kett, including Chosen, Destined, and Anointed stormed out, weapons ready. And there wasn't much cover down here.

"Drack, cover the ramp. Vetra, Jaal, with me to the door above us!" I called out. As ordered, they stepped out with me and the jump-jets gave us the lift we needed to the upper level. Yeah, plenty of Kett. Again, not too much cover, but there was a barrier along the edge we could use. That's where Vetra set up. Me beside her, and Jaal against the wall and its support beam, rifle ready. We opened fire. Whenever, and wherever we could. Tech attacks were focused on the Anointed to drain their shields, explosives focused on the Destined whenever they tried to cloak a group. But the Kett had something we didn't. Reinforcements. Quickly, I tried to check the door behind us. Locked.

"Think they locked us in," I called out.

"Then we fight our way out. Got explosives?" Vetra questioned.

"Well, there's that Cobra missile you have," I suggested.

"That is something I have. But there is no way in hell I'm shooting that door with how close we are," she responded.

"Yeah, that's… not a bad point. Alright, clear the room, give her space and time to fire that shit," I ordered. But they didn't stop coming, and we weren't taking them down fast enough. Drack was starting to lose ground by the ramp down by the others, needing to fall back, or let them get closer and closer before he could retaliate.

"Ryder! We're here! Open fire!" Raeka called out and then ordered her men. I looked up, and thank fuck, there they were. On a balcony in the middle of the room, above all other levels. Any Kett that wasn't perfectly within their sights, was right in the open for us. With bullet after bullet raining down on the Kett, we started fighting back harder in the confusion. Some Kett tried to shoot the Salarians, others continued trying to shoot us. Raeka continued encouraging her team, calling out other orders as the situations arose. The reinforcements had ceased. Kett were still trying to kill us, but no more were entering the room. Unfortunately, an Ascended had still managed to join the party. Another handful of Kett fell, but we heard a Salarian cry out in pain.

"Ryder, we have to pull out! We have wounded!" Raeka informed.

"Go! We can take it from here. Thanks for the save," I responded, taking down another Chosen.
Soon, as the Ascended was still approaching, the last of the other Kett fell.

"Spread out! Draw his fire any which way!" I ordered. We keep that orb under fire, he's done. As ordered, the crew began to disperse. Ducking in cover when he charged a shot, or just getting out of the way. I swapped my Sweeper for the new Dhan, eager to try it out. As the orb circled around, I fired. Oh, that's nice, the shot has minor tracking. Directed itself right to the orb. It disintegrated, leaving the Ascended vulnerable. Another Dhan round knocked him to the ground, a large hole in his chest. Scorched and burnt to hell, all the way to the large hole on the other side. With our victory, the crew began cheering in relief.

"That was damn close," I breathed heavily. "If Raeka hadn't come by…"

"I think we owe 'em one," Drack remarked.

"Agreed. But how do we get out? Liam questioned.

"I have located a new path to the Archon's chamber," SAM informed, and a new nav-point appeared on our HUD's. A door in the center of the room. A hallway to an upper level.

"Whole ship is probably looking for us," Peebee muttered, nervous. Another door, another room. This one with an orange light seeping in, from a window separating this chamber with another. This side had tables and chairs, some Kett machinery along the wall. The other side? Familiar faces. Raeka and the Salarians. She called us over, whispering.

"Seldin's wounds were fatal," she informed, lowering her head in sadness. I could see the corpse slumped against the wall in the corner. Shit.

"I'm sorry. He was brave," I attempted to comfort.

"I can't access this terminal. It's not working," Hajer grumbled from across the room.

"SAM?" I requested.


"Raeka, we got a big problem. Those guns trained on the Ark," I began.

"I know. They'll destroy the Ark before we can power up the engines. Unless..." her eyes widened with an idea. "Venro here used to repair FTL drives on private cruisers. Venro, an EMP device?"

"It might work," Venro nodded. "If we rig one to detonate near those guns, they'd lose power."

"And the ark would be out of harm's way," Raeka finished. "You and Hajer focus on that, I'll keep looking for our people."

"Everyone be careful. Good luck," I stated.

"You too, Ryder," Raeka responded. "We'll stay in touch." A new nav-point appeared.

"Why are we still keeping our voices low?" Vetra whispered. Huh, she's right. We had.

"We're sneaking onto an enemy ship," Drack responded, whispering himself.

"Who already know we're here..." Jaal murmured.
"Old habits die hard," Drack shrugged. We continued making our way.

"Worse comes to worse, how many Salarians are left in Andromeda?" Liam questioned.

"Not enough. The whole species is at risk," SAM answered.

"How reassuring," Peebee muttered.

"They'd know what the Genophage felt like," Drack grumbled. A few eyes turned back to look at him. "What? I didn't say I WANTED them to," he retorted, shrugging. We made our way to an open door. And then it closed on us. Locked. I was afraid of an ambush, but nothing came.

"There is an alternate route. Overriding the door now," SAM reassured. Damn, I feel like they're herding us. The door was still locked. "The Kett are hardening their security. Can you scan the access panel?" I did as requested. "The door is voice activated. I can attempt to modulate your vocal cords to approximate Kett intonation," SAM explained. Well, that's weird.

"Uh… go ahead? Then?" I remarked, unsure. I approached the security terminal. I picked out Kett words I had heard spoken before. Suppose I should try them…

"Rok Tal?" the… console spoke.

"It is asking for your authorization. How do you wish to respond?" SAM informed.

"Uh… Gosad nura… torak… shura…?" I spoke. Yet it wasn't my voice. I sounded just like a Kett.

"Really?" Vetra covered her face in her palm.

"Nok ra." the console stated. Nothing happened.

"Access denied," the AI translated.

"Yeah, I got that SAM," I grumbled. I tried again. This time, without pulling Kett words. "Intruders have been spotted on the ship. We need to secure this area." Still a Kett voice, but my words. Must be getting translated.

"Yol ma." The door opened.

"That was creepy. Really creepy," Drack murmured. We proceeded into the next room. This seemed like a kind of observation area. To our left, some kind of barrier surrounding Kett tech. To our right, another barrier, but there were more scientist Kett. Inspecting an insect in a kind of stasis field. They couldn't see us.

"Hate to think what they do around here," Cora whispered. It looked like a lab. I can only think of one thing the Kett would spend so much time researching. There was a data pad.


Damn it…

We entered the lab. One scientist tried to grab a gun, another tried to run. Both were taken down. But there were two others further away. They both ran, shouting. Damn.

"Let em go, we don't want them to lead us into a trap," I ordered. I checked a console behind the
floating, alive, pissed, but trapped Kaerkyn. The screen of the observation area was completely tinted over. Like a sheet of metal had been drawn across.

"Only useful if you're hiding something," Liam grumbled.

"Exaltation pods. Empty," Jaal growled. The way the scientists fled was the only way for us to go. Cautiously, we followed. A squad of Kett was waiting. An Anointed, a Destined, two Chosen. A flak round from Drack made them drop like flies. Shredded flies.

"Would be easier if they just handed the relic over," Cora joked.

"Yeah," Vetra sighed. "Save everyone the ammo." I subtly eyed her wound. Still not bleeding, but doesn't seem to be hurting her. Much, at least.

We pushed forward. Past more empty exaltation pods. Even through a room full of empty Cryo pods.

"Why the hell haven't we seen a single damn Salarian yet?" Peebee murmured.

We found our answer.

The crew spoke not a word. The shock… what we saw… there were several metal 'beds.' On each of them, a Salarian corpse. Limbs broken, even removed. Cuts and incisions all along their naked bodies. One had their abdomen wide open, all of the organs missing. Some had skin peeled away, revealing the muscle. Sometimes the muscle was intact, others it was torn. Some necks had turned in unnatural ways. Even the horn things on top of Salarian heads? Some of those had been torn off as well. Teeth removed, eyes gouged, lips peeled. If you think of a wound that can be inflicted on a body, we saw it right there in front of us.

"What… what happened here…" Vetra barely managed to speak. Slowly, I got closer to the bodies, grateful for my helmet, filtering away the smell.

"I have noticed the same trend amongst all the bodies. They all died after the operation," SAM revealed. Jesus fucking Christ…

"These poor bastards were ALIVE when it happened?!!" Drack barely managed to contain his anger. Peebee began gagging. Liam and Jaal? Growling. Cora remained stunned. Me? I was appalled. Just… absolutely appalled.

"No! Stop! Please!" A Salarian voice pleaded, shouted. This was another observation room. A pair of scientists, preparing a Salarian on an operating table. There was a machine above him. It had several arms. On each, contained some means to break, to cut, to slice, to peel, to pull, to gouge, to dismember. To kill. Vetra was the first to run over, pounding the butt of her Cyclone against the barrier.

"HEY! YOU FUCKERS! I'M GOING TO PERSONALLY FIND YOU AND KILL YOU, YOU MONSTERS!" Vetra cried out. Drack was next, kicking at it, punching it. I think everyone had joined next. The scientists seemed to find amusement in this. Shaking their heads. One turned on the machine as the Salarians screams grew more intense. Another approached another console, and pressed a key. The screen was now a solid wall. We couldn't see inside. "BASTARDS! YOU CAN'T FUCKING HIDE!" She shouted. But I noticed that as the wall changed, we could no longer here anything inside. We stopped trying to break through the barrier. "I've seen enough…" Vetra murmured, as the rage began to subside. "We need to find that relic and stop all this…"

What else could we do?
We entered the next chamber. A trio of Scientists had just entered, running, through a door to the side. We very quickly gunned the three of them down. But Kett forces rounded the corner, guns ready.

"LET EM FUCKING HAVE IT!" Drack roared. Jaal and Liam let out their own battle cries alongside the Krogan as we began tearing through the small Kett force.

"You bastards! We're not lab animals!" Vetra shouted. Drack charged the Anointed, and wrestled with his gun. Drack slammed his forehead into the Anointed's and tossed the gun to the side, He grabbed hold of the Kett's arm, and slammed him face first into the ground. Drack placed a foot on his back, and with one hand grasping both arms, pulled back, while we mopped up the rest. Drack tore both of the Anointed's arms from their sockets, and rolled him over, threw both arms into his face, and slammed his foot down onto the head, killing him. His nostrils flaring like a bull in anger.

"Hope they got the message," he growled. We continued following the nav-points. We arrived in a large, lab like room. Larger than the one we were in earlier. More equipment, though none in use. Weapons in hand, we continued moving, now, where to next…

"Scott, caution," SAM began. We were enveloped in a kind of energy field. Or… something. It lifted us into the air and gave us all a shock, making our hands spasm, and our weapons falling to the floor. Shit. We couldn't move.

"Aaaagh, God, Fucking, damn it," I growled, struggling to try and move.

"It's useless to struggle," a voice remarked. A Kett voice. All our heads turned to look at the newcomer. Fucking hoop-head Archon himself. Flanked by an armored Destined, red armor, a logo emblazoned on his shoulder and chest. The Archon strode straight towards me. My eyes narrowed. He eyed me, up and down.

"I've been in this cluster for decades, surrounded by amoeba," he continued. He began eyeing over the rest of my team. Walking between us. "Then you arrive. A human, able to do the unthinkable. You even evaded me." Jaal clearly struggled more when the Archon passed by him. "Such an unlikely rival. It's almost invigorating to have one. And yet, it's a fitting end," he mused, stepping right back in front of me. His face to my helmet.

"Is that what sad looks like? I'd give you a hug but… Hey, let me out, and I'll give you one! Around the neck! With a rope!" I offered sarcastically. The Archon grasped me by the throat, and then grabbed my helmet, ripping it off and letting it fall to the floor.

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF HIM!" Vetra cried out. The archon glanced at her, a brow raised. He turned my head back and forth, before I was face to face with him.

I spit, right over his left eye. The eye was closed, whether or not before some of that spit got in, I don't know. He slowly used his other hand to wipe it away.

I spit again. He slapped me. I chuckled. Vetra shouted again. Growling, the Archon grabbed something from his belt. Looks like a syringe. He stuck it into the back of my neck. Now the entire crew was shouting, some variation of "Get the fuck away from him." I felt the syringe draw blood from my system.

"A first sample. Your testing begins now. I will learn your secret soon enough," the Archon explained.
I spat in his face yet again. There was the sound of an explosion in the distance. The Archon, very clearly annoyed, wiped away the spit yet again.

"Report." he demanded. I couldn't hear the reply. "Await my arrival." The Archon pressed his palm over my face, and stepped closer, staring me right in the eyes.

"Save your strength, human," he sneered. He once more walked through my crew.

"As for the rest of you… Krogan. We are very close to perfecting exaltation of your people. Perhaps you shall be the first true success. You are exceptionally strong, despite your age. Yes, a good specimen," the Archon nodded. Drack growled. "Human male… uninteresting. You will be tested, examined. Perhaps an early attempt at Exaltation."

"Fuck you," Liam snarled. The Archon ignored it.

"Human female… what you refer to as… biotic. Very intriguing. Yes, you will be studied. Fear not, you may live for some time as we unravel the secrets of biotics, and you may be fortunate enough to join our Empire," he mused.

"Take your empire and shove it up your ass," Cora sneered.

"Asari-" the Archon began.

"Don't touch her," Jaal threatened, growling. He did anyway.

"Such long lives, the biotics… and, the rumors we have heard of your reproduction. Yes, you will be studied. Your secrets will be unraveled," The Archon moved on.

"Angara. We already unlocked your secrets. Yet-"

"Stay away from him," Peebee snarled now.

"Curious…" the Archon murmured. "Yet, you, Angara, you are a strong specimen. You will be exalted soon, rest assured." He continued moving through us.

"And, the Turian."


"How foolish. Such connection when reproduction is an impossibility. Your biology will make exaltation complicated, but we will unlock the advantages of your species. Perhaps you will die in examination, perhaps you shall be tested. It is of little matter," the Archon mused. "I shall return later. Then the tests shall begin." The Archon, followed by his bodyguard, departed.

"I'm gonna rip his fucking head off," Drack growled.

"Get in line," I muttered.

"SAM? Come on, how do we get out of here?" I questioned.

"I'm sensing a biological transmitter in your bloodstream now. Attempting to neutralize," SAM began.

"Okay, yeah, get rid of that shit. But, how do we break out of this?" I continued.
WHAT?! FUCKING WHAT?! Did I just hear SAM right? According to him, this field only interacts with living things. So, if Scott dies, the field around him will reset? What good will that do anyway?

"As you know, my access to your physiology allows me to enhance your vital signs when required," SAM explained to my BOYFRIEND. "I can also do the opposite."

"Woah, woah, woah, slow the hell down, SAM. I really kinda don't want to die today!" Scott exclaimed.

"Damn fucking right you don't! You're not dying!" I exclaimed.

"After stopping your heart, I would attempt to resuscitate, of course," SAM attempted to reassure. Spoiler alert? It did not reassure.

"Are there any other options? Any other than let that fuckwit do what he wants?" Scott questioned. The AI paused. A full two seconds. With how quickly AI process information, that's telling.

"None that I can determine." Scott looked down, sighed. Then looked back up. Scott, don't you fucking-

"All right. Let's do it," he stated.

"NO! LET'S NOT DO IT! I'M NOT WATCHING YOU DIE!" I exclaimed, tears started to break through.

"I'm not looking forward to this either, V…" Scott muttered. "But you heard him. Our only option is to… stop my heart, then bring me back," Scott tried to comfort. I wish I could just reach out, and either hold him, or be held by him.

"There has to be another way! Raeka, or something!" I countered.

"They're already held up, nothing else would come in time," Scott sighed. "I'm doing it, Vetra. If it doesn't work, we're all dead anyway. If it works, we get out, and kick his fucking ass."

"Don't…" I murmured, tears starting to break out.

"Are you ready?" SAM questioned.

"Stars and skies, light your way," Jaal whispered.

"You can do it," Liam nodded.

"Never said this before but… Goddess go with you," Peebee added.

"Alec would be proud," Cora comforted.

"You got one helluva quad, kid. Korbal. Victory or death," Drack finished.

"Yeah, that's literally the only two options right now," Scott muttered nervously. He let out a deep breath. "Do it, SAM."

"Come back to me…" I whispered, as a tear fell of my face and onto the glass of my helmet.
"Stopping your heart… now," SAM stated.

Scott slumped to the floor.
"OH JESUS CHRIST MOTHERFUCKING BITCH ASS TIT SHIT DICKBACK… FUCK!" I exclaimed, gasping in a breath of air as I sat right the fuck up. My heart literally just fucking stopped. And then shocked back into action. I crawled off the large black circle in the floor that was projecting the field before it captured me again. I really don't want to do that again.

"Scott!" Vetra cried out, as I began to stand.

"That… That's twice now I've come back from the dead. Fuck. Can't say the experience is improving," I muttered, still taking in several deep breaths, shaking the… dead out of my system.

"I believe it is preferable to the alternative," SAM remarked.

"Yeah, no shit," Vetra muttered. As my breathing began to slow, I looked over the others, floating there.

"Well, you all look comfortable," I joked, still getting the shock out of my system.

"Down. Now," Drack demanded. I gave a thumbs up in reply as SAM led me towards another console, showed me what buttons to press. The others fell back to the ground. Everyone but Vetra immediately picked their weapons back up from the ground. But Vetra? She immediately stormed over to me and wrapped her arms around me. And I wrapped mine around her. Jokes aside, I'm still fucking terrified of what I did. I was terrified going in, and terrified coming back out.

"Don't EVER do that again," she whispered, shuddering slightly.

"I won't. I hated every second, even coming… back," I comforted, gently rubbing the back of her armor. Drack lumbered over.

"Sorry kids. But we need to get moving," Drack murmured gently. Vetra let out a deep breath, and then released me, but not before tapping her helmet to my forehead. We nodded at each other, and we both returned to our weapons to gather them again. And I grabbed my helmet from the floor and put it back on my head. Show time.

"Scott, there might be useful intel here. Shall we search?" Jaal requested.

"Yeah, sure, not like we'll ever get a chance like this again," I remarked.

As we searched, we heard the Kett on the loudspeaker get killed, Raeka replacing him with mockery for the Kett, drawing their attention away. She was diverting their attention both from us, and Hajer and Venro for the EMP. Drack, was impressed.

Searching what I suppose was the Archon's personal lab, we found many different audio logs. Including from when the Moshae was here. From when she first got here, still confident, strong, resilient, and later. Jesus, the pain, the fear, the… everything she felt. If it wasn't for his helmet, I'm sure I would have seen tears stream down Jaal's face. The Moshae knew nothing about the relic the Archon was obsessed with. He did not believe her.

"He… he will pay…" Jaal growled. No one responded. No one had to. There was not a sliver of disagreement with that sentiment. Not from anyone here. Not after everything we've seen. From the
Exaltation facility, to the Salarian bodies we found here. And there were more inside this very lab. Their condition, much the same. The Archon had questioned them about Meridian as well. He had a suspicion that was why we came to Andromeda. The screams at the end of that log told us everything we needed to.

Another log, I don't know why we were still searching. But this voice wasn't the Archon. It was that Primus we heard when chasing the Kett disruptions of their communications. The Primus suspected that we were hiding an invasion force. And there was a clear contrast between the Primus' line of questions, and the Archon's. The Archon's all centered around Meridian. But the Primus did not care. They were explicitly trying to learn more of our species. For exaltation, no doubt. But the Primus was no less cruel than the Archon.

"They die, kid," Drack grumbled. He got no argument from me. We checked out some of the side rooms. The first had little for us to find, but more logs.

These simply seemed to be the Archon talking to himself. About extra-galactic visitors. "A treasure of fresh specimens. Genetics shaped by forces outside our galaxy." The archon had a hard-on for that. Another log was referencing either me or my father. How we "Spoke" to the Remnant machines. The Archon was mesmerized, jealous, and pissed that we "enforced our will on the old technology." And that it responded. They tried for years just to understand it, and now it was clear it was referencing dad on Habitat seven. But he succeeded in less than a day. He wanted to capture dad at all costs. Now, that means me.

"He can fucking try," Vetra growled. I put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed to try and comfort her. We investigated another room. This one had a pedestal and hologram for each of the Milky Way species.

They saw use for the Krogan, as the Archon told us before he left. The Kett have detected the presence of the Genophage, and know that it's artificial, and deliberate. Likely intel gathered from interrogated Salarians. The Archon believes that without it, they could be unstoppable.

"And that's why they gave it to us," Drack murmured, sadly. The next we listened to was about humans. Apparently, the Archon believes we are the most perplexing. That we possess an emotional range, often exceeding the other species. I don't believe that. People are people, and people have emotions. It must just have been mistaken as societal differences. Turians tend to have a more rigid society, Humans are more of a varied society, for example. The other species are all capable of the same emotions as all the others. The Archon believes that we are dangerous because of an unpredictable nature. But believes our passions have some kind of genetic root they could use. Stupid. But the Archon wants to find, capture, and study a "Champion" among us.

"Idiot," Liam muttered.

"Funny, I just had a little monologue in my head. All boils down to how the Kett must not understand how the hell emotions work, that biology, of any species, doesn't determine that kinda shit," I remarked.

"I genuinely don't know why people have that kind of perception. They just… expect people to act a certain way," Peebee mused. "I mean, look at Vetra and I. I'm why more seclusive than most Asari, and she doesn't have a stick up her ass that most Turians do." I gave a knowing glance at Vetra, remembering the story as to how she technically had a stick up her ass once. She punched me in the shoulder.

The Asari were next. The Archon focused, and was very intrigued by their methods of reproduction. How it was a mixture of biology, thought, and memory. "They take what they need
from a species. As they should. Reproduction cannot be left to chance. The superior race dominates. Yet these Asari pretend otherwise. A melding, they call it. Embracing eternity. Biology has no use for poetry." He only left a passing note for the biotics.

"I-It's not like that… It's not… right?" Peebee stuttered.

"No. It's different. Shall I repeat what you told me when I asked?" Jaal whispered gently, rubbing her shoulder.

"Maybe later… not now…" Peebee murmured. Shaking herself out of it. We moved onto the Turians. The Archon saw benefit in using the Turian exoskeleton. But he was more intrigued that Turians have a tendency to discipline, their militaristic order. He saw an effective trait for instilling obedience. He wanted more study.

"Except we have a moral compass you prick," Vetra growled. Finally, the Salarians. The Archon recognized their intellectual prowess. How their thought processes are much faster than the rest of us. The Kett were working on isolating their genetic markers for their cleverness, their cunning.

"I'd rather we kept the Kett as stupid as we can," Cora remarked. The only thing more we could find was a response to orders from the Archon. Orders to find and capture Milky Way species for study, and eventual exaltation. No one had anything to say. No one was surprised. Angry, perhaps, but no surprise.

SAM helped us to open a maintenance hatch, our means of escape from this lab. The room I died in. Damn, that's freaky. We dropped into a maintenance corridor, poorly lit, though our helmets had night vision to help. Automatically activated too. We kept our weapons ready. We were careful, but we couldn't waste much more time. It was quiet. Aside from an occasional scream echoing from some lab nearby. We passed through a room that had water pouring into it, and empty cryo pods or Initiative supply crates.

"Is this kind of evil universal? First the Milky Way, now here?" Vetra questioned.

"One way or another. Evil bleeds. Let's make it hurt too," Drack grumbled.

"Amen to that," Liam mumbled. We kept moving through eerily vacant halls. No sign of life. Then we heard a growl. A low, rumbling noise. Must be a wraith.

I put my Sweeper on my back, swapping it for my Hornet in my right hand, and holding my sword in the left. I heard its cloak, and then, just barely in the night vision, a ripple. I fired, but missed. The ripples got close. It growled again, I knew it would be pouncing. I held the tip of the sword out in front of me, and heard the Wraith whimper in pain as it de-cloaked. The sword had gone straight through the mouth. And it was dead. I pushed it off, and sheathed it, swapping the Hornet back for the Sweeper.

"Why was that thing here?" Peebee questioned. We soon found an answer. Behind the crates the Wraith had come from, was a horrendously mauled Salarian corpse. Claw marks along its face and neck, an arm torn off, the Salarian's side had clearly been chewed on. We caught that Wraith during its lunch.

"Must have tried to escape…" Jaal muttered.

"Poor guy," Vetra murmured sadly. I leaned over his body, and closed his eyes, allowing him to rest. That was all we could do for him, and we pushed on. Now we were starting to climb, maybe we'd be out of these ducts soon.
"Ryder, it's Raeka. Some of our people are alive. I'm heading there now. Captain Hajer, status?" she questioned.

"The EMP is primed and ready," he confirmed.

"We're almost at the Archon's chamber. Stand by," I ordered.

"Affirmative," was the Captain's sole reply. SAM led us to a door out of the maintenance area. It was a larger room, one with several different doors, and one with a kind of sitting area outside, waiting, perhaps. Turns out, that door was to the Archon's quarters.

It was a hallway, filled with vats of green liquid. Floating inside the vats? Salarians. Couldn't tell if they were dead or alive. They were just… floating there. It was eerie. Beside the end of the hall, was a larger vat. What was inside, was clearly, not Salarian. It was covered in a thick, boney armor, from head to toe. Its maw showed rows of razor sharp teeth. The back of its forearms had spikes of bone to gash its victims. Its claws were as sharp as its teeth. This creature was a hulking mass of rippling muscle and bone.

"Is that… a Krogan?" Liam questioned quietly. Drack stepped closer. His gaze focused on something around the beast's neck. A pendant. It was a small metal symbol, the same one painted onto New Tuchanka.

"Not anymore it isn't… It's one of my missing scouts. I can't tell which one… Damn it," Drack growled.

"The DNA is Krogan, but drastically altered," SAM explained.

"Shit. They're learning how to exalt Krogan. Fuck," I muttered. Bad news. There was nothing more we could do, and no point staring at him. We proceeded through the next set of doors. It was a large, open room, large sprawling viewports allowing an outside room. Directly in front of us, was a large chunk of Remnant metal floating and spinning slowly. No, it was two separate chunks.

"Hajer, we're in the Archon's sanctum. Looking for the artifact," I informed.

"Give the word, and we'll set off the EMP. Should disable the guns," he answered. I acknowledged, and we began scanning the Remnant metal.

"This isn't just a mission for him… it's an obsession," Cora muttered. She spoke louder, looking right at me. "I've dealt with people like that before. They only have one thought in their heads that burns everything else away. They get very dangerous, very fast." She was talking about her father, wasn't she?

"Archon is gonna be pissed if we pull this off," Peebee remarked.

"Good," Drack growled.

"Whatever the hell he has planned, it's genocide for the whole cluster," I muttered. As we scanned the Remnant metals, all in places of honor, showmanship in the quarters, we noticed a pattern. The pieces had either been drastically damaged through testing, it was inert in the first place, or even, it was goddamn Remnant junk! "Bastard has no idea what the fuck he's doing with any of this," I remarked.

"No wonder he hates you," Cora near chuckled.

"Yeah, well the feeling is mutual," I shrugged. Ah, that must be it. At the far end of the room, right
in the middle, a rectangular Remnant artifact with the symbol of Meridian. A glowing blue triangular shape. "There you are," I murmured. "Come to papa." We approached the relic. I lifted my right arm, Omni-tool activating, and reached out towards the relic, palm out, and fingers extended. A holographic circle appeared at the tips of my thumb, index, and middle fingers. The relic responded, angling itself upwards, and an orange, tendril like hologram reached out from my palm towards the relic.

"I'll overlay the chart on Eos," SAM explained. The relic hummed to life, and a series of blue lines and dots began to stretch out, forming its own map.

"Look at that…" Drack murmured, appreciating the light show. A copy of the triangular figure appeared, glowing brighter, and another series of lines appeared. Forming a distinct shape. It was like a large needle, but at the center, surrounded by three large circles, each with their own point sticking out, much like Meridian's logo. The hologram began spinning.

"I guess that's Meridian?" I asked our AI companion. I glanced at Vetra as she glanced at me.

"Coordinates secured, Pathfinder," SAM confirmed. I smiled, we're getting close.

"So that's what you're after," a voice spoke from behind. All seven of us turned on a dime, weapons raised, eager to put a bullet in the Archon. But it was a hologram. Shit. "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," he warned, as he stepped beside me, gazing at the map.

"Pity for you I actually know how to work this shit. Besides, you didn't allow me to escape your little trap either, did you," I scoffed.

"That wasn't you. That was the artificial intelligence in your head," the Archon dismissed. "I've seen what transpired in the laboratory, and now I know what makes you… special. Meridian is mine. I've tolerated you long enough. Once your vessels are destroyed, you will be stranded here," the Archon threatened. Well, that's what he thinks, the Tempest ain't on Paarchero. Nonetheless, he's NOT destroying the Ark. He began walking away. Well, his hologram.

"Hajer! EMP! Now!" I exclaimed.

"Firing!" he responded. There was a brief hum as a blue wave of electricity passed over and through the ship. The Remnant scrap floating in the air ceased to glow and fell to the ground, the lights dimmed, replaced with orange emergency lights. Doors across the ship were likely opening as well, as the magnetic locks ceased.

Glass broke, and there was a guttural roar. Oh for fuck's sake… Objects were thrashed around, another roar, and then that behemoth of bone and muscle, the former Krogan, stood on the ledge above us, a weapon, looking much like the Dhan in his hand. He snarled, his entire body shaking, twitching. He jumped down, breathing heavily.

"Shit…" Drack murmured. "Krogan! Stand down!" Drack shouted his orders as the former Krogan, let's just call it a Behemoth, charged towards me. Drack shoved me away and wrestled with him. Grappling with the gun, trying to get it out of his hands. He roared, snarled even harder, his jaws snapped, lunging towards Drack's neck.

"I don't think he understands!" Vetra shouted.

"Krogan! Argh, Listen to me!" Drack continued. The Behemoth roared even louder, then slammed his forehead into Drack's, staggering the old man, and threw him to the side. I knew Drack was
fine, he was cursing the whole way as he rushed back to his feet, and the crew began dispersing, shots now beginning to ping off the Behemoth's armor. "STAND THE FUCK DOWN!" Drack shouted once more.

"Shit," I muttered as I used my jump jets to jump over the Behemoth's head, ending up behind him. "Forget it Drack, it's not working." I ordered.

"DAMN THEM!" Drack roared, Ruzad blasting. Some rounds just pinged off, some seemed to chip away the bone, very few, only those that managed to get through to the arms or legs seemed to draw blood. Not even my Sweeper was doing damage, the rounds just scorching the armor.

"Drack, try to pin him or something, get me a clear shot!" I called out, swapping for my Black Widow. Drack got the Behemoth's attention. I fired a round into his back, managing to crack it, maybe even dig in a bit, but only causing him to roar out more. He turned to face me, but then Drack launched into his back, knocking him to the ground. I fired again into his forehead, but only had the same effect.

"The armor's too thick!" Jaal shouted, still firing himself when he got a clear shot.

"Drack, try to lift his head up, get me a shot at his neck or something!" I ordered.

"Working on it," Drack shouted, trying to keep the Behemoth's forearms from cutting into him. Drack managed to sit himself down on the Behemoth's back, and pin his arms under his knees. As the Behemoth struggled, Drack wrapped one arm under its chin, pulling the head up as much as he could, exposing the neck. I fired, a large hole appearing in the fleshy neck. The Behemoth roared and dislodged one of its arms from under Drack, and knocked it back, sending one of the spikes back towards Drack. He cursed in pain and rolled off the Behemoth, clutching his side.

"I'm fine, damnit, hurts like hell," Drack reassured. The Behemoth began struggling to its feet, it's roars now more akin to wheezes as blood continued to drip from his neck. He began slowing down as he tried to charge again. We continued to fire. Drawing blood from the limbs, or still trying to break through the armor. Finally, the Behemoth began to collapse to its knees, let out a final breath, and fall over.

"What the hell… that thing fought like no Krogan I've seen before," Liam muttered. Vetra rushed over to Drack to check on him, but he waved her off. Krogan re-gen and Medi-gel was all he needed.

"I scanned the Exalted Krogan's neurochemistry. It was erratic, the patterns similar to that of an extreme case of schizophrenia and additional symptoms that would be classified as insanity," SAM explained. "It's serotonin levels were also near nonexistent, resulting in what is essentially a permanent blood rage. Finally, I detected that it's pain receivers were constantly firing. The exalted Krogan, was in constant pain."

"I will fucking kill them all," Drack growled. "These are my people they're messing with!" He let out another huff, closed his eyes, and approached the body. He rolled him over to his back, and closed the eyes. "May the void have you…"

"Sorry Drack, had to do it," Vetra murmured. He nodded, silently, sadly.

"Ryder, this is Hajer. We've detonated the EMP, and Raeka is still trying to free the captives," he explained, contacting the comms.

"Understood, but we need her back on the ark, we need to go," I stated.
"I'll try. See you soon," Hajer ended the call. We began hurrying back the way we came. When we entered the vat room again, SAM spoke up.

"Pathfinder, a moment. I'm picking up Krogan life signs onboard the ship. Several captives are being held not far from your location. They are scheduled for Exaltation," SAM informed.

"Then we'll pick em up. Where-" I began.

"Ryder, it's Raeka. I'm pinned down. Don't think I'm going to make it," she stated.

"Where are you?" I questioned.

"Near holding cells where they're keeping several of my people They're still alive. I've ordered Captain Hajer back to the ark."

"You should be with him," I responded, hiding the annoyance, instead, urgency poked through.

"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."

"SAM? Time?" I questioned.

"You do not have time to lead the squad to save both," the AI answered.

"Cora, take Liam, Peebee, and Jaal, go save Raeka. Drack, Vetra, with me. We're getting those scouts," I ordered. "Do not waste a single moment!"

"Got it! You heard him, MOVE!" Cora ordered the others, and Drack and Vetra began running by my side.

"Thanks, kid, I'm not leaving the rest of my scouts," he nodded as we ran.

"No one left behind, Drack. That was drilled into me since boot camp," I remarked. We passed through another door, and found a Krogan male standing beside the body of a dead Anointed, the Krogan was holding his weapon. He aimed it at us, but then immediately lowered it upon realizing we weren't Kett.

"Drack?" he questioned, surprised as hell.

"Birtak, what are you doing here?" Drack responded.

"I got loose when the power went out. Our scouts are at the end of the corridor, with a lot of Kett in the way," Birtak explained.

"Then we push, don't stop for anything. We don't have much time, GO," I ordered. Birtak paused to look at Drack, who nodded, and we rushed inside. The first Kett to try and stop us were some Chosen and a Destined. Between Birtak and Vetra both firing what were essentially LMG's, Drack charging in, absolute fury in his eyes, and me taking quick picks of the Kett, we were pushing quickly. The next part of the corridor had more resistance. In the form of Anointed set up. I charged them biotically. I knocked one to the ground, killed the other with a slice to the neck with the Asari sword, and finished off the other by stabbing the point of the blade into his forehead. The others pushed up and eliminated the rest in the room. I quickly ordered the Tempest to keep an eye out for any changes on the ship, and to prepare for a getaway.

"Think you can capture my people? Out of the fucking way!" Drack roared as he blasted and
slammed his way through a group of Chosen.

"Keep your focus, Drack! They catch us, they exalt us!" I warned.

"Not this Krogan, they won't!" Birtak shouted.

"The hell they will!" Vetra growled as we continued mowing them down, and pushing. I used biotics when I could for detonations, and grenades for others. The back of Drack's shields took a hit from Birtak's stolen Anointed gun.

"Birtak! Watch your aim!" he shouted.

"It's yours I'm worried about old man!" Birtak laughed as we pushed again. An Ascended with several other Kett.

"Fuck this," I shouted, and formed a singularity right in front. The Ascended screamed but was immediately sucked in. The others we shot and killed instead of waiting, then I closed the quantum engine of absolute destruction.

"Scott, they're trying to reset the power! Act fast!" Kallo warned. I cursed under my breath as we rushed for the door with the Krogan prisoners. I opened it.

"Don't ask questions, just fucking RUN!" I shouted, checking to make sure each had run out as we led them away.

"You got a quad, human!" Birtak roared with laughter as we led the charge out. Occasionally blasting a Kett unfortunate enough to stumble upon us.

"SAM, lead us to the top of the ship's hull, we'll extract from there!" I ordered.

"Affirmative," the AI answered, and our nav-points changed.

"Cora? Status?" I questioned.

"We have Raeka and the Salarians, crossing the tethers now," she answered.

"Good, don't wait for us, we're going topside for ex-fill," I explained.

"Wilco, good luck," Cora responded. We ran through and found another maintenance area, SAM leading us along to an airlock. We rushed outside, the wind blowing hard, but the air out here was still breathable, fortunately for the Krogan. As the last of the Krogan climbed out, the Tempest soared overhead, and turned back around, bringing the extending cargo ramp down as close to us as possible. Kett were starting to appear on the hull. Vetra and I worked on suppressive fire as the Krogan ran for the ship.

"Move! Move!" I urged. I fired off a few more shots and ran up the ramp myself. The Tempest pulled away, the Ark now soaring above us, moving as the Tethers fell away. The cargo ramp began to close, and we safely returned inside. The Ark, and the Tempest, were clear, and we jumped to FTL. Birtak and the other Krogan roared with laughter. Drack smiled. A real, genuine smile. Vetra just wrapped me in a half hug, her breathing slowing down. We made it.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Paarchero and the Tempest had jumped to the same coordinates. Currently, the Tempest was inside
one of the Ark's hangar bays, getting our crew back on board. The Krogan would stay in the cargo bay, and then catch a ride back to New Tuchanka from the Nexus. Now, I was standing in the conference room, as Raeka had requested to come on board, and see me. She walked up the ramp, still in her armor, and looking tired as hell.

"Good to see you alive and well, Raeka. We'll escort the Ark back to the Nexus. They'll be very happy to see you all," I smiled.

"Thank you, again, Scott. Your team arrived just in time, and I understand you were still able to rescue the Krogan," she nodded.

"As I said to Drack, no one gets left behind. I heard that enough from both my father and my drill sergeant. Wasn't about to start forgetting that anytime soon."

"Indeed. As Pathfinders, our job is to serve our people, and also the greater good. It's a difficult job, but one you do well. Alec would be proud," she smiled.

"And thank you for the help in the gun battery. I kinda thought we were gonna bite it there. How about we call it even?" I reached my hand out for a shake.

"I appreciate that," Raeka shook the hand. "The Salarian people are forever in your debt."

"The Salarians don't owe me anything, Raeka, but thank you."

"Of course. I should get back to my people now. Besides, your Krogan friend seems like he wants to talk," Raeka remarked, looking behind me. I turned, seeing Drack leaning against the wall. He nodded at Raeka as she passed. As she left, he approached.

"Thanks again, kid. My scouts are alive because of you," Drack began. I saw the look in his eyes. Relief. He had been concerned about them for some time, hasn't he? "You kicked the Archon's tail today. Spat in his face, three times, took the ark RIGHT out from under him, got Meridian's location, and, fucking hell, you DIED, and came back," Drack rumbled with laughter. "Enjoy this one, kid." he slapped me on the back. He looked me right in the eye again, I saw the smirk on his face. If Drack wasn't already committed, loyal, if I hadn't already earned his respect, well, I had now. As Drack turned to leave to likely talk with his scouts, SAM's voice 'spoke' within my head.

"Your father would have been proud." he stated.

"You just repeating Raeka, or...?" I joked, chuckling lightly. I let out a deep breath.

"It's been tough, trying to live up to him, hoping he'd approve. I hope I'm earning it. Heh, though slapping and spitting in the Archon's face like this will only make him more dangerous."

"Or perhaps reckless. Your father liked putting others off balance," SAM mused.

"True. Though not when it was unintentional, and a result of him being a socially awkward mess," I laughed.

"I do recall such moments. Either way, your father said that the worthy would rise above it, and learn to face adversity ably."

"And what did he say about the unworthy?" I asked.

"They would crumble," SAM answered.
"Yeah, let's stick with that option," I chuckled.

"Scott, you may want to see this. Meet me in your quarters?" Suvi requested.

"Sure thing. Be right there," I answered. "Kallo, the Ark ready to go?"

"In just a few moments. We're exiting the hangar now," he answered. "We'll need to lead them around the scourge, so we'll take them to Voeld's system first, and then from there back to the Nexus."

"Sounds like a plan. Just let em take it easy, eh?" I remarked.

"They're eager for safe harbor. They don't want to wait a moment longer than necessary," Kallo responded.

"Can't say I blame em. Keep me posted." I ended the call, and made my way to my quarters, Suvi was already sitting inside.

"SAM intercepted data transmitted by that biological tracker. It's gone now, but they gleaned… something from the implant," Suvi explained. She lifted her arm for her Omni-tool and played the images. They were flashes of memory. From childhood, mostly. Dad, Mom, Sara. Flashes of the Citadel even. Nothing I would imagine as being that crucial for him to have, but, still, I would rather not have a freak like that knowing about my sister.

"So, he got all that from my implant?" I asked incredulously.

"His device went deep. Our connections were wide open when SAM… killed you…" Suvi murmured. She was uncomfortable with that too, it seems.

"Shit… think he would have known how much we need Meridian?" I questioned.

"I… I don't know. He would have had access to those files, but it's a matter of whether or not he managed to get them. It's a lot of unknowns," Suvi warned.

"Damn it…" I grumbled. Vetra entered my quarters, back into casual clothes.

"I'll let you two be," Suvi muttered awkwardly, stepping out.

"What was that about?" Vetra asked as Suvi left, stepping closer. She had no suspicion in her voice, just curiosity mixed with… fear from earlier, I suppose.

"Remember that tracker the Archon gave me? Managed to pull some info, some… flashes, when…" I trailed off. Vetra sighed.

"What did he find out?"


"Medi-gel still going. Doc says it's healing just fine, won't stop me from doing anything," she answered. "I should be asking you that, though." I sighed again, and sat down on my bed.

"I'm… still trying to process. What happened, what we saw, what we heard… it's a lot…" I muttered. More images that would likely haunt me for the rest of my life. Vetra sat down beside me, leaning on my shoulder.
"What was it dad used to say? Look to those who look to you, and together, be uplifted..." Vetra murmured. "Wow, I can't believe I remembered that..." I saw a tear form and start to stream down her face. I lifted my hand and gently wiped it away. "I hated every moment of that... you scared me. Terrified me, even," Vetra whispered. I wrapped an arm around her back.

"I'm here. I'm alive." I looked down into her eyes. "And I'm not leaving again. Not ever."

"Good." She sat up straighter and planted her 'lips' against mine. Her tongue requesting access. It was granted. Gently, she pushed me down onto the bed, not daring to separate herself from me. I could feel... a need, in her kiss, her efforts. I wouldn't say a need to start tearing clothes off, else that's probably what she would be doing. Instead, it was a kind of need to... confirm, I suppose, that she hadn't lost me. And, well, I kinda felt the same need. I didn't try to roll over, I just met her own movements with my own. If she wanted to feel me under her, she'd feel me under her, holding her close as our tongues danced. She'd feel my hand on the back of her head, pulling her down and close. She'd feel my hand gently exploring her back, grabbing onto her waist occasionally. She wanted to take a hand, rub it along my chest? My sides? That's exactly what I'd let her do.

Together, we forgot about everything. Our worlds were just each other. As we embraced, we kissed, and we reminded one another, we were both still here.

And we would not leave the other behind.
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

While the Ark may not have wanted to waste any time getting to the Nexus, it was still slower than the Tempest, and we still had to use longer routes to get around the scourge. Combine the time it took for us to reach the Tafeno system in the first place, plus the length of our mission, and our return journey, the day had run its course.

Aside from the occasional visit to the mess, bathroom, or when Lexi wanted to make sure my vitals were still strong, Vetra and I stayed in my quarters together. Whether that involved just holding each other, kissing, or even dozing off in one another's arms, that's where we were.

It wasn't until our clocks reached early morning where we got the official wake up call. Our jump was coming to a close, and the Nexus was waiting. Vetra and I began to climb out of the bed. Vetra was going to shower and change for the day, and that's something I'd get done soon after her. But Lexi wanted to see me again. I entered the Med-bay to find her sitting in her chair at her desk. She immediately spun the chair around, her features were dead serious.

"We need to talk. About SAM," she began. Figures, I suppose. I was in the process of opening my mouth when the AI joined in.

"Dr. T'Perro does not approve of how we escaped the Kett containment field on the Archon's flagship."

"By stopping the Pathfinder's heart?" Lexi raised a brow, crossing her arms over her chest. "No. I do not approve."

"No one was exactly eager for that, Lexi, and we didn't have much choice. But hey, it worked," I shrugged. I'll be honest, I'm still shaken up by it. How couldn't I be? But, I'm dealing with it, and I don't trust SAM any less than I did before. Hell, given that he managed to bring me back, I kinda trust him more.

"Dying, even temporarily, is NEVER okay," Lexi retorted, annoyance creeping into her voice. Lexi sighed, placing her hand on her forehead. "Scott, 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," SAM countered. Lexi raised a brow and looked up, much like I do when talking to SAM.

"You're lines of code, SAM. You can't die." Not a viewpoint I agree with, but when one is a medical professional, I can see why they'd think that way.

"SAM would never hurt me, doc," I argued. Lexi sighed again, looking down, closing her eyes as she collected her thoughts.

"Look. I'm not against SAM," she stressed the word, then looked up to speak with the AI again. "I'm not against you, SAM." She lowered her gaze to return to me. "But my job's hard enough without an AI stopping your heart. Even to save your life," Lexi explained gently.

"All right, all right," I smirked. "I'll find a new party trick."

"Have Gil teach you Three-Card Monte or something. Besides, I'm sure Vetra would just love to
"Hear if you started dropping dead at parties as part of a gag," Lexi warned, the ghost of a smirk crossing her lips.

"Point taken," I chuckled.

"Lexi, I apologize for any distress I have caused you," SAM spoke. Lexi looked down meekly, sighing once more.

"And I'm sorry for calling you 'lines of code.' You're more than that. Even if you don't have the cells to prove it."

"Thank you, Dr. T'Perro," Lexi nodded her response, and looked back at me.

"You're clear. Thank you, Scott. Now, just need to get Drack to see me about his own wound," she muttered. As I left, I got the alert that the Tempest was starting its approach towards the Nexus, and the Ark would be docking soon after. Vetra, though, had only just gotten in the shower. While it would be… tempting to try and join her, there are a few issues with that. First, given we haven't done that yet, I'd wait for an… invitation, so to speak. Second, well, I did give Peebee and Jaal the rule of no shower sex. Probably shouldn't go ahead and break that. Third? Neither of us would exactly be all that clean afterwards. I began heading to the cargo bay, maybe talk to someone, and bumped into Liam.

"Hey, been meaning to talk to you after yesterday, but, never saw you," Liam began. I was glad that there didn't seem to be any judgement or anything in his eyes. I know he doesn't like Vetra, but so long as he doesn't start bitching about the two of us.

"Yeah, someone needed me," I remarked. He raised a brow, a slight smirk.

"That is a pretty good reason. All honesty, no joke, I mean it. That's a good thing to hear about," Liam nodded. "But, I wanted to ask, are you ok?" he asked a bit quieter, more concerned.

"Well, I'm alive. I'm breathing," I sighed. "Still kinda shocked myself, but I'll get over it."

"Can't say I blame you. Had a friend in HUS-TL, Dondi. Clearing out a hospital after an earthquake, and a chunk of rebar split her helmet. Four minutes technically dead, but we got her into emergency stasis, kept going. Thanks to all the medical shit they have these days? She was back in a week, but she shouldn't have been. Yeah, she's a vet, sure, seen some shit, but you don't walk that off," Liam murmured. "She worked that quake site for a week, and then disappeared. Just… vanished. Five months. When she came back, she was… different. The other vets, they knew, the others and I didn't ask. What I'm saying is, take the time if you need it," Liam put a hand on my shoulder. "You don't die and just shake it off," he patted, a small, reassuring smile.

"Yeah, thanks Kosta. We're… probably going to take it easy a bit. Can't do that long, but," I shrugged.

"Whatever you think we need. In fact, that thing I wanted to arrange at Prodromos? That could be a fun way to help, should start later tomorrow," Liam suggested.

"Sure, so long as nothing urgent pops up, sounds like a plan," I nodded.

"Great, I promise, you'll love it," Liam beamed, excited by the prospect. We passed each other by. In the cargo hold, the Krogan were mostly just sitting around, talking amongst themselves. Drack, of course, with them. They were quiet, and how close together they all were seemed to point that they were still getting used to the fact they weren't captive anymore. I could see Cora with her shotgun on a workbench. Rags and tools within reach. Weapon maintenance, looks like. Her
movements seemed both distracted and urgent. I could see her eyes. As she worked, they darted every which way, interrupted by bouts where she'd force herself to stare at her gun. Her nostrils were flaring rapidly. She dropped a tool, it landed on her foot, as I'd assume from her reaction.

"Sonuva bitch!" She exclaimed, stamping her foot on the ground, before leaning back against some crates, breathing.

"You o-" I began to ask.

"WHAT?" Cora shouted. Her eyes widened as she realized who was there. "Sorry," she meekly spoke, looking down, embarrassed. "It's… it's the Archon. He doesn't even see us as sentient. He… strings people up like puppets, he strung us up like puppets…" Cora murmured. "And I didn't know SAM could… do that to his Pathfinder. I should be asking if you're ok."

"Don't get me wrong. I still trust SAM absolutely, but… shit, that's still scary," I answered.

"Well, I'm sure Vetra and Lexi are there if you ever need to talk. So am I," Cora reassured.

"Thanks, but, seriously, there's more to what's getting to you than just what you told me. Come on," I urged. Cora sighed, her answer was a whisper.

"It's like… him. The Illusive man. My… father. He viewed the other races as less than people. Even when I was a kid. I… I'm a bit ashamed to admit I thought the same until I left for school. Got a dose of reality. All the reports I've seen of Cerberus activity since? It's not much different. Kidnapping Asari and experimenting on them to find a way to completely nullify their biotics was one. Another was the Murder of an Admiral Kahoku. The media said it was natural causes, but there was an investigation. Your father even showed me a report from a bit before the Geth attack. Someone thought dead on Akuze. Found, and brought back. Cerberus orchestrated that massacre. Then, this, Corporal Toombs, they ran tests on him, experiments. It was torture," Cora choked. "There were also reports that some remote colony out in the traverse. It was found with all the colonists… horribly changed. The same kind of Geth tech that turned people into… mindless zombie… things. Cerberus. And that's what they've done to HUMANS! Imagine what else they'd be willing to do to non-humans! It's just like the Archon," Cora shuddered. "Everyone and everything is a puppet, a tool, to be used and cast aside as needed. All with the end goal of complete domination."

"Fucking A…" I muttered. I hadn't even heard of most everything she'd said before. I heard about Kahoku, sure, but just that he died. It was a shame, he led the navy forces that drove back the pirates during the Skyllian blitz. And Akuze? Where an Alliance squad stumbled upon a nest of Thresher Maws? That was fucking orchestrated? Christ on a bike, that's fucked up.

"Yeah, it's a lot, I know. But, thanks for letting me vent. I'm sorry, I'm just going to go back to my room. Vent," Cora muttered, setting her weapon to the side, wiping the grease off her hands, and leaving. As I let out a deep breath, as that was a lot to take in, I heard a familiar voice.

"Showers all yours. Might want to hurry, I'm sure they'll want to have you around," Vetra called out, passing by, a fresh set of clean clothes on her. I nodded my thanks and returned to my room to get what I needed. With all that said and done, and in a change of clothes, including a black polo for what will likely be a small ceremony, I returned to the cargo bay, ready to disembark. Vetra was already waiting. And the Krogan were all eager to catch their ride home, and Drack would likely stay with them until they got their shuttles. Additionally, Jaal was waiting for the bay doors to open as well. Finally, they began to open, and Kallo hastily entered from above, taking the lift by the engine room down. Not surprised he wanted to come along for this. I nodded a greeting, and noticed, suppressing the chuckle, that Kallo nervously kept his distance from the Krogan. As the
ramp finished lowering, we strode out onto the docking pad.

"Kesh has a shuttle waiting for you all nearby. Scott, I'll see ya 'round. Try not to leave without me, huh?" Drack called out.

"How could we forget? What with how much the ship shakes whenever you get on board," I retorted. Drack and the Krogan burst into laughter, while Kallo seemed to be afraid that one of them would get pissy if they saw him laugh.

"Or your snoring. Spirits, we could stick you in the engine room, put everyone else in the bridge, vent all the rooms between, and STILL we'd be able to hear you!" Vetra laughed. More laughter.

"I like this Turian," one of the Krogan chuckled. We began to split up. Drack and the Krogan taking a way down to another landing pad, while Kallo, Vetra, Jaal and I made our way up to the commons. As we made it out of the docking area, a nervous an approached me. Brown skin, dark hair.


"I think I remember meeting you earlier on," I smiled, reaching my hand out for a shake. He accepted.

"Yes, well, there's been a hitch. Keri's been arrested for 'conspiracy to incite unrest.'" Hakim scoffed. There was an audible smack and groan as my hand launched to my forehead. For fuck's sake Tann. I was expecting this to be a good time away.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Vetra remarked.

"I wish I was. She's in a cell at the militia headquarters. Think you could stop by? A visit from you would shake things up," Hakim requested.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll do that right away," I nodded.

"Thanks. And if it's just before the welcoming ceremony, might make it easier to just let it go, keep a scene away," Hakim mused.

"Something like that, I'm sure," I shook my head. I turned to the others.

"You guys can go off wherever it is your planning to. I'll fix this shit," I stated.

"Meet up after the ceremony?" Vetra suggested.

"Sure, Pathfinder lounge. I'll probably end up stopping by to shout at Tann, so I'll make sure the receptionist expects you." Vetra nodded, turned to go about her business, as did the others. While I made my way straight for the tramp to Ops. I made a beeline for the cells on the other side of the Militia HQ. There was a Turian walking back and forth in front of the cells, disinterested and bored. And another Turian sitting at the desk there. Also bored, just throwing a pencil in the air and catching it. Both looked up as I approached, clearly annoyed. Both seemed eager for something to break up their monotonous day.

"I'm here to see Keri T'Vessa," I stated. I didn't let any of my anger out at them. They weren't to blame.

"Ryder?" I heard her ask through the transparent material of the closest cell.
"Go ahead, Pathfinder," the guard shrugged. I stepped in front of the cell, and the guard ceased his patrol, now leaning against a wall, watching and listening.

"Hakim told me they arrested you over the documentary," I began.

"Guess I tweaked the lion's tail too hard," Keri murmured. That's odd, she sounded more upset, not angry. I raised my head and placed a finger to my chin.

"A crowbar, some gum… a nudge from SAM… and I could get you out of here," I joked.

"I'm right here, hero. Trust me, this is safer than exile," the guard spoke up. I could hear the Turian sat at the desk snickering. And it looks like I managed to draw out a grin from Keri. But then it vanished.

"You know… they've had other people in the cells." Keri began messing with her own fingers. "Rioters. People crying and scared." What? But, haven't things been looking up? "Me and my 'truth' did that to them…"

"So, you're just going to sit there? Is this how your work ends?" I questioned. Time for some inspiration. Keri's head shot straight up, brow raised.

"What? No. Hell no!" she answered. "Maybe I could use this. Thanks for coming, Scott. I'll send word if anything changes," she smiled.

"Now there's my favorite reporter on the Nexus shining through. You'll be out of here in no time. Giving people the truth, and nothing but. I'd give you a pat on the back, but…" I chuckled. "Mind doing that for me? Just, reach your hand up and over your shoulder," I continued. Keri, smiling and chuckling, did that. "Yep, just like that. Now, quick set of three pats, go on." She did as requested. "There ya go! Start getting your story put together Keri, lotta people are gonna want to hear that soon," I encouraged.

"I'll get right on it Scott. Thank you," Keri smiled. I made a beeline straight for the Militia HQ. I could see Kandros wrapping up some business. I was calm, I doubted that he had much to do with her. He saw me coming.

"Hey Scott. Paarchero is getting settled in now. Ceremony should be soon. Lotta good work you've done. An entire wave of arks accounted for, plus outposts. How do you find time for all of this?" he questioned, a tired look in his eyes.

"Fucked if I know," I laughed. "Those vaults do make it pretty damn easy, after all. And I suppose I'm not exactly trying to manage an entire military force, and then coordinate the use of said force with a completely different one."

"Too damn true," Kandros chuckled. "So, need anything?"

"Yeah, wanted to talk about Keri T'Vessa. In one of your cells, journalist, been interviewing me," I explained.

"Word came down her series was frightening people Can't afford more unrest right now," Kandros shrugged.

"Word came down from where, specifically?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Who else would want to imprison a journalist? I haven't watched her documentary, but it came down as an order."
"Come on, Kandros. The Initiative isn't the Hegemony, you know that. We got freedom of speech, freedom of the press. And Keri is one of the few journalists that I've ever known to be getting the genuine truth to the people," I argued. "She asked me about the 'anticipated problems' message Tann put out? I said that was bullshit, and that some of these problems could not have been anticipated. Yet, everyone, leadership included, should own up to fix it. She asked me how I knew Prodromos would succeed, I told her I didn't have a guarantee, but that it's all our jobs to work to make the odds as good as we can. Asked me about the Angara? Told her it's a great sign, but that we should not ever ask to live on Aya. Exiles? Plenty of good un's among them. Come on, if a few people freak out over some of that, that's on them, not Keri," I finished. "If you have to, say I ordered her release." Kandros sighed.

"I can't say that I disagree with you, Scott. Tell you what, I'll watch the documentaries, go from there," he offered.

"All I can really ask. Oh, and I'll go out on a limb and say any responses to Addison aren't her fault," I added.

"Right, the Three Sabers," Kandros scoffed. "Oh, I had some words with Addison about THAT security breach."

"What's been the general response to that?" I asked.

"Well, her approval soared after Spender was arrested, and she started to help the Krogan negotiate. The Three Saber situation put a dent in it, but people mostly recognized how long ago that started, and when it was solved. Started to look past it as the 'old Addison.' Don't go thinking she's changed that much though. Least not for a while," Kandros warned.

"I figured. But some change is better than none," I shrugged.

"True enough, I suppose. I'll see you at the ceremony, Scott," Kandros ended. I gave my own farewell, and made my way to the Pathfinder's lounge to chew out Tann. As the door opened, the receptionist, a Salarian woman, greeted.

"Good morning, Pathfinder Ryder. The Director and the other Pathfinder's are waiting in Paarchero's docking bay. My own thanks for saving them, by the way," she explained. Guess I'll have to wait till later to give him a piece of my mind.

"Thanks. Uh, while I'm here, a Vetra Nyx should be stopping by sometime before we all get back. Be sure to let her in, my guest," I requested.

"Of course. I'll be happy to offer her any refreshments," the receptionist responded. I nodded my thanks and changed course down to Paarchero's docking bay. Once again, Hyperion seemed to have gotten lucky. Like Leusinia's docking bay, while some storefronts had been set up, they had no bar, and no science lab. Yet, I suppose, but still. Avitus and Vederia were talking to themselves behind the temporary stage that had been set up, much like when Leusinia arrived. Tann seemed to be on a call as the crowd was starting to form to welcome the Salarians. Kesh and Addison were both sitting, and, appeared to be talking. Business? Casual? I dunno. Frankly, not sure I care that much. I approached my fellow Pathfinders, figured I'd join whatever discussion the two were having. Vederia was the first to notice, as her back wasn't turned to me.

"Hi Ryder," she greeted cheerfully, waving a hand. Avitus turned, silently nodding his own greeting.

"Hey Vederia, Avitus. How've you been?" I remarked.
Avitus and I have been going on some APEX missions together. Kett on Voeld, Outcasts on Kadara, even led a science team into the Remnant derelict on Elaaden,” Vederia answered.

"Good to hear. Guessing the Stasis pods from Natanus have all been recovered?"

"N-not yet. I helped with the first few rounds but… I just couldn't keep going back…” Avitus ended quietly, meekly. Avitus shouldn't have just immediately started his role. He needed time to mourn. I just hope he still manages to get some later.

"The recovery teams should be able to handle it just fine," Vederia remarked. Doubted she knew.

"Yeah, yeah. So, got your teams picked out?" I asked.

"I've got the APEX team I've been with for a while. At first, Kandros wasn't eager to part with them. Still isn't, but with the Arks all here, he's willing to let them go," Vederia answered.

"And I've picked out a few Natanus survivors Macen mentioned before. One of em came from a Cabal unit," Rix explained.

"Biotics. Always a good thing to have 'round," I remarked.

"And I'm sure there's no bias from you involved at all," Avitus chuckled. Vederia began giggling.

"I don't know what you could possibly mean," I replied innocently.

"Uh huh," Avitus raised a brow, a Turian smirk barely visible. "Looks like the show is about to start." I turned to see that Kandros had arrived as well, and Tann was on stage, the crowd growing silent. We moved to watch. The doors that would admit passage from the Ark to the Nexus, opened. Hajer, dressed in a formal captain's attire of the Salarian union, flanked by Pathfinder Raeka in her armor, led their people aboard, to the welcoming cheers of the crowd. Obviously, not all of the Salarians on board would be welcomed in this ceremony, but rather a select group. Soon, the doors closed behind the still large group of Salarians and… what the hell?! I moved over to Kandros and whispered.

"Why did two Batarians just exit the Ark?"

"What? Oh, yeah, them. I was notified they'd be interested in joining APEX during their way here. Read their files," Kandros began. "Can't say I'm happy about their past, but, we need the man-power. The two of them used to be members of a big-time pirate gang in Council space."

"Then why the-" I began to almost growl. I hate pirates. And I'm not proud to admit that I hate the Batarian gangs the most. The slaves, the excessive force, savagery, brutality… all shit I've seen fighting off raids back in my time in the Alliance.

"Hold on, let me finish," Kandros tried to calm me down. "Either they got tired of it, or something happened that crossed a line, I don't know, but the two of them offered the Alliance intel on their leader and the rest of the gang in exchange for Asylum. They brought the gang down, but were almost killed in retaliation. So, they arranged for their Asylum to be Andromeda. Hyperion had just left, so they were put on Paarchero as extra muscle." I let out a deep breath, shaking my head.

"Let me speak with them both before you let them into APEX,' I requested. "I do not have very pleasant memories of Batarian pirates." I almost hissed out the word scum to the end of that sentence. But I tried to curb myself. I try to look at all races equally, and to not judge someone by what I've seen others of their species do, but I have a hard time of that with Batarians. I'm not proud of it, but when you arrive on a Colony after a Batarian slaver raid, and see the bodies left behind?
Gnawed apart by Varren, strung up as an example, the bodies that didn't survive getting the tracking chips implanted in their skull, WATCHING the security footage of the men, women, and children gathered up, beaten and bloody, then, without anesthetic, getting a chip that both tracks them at all times, and can explode at the press of a button, surgically implanted into their skull? Yeah, it's pretty fucking hard to make that distinction.

"Sure. I'll arrange for it later," Kandros nodded. I gave him my thanks and sat back for Tann's speech. Though I had a hard time paying much attention. I kept catching myself looking at the Batarians. Both had skin a mix of dark green and brown, with a darker brown on the rougher parts of their features. Their flat noses, pointed ears. Both appeared strong, capable. As for cunning? Hard to tell with sideways glances at a distance. Glances of their sharp, perhaps reptilian teeth? I don't know what category they fall under. But the teeth poked through either as they whispered to each other, or breathed.

"Now I'd ask that our Pathfinder's all stand together, for the first time since the Initiative left the Milky Way," Tann announced. Heh, just like last time, I wasn't paying attention to anything Tann said. Probably some shit about it being a long road but that now the family is back together or something. Avitus, Vederia, and I quickly stood and approached the front of the stage. Avitus still seemed uneasy being a center of attention. Probably from his Spectre days. Raeka quickly joined us, walking up the steps from her people. "Ryder, would you like to begin?" I took another step forward.

"It's been a long time coming. Would have felt like much longer to some of us more than others. We all remember that the plan was that the Initiative would start together, as one. Unfortunately, things changed. We were separated, and what we got, was lightyears from what we expected, what we hoped for. But today, that period of separation has finally ended. Human, Turian, Asari, Salarian, Krogan, or even one of the good people exiled to Kadara, the ones who just made an honest mistake? We're coming back together. It hasn't been easy, and we've lost people. People who we will mourn, people that we will never forget. But we've worked for this, and we won't waste it. The Initiative is together again, and we got some friends joining us too. If we're lucky, the hard part is over. If not? Well, we'll overcome that too. Together. One way or another, we still have a lot to do. But finally, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel," I spoke proudly. I turned to face Raeka. "Pathfinder Zevin Raeka, you are the last of the original Pathfinders. And it is my pleasure to welcome you to the second generation of our Rag-tag team of explorers," I held out my hand. "Whaddaya say, old timer?" I joked. Raeka happily accepted the handshake, chuckling.

"I'm honored and grateful to be accepted by you all. I knew each of your predecessors well, and considered them all friends. Matriarch Ishara, Macen Barro, Alec Ryder, each would be proud of the examples you have set. While I will mourn their loss, I will be glad to count the three of you amongst my comrades, and my friends."

---

**Vetra Nyx**

Alright, Drack's agreed to help keep the kitchen off limits later, and I downloaded a guide to cook… steak from the Initiative records. Hardly worth calling it an extra-net as it is. Foundations for all the familiar commodities are there, but won't be worth using until the Colonies really start expanding. Let's just hope I'll be able to understand what that cooking guide is saying. I even got some more expensive wines out of my stash. My personal favorite, and one that should be good for Scott. A Thessia Red. Lexi recommended it. And I even have a dressier outfit picked out for later. With something… special underneath.

I really want this to go right. Yesterday, the fear of losing him… convinced me. I think he's the
one. I love him. And I'm going to show him just how much. My Omni-tool was pinged with a message. The ceremony was almost over, and he and the other Pathfinders would be going back to the lounge for drinks. Celebrate a bit. Still wanted me to join them. I quickly made another check of the table I had brought into Scott's quarters. Small, round one, just for two. Plates, silverware in the same pattern fancy restaurants would have… Shit I'd doubt he'd even notice that, but still, I researched that. Nice, silk napkins, clean, white plates, candles, and a glass vase with a plastic version of some flower from Earth. A rose, I think. Finally, I double checked the light setting SAM helped me set up. A nice, low, warm glow. Perfect to set the mood. Now, just need to find a way to both keep him out of his quarters, and the mess until all that is done. How? I'll think of something. I took another deep breath to ease myself as I left the Tempest, and got on a tram to ops.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The other Pathfinders and I entered our lounge, talking, laughing occasionally amongst ourselves. Raeka had vaguely mentioned something in passing to Avitus, that she knew of his relationship with Macen, and that Avitus had her condolences. Nothing that would give it away to someone who didn't know, like Vederia, but enough so that those who do, understood. Avitus was mostly quiet, afterwards. I suppose the drinks would help.

"Good to see you all," the receptionist greeted warmly. "The drinks requested by Pathfinder Rix have been delivered, and Miss Nyx has arrived as well, Pathfinder Ryder."

"Thanks. She been waiting long?" I asked.

"Not at all. She arrived only moments ago," the receptionist answered. I nodded my thanks.

"Feel free to sneak a glass if you want, we won't mind," Avitus offered.

"With who you work for, you probably need it," I joked.

"A fair point," the receptionist laughed. "I'll consider it. Thank you." We made our way up the stairs to see Vetra relaxing on one of the sofas by the cart with two ice-buckets worth of alcohol. She gave a friendly wave of the hand.

"I remember you from the ark, I believe. But we weren't introduced. Zevin Raeka," Raeka introduced herself, reaching out a hand. Vetra stood, and accepted.

"Vetra Nyx. Before Scott arrived, I was Kesh's top quartermaster. Still put those talents to use for Scott and the team, but now I get to help shoot shit and save other shit too," Vetra introduced. I took my place beside her. Everyone then grabbed a glass and began pouring their choice in alcohol into it.

"Don't drink too much. Want to see Sara after this," I whispered to Vetra.

"So, Scott, if Vetra is here, why not the rest of your crew?" Vederia asked. I kinda saw through. She was politely wondering why Vetra was joining the Pathfinders, and just didn't want to come across as rude.

"Well we were gonna meet back up here after the welcoming anyway. When I found out you guys wanted to have some fun together, well I thought I should share the fun with my girl," I answered casually.

"Your girl?" Vetra raised a brow as we both sat next to each other on the sofa. Vederia's eyes widened slightly in surprise, Avitus had a knowing glance, likely suspecting after having seen the
both of us waiting on the Turian ark, but Raeka was unfazed. Or she just didn't let it show.

girl, I'm your guy, man, whatever... Want me to call you something else? Maybe... Tough,
accomplished, beautiful woman who just so happens to like me for some weird, stupid reason?" I
smirked teasingly.

"That's better," Vetra chuckled.

"Really rolls off the tongue, doesn't it," Avitus snickered.

"I know Alec fought at Shanxi, and knew he had no ill will towards the Turians. I'm glad to see
neither of you do either," Raeka remarked, taking a sip of her drink.

"My father didn't fight there. Either way, was just a big ol' misunderstanding, right? And thirty
years before we left. Who gives a shit anymore, right?" Vetra chuckled, taking a swig of her own.

"Here, here," Avitus raised his glass in the air. In response, so did the rest of us, taking another
swig of our drinks.

"On our way back to the Nexus, I debriefed myself on what has happened since the Initiative first
arrived in Heleus. Even while we were under the Kett's clutches, I couldn't have imagined that
everything went so wrong for everyone else. The golden worlds, the mutiny, over a year without
any sign of an ark? It's impressive that the Nexus lasted so long," Raeka mused.

"It was a right mess. That's for sure. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if the original leadership
weren't killed when we hit the Scourge, but, still wouldn't have been pretty. Least, in the end,
Hyperion finally showed up, with Scott in tow," Vetra remarked.

"A blessing from the Goddess, to be sure," Vederia smiled.

"And taking all the fun jobs. Come on! Leave some Vaults for the rest of us!" Avitus laughed.

"Then get off your ass and find 'em Rix, they're sure as hell out there," I retorted, chuckling.

"Don't tempt me," Avitus smirked, shaking his head.

"Raeka, back on Paarchero, you mentioned something about how you dismantled your SAM.
Where to from there?" I questioned.

"Yes, I had to ensure he was kept out of Kett hands. I dismantled him, yes, but I know how to put
him back together. It will simply take some time," she explained.

"What about a team?" Vederia added.

"Most of them are still alive. I'll miss those the Kett took, but I'll look for people to fill their
positions soon. We have work to do, after all," Raeka shrugged. We were then 'joined' by the
Nexus leadership. Each member. Something tells me they aren't here to join the pleasantries.

"Ryder is a sentimental person. He looked at those Krogan, and thought of you," Tann whined, I
could HEAR him just sticking his nose in the air. Kesh rolled her eyes, as the group walked up.

"He's his own person. Just admit you don't like Krogan," Kesh retorted. Addison was the first to
take notice of the rest of us. She cleared her throat.

"The Pathfinders."
"Ryder. We were just discussing your encounter with the Archon," Tann explained, standing straighter with his hands behind his back. I know Vetra and I both had brows raised, I figured the other Pathfinder's did too.

"And, what? You don't like that I saved the Krogan too? Or maybe that I sent the larger portion of my team, without going myself, to help save Raeka?" I questioned, some anger creeping in.

"I for one believe, that your presence with Raeka would have delivered a message of unity amongst the Pathfinders," Tann argued.

"Director Tann, Ryder sent four of his team to aid me, leaving himself with the smaller, less defended team for the Krogan. I knew Matriarch Nuara, the woman you've replaced. I know for a fact that she would be applauding Scott for saving as many lives as he did, not questioning which specific group he personally helped rescue," Raeka scoffed. Glad to have her react that way.

"At least Ark Paarchero is back," Tann sighed.

"But what did we gain, exactly? Provoking the Archon like this?" Kandros questioned, as the leadership and Pathfinder's gathered around the conference table. "Don't mistake me as saying it wasn't worth the Ark or the Pathfinder, but you went after him for another reason, Scott. Just what was it?"

"He had a map showing the location of Meridian. From what we currently understand, it's the center of the Remnant Vault network. We take it, get it working, and all of our environmental problems are solved," I explained. I entered the data into the console on the table, displaying a hologram of the station. And Kett defenses in orbit. A few Warships.

"Based on what data? This is all alien science," Tann questioned.

"Data taken and translated by SAM, other maps we've seen on both Eos and Aya, the Moshae's understanding, who is arguably the greatest expert on Remnant in the cluster, and even the Archon. When he had us trapped, he explicitly told me that transforming the weather was only a fraction of Meridian's power," I answered.

"I thought you found the map of Meridian on the Archon's ship?" Addison asked, confused.

"That's how we got the location, yes. Apologies that I wasn't more clear. When the Moshae and I inspected the vault on Aya, it did give us a kind of star map. Many dots, and at the time, only four were active. Aya, Voeld, Eos, and Havarl. All those dots, and the lines connecting them all, converged on one symbol. The very symbol on the map to Meridian. In short, we have a whole lot of signs, and all of them point to the same conclusion." As I finished, Kandros shook his head and sighed.

"Either way, we just aren't equipped for a war with the Kett. If the Archon really is that obsessed with it, it's defenses are going to be strong."

"Wasn't suggesting we just charge those warships with a few fleets of fighters. The Moshae understands the importance, I know she could get us Resistance aid. I'm sure they've been able to infiltrate and take down warships. We plan this right, we can do it. Besides, the Kett aren't just going to let us be. You know that," I argued. "This," I stressed the word. "Is how we beat them. The Archon doesn't know how to bring Meridian online. But given the time, he will. But I can control that technology. Look at that place. It's a Remnant space station. A city, even. You get me in those systems, and I bet it'll have something that will help take those ships down."
"How do we even know if Meridian works the same way? All that only to find out you're wrong" Addison questioned.

"Come on. If you have a system that works, you tend to stick with it. We did back in the Milky Way, the Angara have, the Kett have, even Prothean ruins all worked on the same kind of pattern. Plus, Meridian being the center of the Terraforming network? And I've gone through the individual pieces? Yeah, seems like a safe bet," I retorted.

"And what about SAM? We took a chance letting AI get involved. Frankly, I'm concerned with just how involved it's become," Kesh muttered.

"You're not the only one to have gotten concerned, Kesh. I'm sure you know Drack was hardly comfortable with it in the first place. But go ask him. I'm sure that he trusts SAM. I know I do," I reassured. Kesh lowered her gaze in thought.

"I trust him too, Kesh. Even after what happened on the ship," Vetra called out from her seat on the sofa.

"Why's she here? This is confiden-" Tann began.

"Relax, Tann. Vetra's a member of my crew, and my girlfriend," I stared at him, anger slightly creeping its way through. If you really think I wouldn't just tell her about everything going on here after the fact, then you clearly haven't learned a thing about me." I smirked as I saw Vetra give him a mock salute.

"Damn it," Kesh sighed. "I like you, Scott. I really do. But as it stands now, I can't support this."

"I do," Raeka stated, loud and proud, arms crossed over her chest.

"So will I," Vederia followed.

"Agreed," Avitus joined in. I smiled inwardly at their support.

"If I get a vote, I support it too," Vetra remarked. I noticed Kesh strain to repress a chuckle.

"Ryder deserves the chance to try. After everything he's done," Raeka argued. Tann stood even straighter, as it the stick up his ass was now lifting his legs off the ground, and the stick was just waddling there, scraping across the floorboards, and his hands, behind his back, trying to hide the hole where that stick cuts through his pants.

"I applaud the gesture. But you answer to me. I hope you understand," Tann sneered.

I burst into laughter.

"What's the matter, Tann? Don't want anyone else overshadowing you?" I mocked.

"It's not called the Pathfinder Initiative. The chain of command has to be respected," Tann retorted.

"Not called the bean counter initiative either, number eight," I crossed my arms over my chest. I couldn't help the smirk as I saw Tann fail to keep his features composed. His brows lowered in anger, his teeth barred and visible for a fraction of a second.

"That will be all," he replied coldly. I shook my head, and made my way down, towards the exit of the Pathfinder's quarters. Vetra and the other Pathfinder's followed. We gathered around the door.

"Guess I shouldn't be surprised," I muttered bitterly. "I don't exactly have a plan B."
"I think I have an idea. Meet me in the tech-lab later," Raeka stated. As she finished, Addison, Kesh, and Kandros made their way down. Kesh muttered another apology but Kandros stopped.

"I can't promise anything, but, I'll talk with the Resistance, see if they have methods. I don't like the Archon having this thing either. I'll even assign a few strategists to think of a plan. In the meantime, my Lieutenant, Sajax, watched Keri's interviews for me, recommends she be cleared, so, she is. And those Batarians are waiting. Right now, I can't officially sanction anything, but, what help I CAN give, you'll get," Kandros explained.

"It's greatly appreciated, Tiran," I held out a hand for a shake. He accepted. "Glad to have your support."

"I was a soldier too. I know how important that gut feeling is. You? You got that and then some," Kandros replied. He then made his way back to the Militia HQ.

"I'll go talk to Kesh. Maybe get Drack's help. She'll see sense, don't worry," Vetra reassured.

"Thanks," I smiled. "I'll message when I'm ready for us to talk with Sara, alright?"

"Sure, see you then," Vetra tapped her forehead to mine, and then let towards Kesh's office.

"Go ahead, Scott. I'll take a look at this lead," Raeka urged. I nodded, and left for the Militia. At the HQ, Lieutenant Sajax led me to what seemed like a repurposed storage room in the barracks. Apparently, Kandros' office for when he isn't coordinating things at the HQ. It was Spartan, which wasn't exactly unexpected. The desk in the center had two forms sitting in the chairs, their backs to the door, but both turned to see me. The Batarians. I'll admit, I felt a twinge of guilt for potentially needlessly calling them here, but I need to know that these former pirates won't go back to their old habits. I sat in Kandros' chair, getting a good look at both the Batarians.

Honestly, I couldn't tell them apart.

"Names?" I asked, beginning this… interrogation, I suppose. I noticed a difference between the moods of the two Batarians. The one on the right was sitting more attentively. Formally. The one on the left, well, I feel like the only thing keeping him from putting his feet up on the desk was his friend here.

"Prasrak Gannomon," the attentive Batarian answered. His naturally, gruff, coarse, and overall rough voice. An unfortunate thing is that a Batarian could be as calm as can be, but to a Human, their natural voice just sounds aggressive.

"Ghobo Keb'cabos," the left one responded disinterested. I noticed Prasrak glance his left two eyes in his friend's direction. I assume annoyance that he wasn't taking this seriously.

"You know why I wanted to talk to you both?" Prasrak opened his mouth to speak, but Ghobo beat him to it. This time, and for the first time since I sat down, all four of his eyes looked straight at my two.

"You're ex-Alliance. What else? You've seen other Batarians do so much shit, and you don't buy it that we're done being pirates."

"What he MEANS to say," Prasrak glared at his friend.

"No, no. Ghobo's right. Can't fault him on that," I shrugged. "I may be the Human Pathfinder, but I had a big part in getting the Initiative to where it is now. I don't want anything to jeopardize any of that. And given I've seen the aftermath of a few Batarian raids, I do have some concerns. How do
"We're brothers. Not by blood, sure, but we grew up on Omega together," Prasrak answered. "My parents were refugees from Khar'Shan. People the Hegemony didn't want leaving. Ghobo? His dad brought his mother and twenty-odd of his other wives out of Batarian space with him. He was allowed to leave, be a pirate, stir shit up. Died in some raid or other before Ghobo was born. The wives split up, none liking the other. Some went back to Khar'Shan, some stayed in Terminus. My parents took his mother in. We were born 'round the same time."

"How come the Kett didn't take either of you? Being the only Batarians on board, figure the Kett would have snatched you right up," I remarked.

"Same reason Raeka and Hajer were not taken. Swapped places with volunteers. When the Kett found us, we were woken up, being the extra muscle we were. Helped with security, all that shit. We didn't want to surrender, but got overruled. It was decided that when retaliation happens, they'd rather ensure we were around. So, went into the computers, re-wrote the records. No Batarians on board," Prasrak explained.

"And the piracy?" I continued. Prasrak sighed, Ghobo just gave another cold hard look at me.

"I'm sure you've heard what it's like on Omega. Unless you got money, you either join a gang, or you die."

"Though if you have money on that shithole, you're definitely in a gang," Ghobo chuckled bitterly.

"Essentially. The gangs are always looking for some Batarian muscle. Get that, and biotics in one package? Like with Ghobo? Yeah, you'll climb the ranks quickly if you have half a brain."

"And from that to one of the most notorious pirate gangs in Citadel space?" I raised a brow.

"Think that probably needs a bit of background. So, on Omega, small time gangs? Yeah, only thing worth doing is trying to muscle in on other gang activities. Can't run a protection racket with the Blue Suns, Blood Pack, or Eclipse around."

"What Pras is trying to say is that we got used to screwing over other gangs," Ghobo remarked. Prasrak cast another glance to Ghobo, but then nodded.

"Anyways. Got bored pulling the same shit on Omega. Wanted to leave. Parents had been killed by some rivals, we killed those rivals. Signed onto a crew led by some Turian ass. Lucimus. Didn't like the guy, but was a good pay. Good ship. Rest of the crew wasn't THAT bad," Prasrak continued.

"And yet, same shit, different toilet," Ghobo muttered.

"He's right. Still weren't any of the big merc bands. Still weren't one of the famous pirates or warlords. Just had a repurposed freighter with a few old Mass Accelerators strapped on. At first," Pras remarked.

"Yeah, Lucimus was an ass, but he was a damn good pilot," Ghobo shrugged, still making an appearance of being disinterested.

"Outwit other pirates. We'd either take their ship for ourselves to use or sell, or the scrap and loot haul would slowly help us upgrade. When we moved up to a frigate? Well, that's when it started to go downhill. Slowly, but there wasn't going back. Got adventurous, started poking into the traverse. When we got confident, being able to outrun or just evade military ships, we became regulars. This
was when we started raiding people who weren't pirates." I leaned a bit closer to the desk as I listened. This general area is where these two will make it or break it for me. "Didn't kill if we didn't have to. That was an agreement most of us had going in. Money got better, but… what did we really have to spend it on? Waste it all back on Omega on booze and women? Gets old. Gets boring. Ghobo and I didn't really know what to do with it. Eventually, we started to poke at Citadel space. Eventually moved in. Bigger risk, bigger reward. Problem was, lot more people started giving us trouble. I remember each time, it was either Lucimus, or that Krogan hot-head he kept around pulling the trigger. Time went on, his already thin patience got thinner. We just… ignored it, at first." Prasrak began muttering. Some amount of shame creeping in.

"Kept telling ourselves they should have just kicked back, and enjoy the ride of having their entire livelihood stolen. Beautiful little white fucking lies," Ghobo almost growled.

"What was your breaking point?" I questioned.

"It was during all that Geth shit going on. Lucimus got it into his head that we could hit refugee ships. Ransom the people. 'So long as he doesn't hurt them,' we thought." Pras then chuckled bitterly. "We had no idea…"

"You got things you can't forget, Pathfinder? Yeah, so do we," Ghobo muttered.

"Lucimus' temper was already short. By this time, even shorter. He started beating the hell out of refugees just for crying. Hell, even a kid who said he was thirsty. You want to know what our breaking point was? He pulled a wailing baby out of its mother's arms. As she screamed. Then he shot it."

"We jacked an escape pod that very night. Got picked up, brought to the Citadel, went straight to the Human embassy. Thought we could get a deal with them. The ambassador was a shit-bag and didn't believe us, was in the middle of calling C-sec when another stepped in. Captain what's-his-name. Became the councilor," Ghobo recanted, staring at me again.

"That's… quite a story you two. How do I know you're telling the truth? How do I know you won't fall back into piracy?" I questioned.

"Same question the Alliance asked us every step of the way," Ghobo murmured. Prasrak tried to stop him, but I think he wrongly assumed it was hurting his chances. Go on Ghobo. "I think it should count for something that we came to the ALLIANCE for this. We could have gone to the Asari. The Salarians. The Turians. Virtually anyone else. But we chose the Humans. The Asari would probably have accepted our bargain, pardoned us, without half as many hoops the Alliance made us jump through. We knew that going in. We trusted your people to do what was right. When they failed to protect us? We negotiated to come here. We didn't just vanish or anything. You want to know if you can trust us?" Ghobo almost began yelling.

"Ghobo, calm down!" Prasrak exclaimed. I gestured for Prasrak to stop and to let him continue. Ghobo let out a deep breath.

"If there's one thing we damn learned out there, ya can't fucking trust anyone. You take the gamble, and hope it works out." Prasrak sighed, and put his head in both of his hands.

"Alright. I'm convinced," I stated, after a pause of a few seconds.

"What?" Prasrak sputtered.

"I know what it's like when someone holds shit in and then it just explodes. You can't fake and lie
something like that. So, you convinced me," I explained. I stood, and offered my hand to the both. "I'm sorry that I felt the need to talk to you in the first place. I wish I'd just have been able to let it be. I hope you two can forgive me." Prasrak quickly accepted the handshake. I don't think I've ever even touched a Batarian before. Well, not a live one. The skin was cool and rough. Ghobo, hesitated, and then accepted the shake himself. I can't really be sure, but I think there was respect in his eyes. All… four of them…

"There's nothing to be forgiven, Pathfinder. 'My' people haven't done much to help their reputation," Prasrak grinned and nodded. I let them go, and messaged Kandros that they were clear. I then typed another message to Vetra. We had a sister to talk to. And boy did we have a lot to tell her.

---

**Vetra Nyx**

I left Kesh's office after reading the message from Scott. Drack, was fortunately already there, and helped me work on convincing Kesh. She was still obviously uneasy, but, slowly coming around. While I was making my way to the tram, I was ambushed by my little sister, her arms wrapping all around me, catching me by surprise as she practically squealed my name. Least I managed to calm her down, reassure her that everyone was alright. She wondered where Scott was, wanting to see him, and when I explained he and I were seeing his sister, Sid asked if she could join us. I denied her request, but quickly explained that we're going to tell Sara some things that would be better off being just Scott and I. Plus, Sid had work. Grudgingly, but understandingly, Sid let us be, hugging me once more, saying she was happy to see me alright, tapped her forehead to mine, and returned to her work.

Now I was waiting for the tram to stop at the Hyperion Med-bay. Scott wasted no time in hiding our relationship, so, good to see he isn't ashamed at all. Not to mention how defensive he got when Tann noticed I was there. It also wasn't lost on me that when he listed off titles for an alternate name, he included beautiful. Now, I'm not exactly one to put the utmost effort into my looks, but still, a good thing to hear. All little things that reinforce my decision for tonight.

Finally, the tram came to a stop, and I disembarked. Just outside the med-bay. Scott was there waiting, tapping his feet to a kind of rhythm, eyes staring off, his mind elsewhere. But with the sound of the door opening, he returned to reality, saw me, and smiled warmly. I couldn't help but smile in return.

"How'd it go with the Batarians?" I asked as I approached.

"Well. The two managed to convince me," Scott began. As I was alongside him, he turned, took my hand in his, and we began making our way towards Sara's room. "Told me their story, then Ghobo sold it to me with a burst of what both SAM and I perceived as genuine emotion."


"Mine too, unfortunately. So, what about Kesh?"

"Uneasy, but, starting to have a hard time disagreeing. Drack's help."

"Good to hear. We'll need all the help we can get for Meridian," Scott mused.

"And we thought the Verikan would be the big one," I muttered.

"I know. Feels like we're coming up on the end, but, at the same time? Feels like we're just getting
"started, you know?" Scott chuckled.

"Then let's just try sticking to the here and now."

"Probably one of the best suggestions I've heard all day." Oh, trust me Scott, you'll definitely have plenty that top that later today. We entered Sara's room. She was still comatose, unfortunately. Still hooked up to all the machines. The IV, everything. Scott told SAM to open the connection, and her body jerked as it was established.

"Wakey wakey," Scott whistled.

"You're back! How'd the mission go?" Sara asked cheerfully.

"That is actually… quite a story. Vetra is here, by the way," Scott remarked.

"Hi," I greeted.

"Nice to talk to you again, Vetra. So, story time," she urged. Scott chuckled lightly.

"Well, the mission quickly became complicated. When we arrived, we found the Salarian ark hooked up, captured. Snuck on board, woke up the Salarian Pathfinder, and she woke up some control crew to get the Ark ready," Scott began. Sara urged him on again. "Snuck onto the Archon's ship. Though didn't exactly stay sneaky for long. Fought through a lot of Kett, learned that some damn big guns were pointed right at the Ark. The Salarians worked on an EMP while their Pathfinder worked on finding captured Salarians. We eventually fought our way to the Archon's personal lab. He trapped us in some kind of containment field. He came right to us, mocked us. I spat in his face. Three times." Sara began laughing. Even through the implant connection, it's weird that that works. I noticed that Scott left out the horrible things we saw with the Salarians. I wonder if he's even told her about exaltation… "You remember how I promised you I wouldn't die, Sara?" he asked, a bit shaken.

"Yeah? And? You're obviously here," she laughed it off.

"Well… to get out of the containment field? I kinda had to break that promise…" The room got quiet. I hated even thinking about it. Scott at least was gently rubbing my shoulder to try and comfort.

"...What?" Sara questioned quietly.

"SAM… stopped my heart, then brought me back. And I got us out…" Scott explained.


"Yeah. You're telling me," Scott murmured his reply. "Well, we then made our way to the Archon's quarters, found the Meridian map. Archon threatened to destroy the Salarian ark, the EMP went off. But our problems weren't over yet. Pathfinder Raeka was in deep shit, and we found out that some of Drack's scouts had been captured. Split the team up, saved both, and the Ark made it out with us," Scott finished.

"Damn. Archon must be pissed," Sara remarked.

"Oh hell yeah. As if spitting in his face three times wasn't enough," Scott managed to chuckle. "There's… something else… we want to tell you…"

"Scott…" Sara… well I could just HEAR the grin that would be on her face. Wait, was her face
twitching?

"Vetra and I… are… uh…" Scott began stuttering awkwardly.

"Yes?" Sara urged, I swear I could HEAR that smile get even wider. I sighed, would be wringing my hands if Scott wasn't holding onto one of them.

"We're together…" Scott finished.

"YES!" Sara exclaimed, shooting straight up, hands raised high in the air, her eyes open wide.

"JESUS FUCK!" Scott shouted in surprise.

"SPIRITS!" I simultaneously screamed. Eyes wide, Scott and I stared at Sara. Sara then seemed to realize, looked down at her hands. She looked back up, beaming.

Scott launched himself at his sister, wrapping his arms around her. And she wrapped hers around him.

She was awake.
Love

Chapter Notes

Happy No Nut November.

(Doesn't start right away, if you don't want to read smut, then stop when they start sucking face)

Vetra Nyx

When Sara woke up, it took… a while for Scott to stop crying. Upon hearing the shouting, Doc Caryle had rushed right in to see what had happened. He immediately began running checks on her to make sure everything was fine.

He didn't bother trying to get Scott or I out of the room. The entire time, the two just talked and laughed and cried. Sometimes all at once. Scott had even quickly sent a message to the whole crew that she had woken up, inviting them all to come see her. With her permission, of course. Though, I heard the doc grumble that they had neglected to ask him. Still, he didn't stop it. I stayed, my plan for tonight still in the back of my mind. Would I have time, now?

The entire crew showed up, even Sid. Not all at the same time, sure, but still. I think that meant a lot to both the twins. A part of me was surprised to see Drack smile and hug Sara when he got here, as that's not a thing the old man does easily. I was much less surprised to see Sid do the same. Some of the crew had brought gifts. Most of it candies or other kinds of treats. For those without treats, myself included, we promised her she'd get something from us soon. Despite Sara's protests. I remained with the others a bit longer, then Drack came and whispered.

"Kitchen's still ready. Left a basic set of instructions to try and help. You want it done, go. I'll cover for you." I nodded my thanks, and approached the currently inseparable twins.

"Important call just happened. Need to go take care of. Sorry-" I began apologizing.

"Don't worry about it Vetra. Go do what you need to do," Sara spoke before Scott could, a curious brow raised on his face. Sara though, gave me a sly wink. I slipped away, making my way right for the ship. Once there, I grabbed the steak I had bought from my room, and brought it to the mess. A pan was already on the stove, and Drack, like he said, had left a note with some instructions.

'Put steak on pan. Turn the knob to four or five. Steak sauce in the fridge, and left some seasoning out for you. ONLY A LITTLE! Then wait. The juices will sizzle. That's normal. Let it. Let it cook a while, and then flip it to other side. Use more steak sauce, wait for it to soak in, use the seasoning. Cook until meat is warm and brown. MAYBE a bit darker.'

Ok, that doesn't seem so hard.

Vetra Nyx

Shit. I don't think it's supposed to look like that. Is it? I don't know. I looked down at the brown
bottle of steak sauce Drack had left in the fridge more me. Hm… maybe a little more… I unscrewed the cap and let it trickle out over the steak again. Well, now it looks brown, at least… Using the spatula, I put it onto a plate, and brought it into Scott's quarters, setting it down on his side of the table. I'd light the candle when I got back. I really wanted this to go right. His day has already been made, hell, his week, just by Sara waking up. I want to help make it the best I can. I returned to my own room and found the outfit I had set aside for the night. Some of my nicer clothes. I got out of my more casual get-up, being left in nothing but the lingerie for tonight. I chuckled internally as I thought about how those wouldn't be on for long anyway. I started with the dress pants, pulling them up and over my legs to my waist with ease, tightening the strap a bit. Brown, with a blue and white trim on the outer side. Then the jacket. I opened up the flap that seamlessly hid the zipper as the fabric wrapped around my carapace. I zipped the jacket all the way to the top, before closing the flap and tucking the bottom of the shirt into the pants. I checked my sleeves and then neck in the mirror again, then noticed my colony markings were fading a little bit. I quickly reached into the drawer and took out the proper container, dipping a finger into it, and re-applying the purple material back over the lines, returning it to normal. Looking nice and glossy and strong.

I placed the container back and returned to Scott's quarters. I checked over the table and the steak again. I already made sure that Pyjak wasn't in here, so the food wouldn't be stolen by that thing. The flowers still looked nice and vibrant. Nodding, then looking down at the steak nervously, I lit the candles, and left the room, standing just outside. I messaged Scott.

'Meet me in your quarters.'

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

My Omni-tool pinged with a message. The doc had somehow managed to shoo us out, stating that, despite having now woken up from her coma, that Sara needed rest as they continued to evaluate her. After one last hug, I reluctantly left my sister be. Just before I got the ping, I had remembered that the other Pathfinder's had messaged me earlier if I'd still be able to meet them in the science lab today. I had nearly forgotten that officially, the Meridian mission would probably not be sanctioned. I chuckled as I, still crying and laughing that my sister was finally awake, messaged them back, asking if it could just wait till tomorrow. I read the message.

'Meet me in your quarters.'

I raised a brow, concerned. Was something wrong? Well, at least my schedule is now clear. I quickly began making my way back to the ship.

So long as nothing’s wrong, well, I'm not sure this day could get any better. Well, unless Tann called for me and then began groveling at my feet, apologizing for everything he’d done wrong, that he'd now endorse the Meridian mission, but, well, other than that, I don't really think anything could. Back on the ship now, I entered the hallway towards my quarters. But Vetra was waiting outside, leaning against the wall. Thought she wanted to meet in my quarters? And she was looking nice. A new, formal outfit I haven't seen yet. She immediately noticed me, and leaned off the wall.

"Must have been eager if you couldn't wait the few seconds for me to walk through the door," I joked. Vetra chuckled as I got close, standing in front of her. And maybe needing to look up, just a bit.

"I got a surprise," Vetra smiled as she tried to move behind me. Instinctually, I continued facing
her, not even realizing before she grabbed me by the shoulders and gently pushed so that I was back to facing the door. "Come on, humor me," she urged releasing her three-fingered hands from my shoulders, and her palms now covering both my eyes.

"Really?" I chuckled.

"Yes. Do you not know what a surprise means?" Vetra teased.

"Fine, fine," I relented. The door opened for us and Vetra led me forward. I could smell a smoke, but like that from a candle. Though I also smelled…

Burned meat?

Vetra led me to the side gently. I heard music lightly playing in the room. Sounded like smooth jazz, though the odds of that being unique to Earth? Next to nothing.

"Watch your-" Vetra began to warn. I felt my shin hit a metal table, sending a surge of pain around the area.

"Fuck," I cursed quietly.

"Shins…” Vetra muttered. I heard a chair being pulled out, and she helped me sit down, blind. My eyes were no longer covered, but I kept them shut.

"Can I open my eyes now?" I questioned my girlfriend.

"Just another moment… and, ok, now," she allowed. I opened them. A candlelit dinner. Silverware arranged like at a fancy restaurant, fancily folded napkin, the lights of the room dim, setting a romantic mood, and in the center of the table, some glassware holding some bright, blooming roses. Plastic, to be sure.

With a steak that somehow looks both burned, and undercooked, all at once.

The meat was blackened, and clearly drenched in steak sauce with some kind of seasoning spread across. Yet, while the meat was blackened, you could still easily see the same fatty lines and divisions you'd see in a steak before it was cooked. I… uh… am not eager to eat that. And how the hell do I not offend her? Because this was a helluva lot of effort.

"Surprise!" Vetra smiled, standing to the side of the table, not having taken her seat yet. Her arms were raised just slightly and out to the side. There was a light in her eyes, and her mandibles twitching happily.

"This is wonderful!" I forced a smile, looking up at her and away from the 'steak.' She began looking both down and around the room, at the same time, meekly.

"I… tried. It wasn't easy to get all this together, but… you're worth it. Not to mention the bet," Vetra explained. "I made it for you myself. It's steak… cow…” Really?

"Earth cow?" I asked, both delaying the inevitable, and actually surprised she got her hands on that. Vetra held up an opened packet.

"It said… cow, on the packet," Vetra answered, unsure. "And some other things I didn't understand… Does it matter?" she began peering down at the steak herself.

"Mm… Delicious… I love cow…” I made a show of licking my lips. My eyes locked onto the
silverware, and I began slowly moving to reach. Knife in the right, fork in the left. I stabbed the fork through one part. It was hard to break through the outer layer, but then slid through easily. Too easily through the uncooked meat. Not a good sign. Nervously, I then began sawing the piece off with the knife. It scraped against the burnt surface before breaking through that layer. The piece fell off. It was cold, and obviously uncooked. Steak sauce began seeping out. I let slip a groan and cursed myself inwardly for not holding it in. I need to recover this. I transitioned the groan to begin the next sentence.

"Uugggh, hell yeah… I'm gonna take time to… savor this." Really? That's the best you could come up with, Scott? Out of the corner of my eye I saw Vetra's mandibles twitch and her eyes fall. Shit. She looked away, and began walking to the other chair as she spoke.

"You don't have to be nice about it… I know I probably made it wrong…" she muttered, sitting down, looking down at the table.

"Vetra, this is great. But you didn't have to," I tried to reassure. She looked back up at me. There was a sadness, disappointment even, in her eyes.

"I just wanted to do something special for you. As thanks. Finding the arks, building us a home, that was YOU!" she emphasized the word. She stared right into my eyes, her mandibles twitching again. "You care about my sister, you care about me! For ME! Not just because you can…" her face scrunched up with disgust. "Get something out of me." she looked back into my eyes, the same sadness. I think I even saw a tear forming. "I love you."

Well, fucking A. That word. That… that word means quite a lot. I know my eyes widened. The tear now fell down her face as she choked out that phrase. I froze, and she looked back down.

"I just don't want to ruin it… I thought…" Do I let her finish, as this might be something important, or shake myself out and wrap my arms around her, tell her everything will be alright, that I love her to, and kiss her? The decision was made for me. "I thought… if I could just get this right. Perfect. And I couldn't… And I know I could have asked someone else, but I wanted to do it myself. Turns out I couldn't even make dinner…"

"Vetra…" I stood, walking over to her. "This was perfect," I smiled, and got down on a knee. I took her hands in mine, and I gazed into her eyes. When hers refused to meet mine, I took a hand, pressed it against her cheek, and gently pushed her face to look right at mine, her eyes followed suit, and my hand remained there, as the other gently began rubbing the backside of her hand.

"What?" Vetra questioned.

"The lengths to which you go for something. For someone you care about. That's amazing," I explained gently.

"But, everything was wrong," Vetra countered.

"And yet, it was perfect," I squeezed her hand, removing my other hand from her cheek and taking her other hand, squeezing it just as tight. "Perfectly Vetra. I'll never forget this." I stood, still holding her hands, and pulled her up from the chair. I wrapped my arms around her, and she responded by doing the same. My head on her shoulder, her's on mine. "It would take a lot to ruin this perfect moment."

"Really?" Vetra muttered her question. I felt like I should take a deep breath for this. That I should… I don't know, proclaim it somehow.
"Because I love you too," I stated gently in her ear. No showmanship, no deep breath. Just what came naturally. That's how I felt. No need for acting. I felt Vetra's mandible flair as it rubbed up against my cheek. I felt her hold onto my tighter in the hug. I felt her release a pent-up breath, feeling the hot air blow past my neck.

"You know… I'm not done yet…" she whispered. It was… a sultry whisper. I felt myself stiffen. Yes, more than just one specific part of me stiffen.

"Please, no more food," I joked.

"No… you'll like this…" Vetra put her face back in front of mine, and gently began pushing me back. There was an… animalistic look in her eyes. Hungry. Like so many times before, our lips locked, and eyes closed. And still, I was being pushed back. Till the back of my legs hit the bed. Vetra removed her lips from mine, and her hands lowered, tugging at my shirt. I lifted my arms to help her, as the shirt was removed from my body and she tossed it… somewhere behind her. I wasn't paying much attention. Were we about too…

She cupped me. Feeling me through my pants. Guess that was her way to answer the unspoken question. She glanced down and giggled, I felt my cheeks redden. Vetra removed her hand from me, and then, with both of her hands on my chest, she pushed me down onto the bed. I crawled back on the bed, so my back was against the pillows, I never took my eyes off her.

She began shaking her hips as she opened a flap I had never noticed on her shirt, and then began to unzip it. It came loose when the zipper was undone, and moving her shoulders back, she let it fall to the ground, revealing her bare torso. Carapace in all. Same color as her other plates, but smooth. Curved a bit, but smooth. But her sides and stomach on the other hand, lacked plates, and instead were soft, brown flesh. Wait, what's that bit of black sticking out from under the pants? Vetra then turned, her hands over her rear, thumbs inside the waistline of her pants. She began leaning her body forward, simultaneously pulling said pants down, and making her… rear look larger. Fleshy and round. Would not have any complaints grabbing onto that. I realized then that the black I saw poking out, was in fact, lingerie. Black lace, just BARELY non-see through. Teasing both the eyes and body. It followed the waistline, just above her assets, with the very small and thin lingerie fitting between Vetra turned back around as she tossed the pants to the side, not even looking at where they landed. She lay a hand on her hip. The lingerie at the front was just slightly wider, to cover up all of that, while at the same time, leaving very little to the imagination. I could also see some black stockings on her lower legs as well.

"Like what you see?" Vetra nearly purred. I gulped, noticing I was sweating a little bit.

"Uh, you see that, right there. You really don't need to ask that," I muttered. Vetra giggled, and looked down at what I was referencing. Vetra leaned forward, placing both hands on the bed, and then a knee, moved her hands forward, another knee, as she began to crawl along the bed, her eyes gazing deep into my own. Her tongue ran itself across her lips hungrily. I felt myself throb down below. Eager for me to do something for me to use the damn thing for what it's meant for. But, well, I just couldn't move right now. Vetra stopped at my waist, putting her hands over me again, consequently making me twitch even harder at the touch. It had been quite a while; my body was eager. Vetra looked down at what she was holding, and then back at me. She wiggled her brow a bit, suggestively, teasing me further. A part of me hopes she doesn't do what I think she might. I'm afraid of Turian teeth. Vetra reached one, single talon through the band of my own pants, and given I could feel it on my skin, the band of my boxers too. Vetra began to pull down, and I brokered no argument. She pulled it down until I... popped out. She moved her head back a bit, and she let out a quiet gasp. In a clear head, I'd bet on that just being a way to further rile me up, rather than actual amazement at me. I'm no Ron Jeremy. And I'm also no one-inch-wonder. I'm an average man. But
one way or the other, it did, in fact, rile me up further.

Vetra tugged at my pants a bit more until they were father down, and then, still using on hand to keep her up, she grabbed hold, stroking gently, slowly, up and down slightly. Her hands weren't the epitome of softness and smoothness, but they weren't rough either. Her talons, while cool, well, I noticed she had the plastic guards on. Because it had been so long, even this was enough to make me moan a bit, eyes rolling back slightly. I remembered, and was damn glad, that I had asked SAM to help with my, uh, stamina, in a time like this. Because I don't want to-

"Fuck," I moaned a bit louder, as I felt her long tongue begin to run up and down my length, spending some extra time at the back end of the tip. I both felt and heard Vetra giggle again, and I moved a hand onto the back of her head, gently urging her on. She, of course, did just that. Still stroking her hand up and down. As she ran her tongue along again, she wrapped it around slightly, the wet muscle bringing up distant, yet certainly welcome feelings. I could still feel myself stiffening, stretching, just slightly, as I became as ready as I would be tonight. I looked back down at Vetra, just, controlling my breathing, focusing on resisting as long as I possibly can. Just as I looked down, Vetra looked back up at me. She opened her mouth more, and wrapped her 'lips' around slightly, the wet muscle bringing up distant, yet certainly welcome feelings. I could still feel myself stiffening, stretching, just slightly, as I became as ready as I would be tonight. I looked back down at Vetra, just, controlling my breathing, focusing on resisting as long as I possibly can. Just as I looked down, Vetra looked back up at me. She opened her mouth more, and wrapped her 'lips' around the tip. Eliciting another moan, and she even moaned as if to make this harder for me. Luckily for me, I don't believe I was far enough in for the teeth. But this did allow her to do much more in a smaller area with that tongue of hers.

I felt that warmth building. That familiar feeling. She could probably taste it. I focused more on resisting, closing my eyes tight, clenching my jaw.

She stopped. I looked back down in frustrated confusion, to see Vetra smirking, and still holding me.

"You know, I'm not really sure. It's fun winding you up like this," Vetra teased. I felt that warm feeling that had just been about to burst recede, slowly, but surely. Damn you, woman. I groaned. Then had an idea. My biotics flared to life as a devilish grin formed, and I'm sure Vetra saw a mischievous light in my eyes. I lifted Vetra into the air, surprising her, hearing her cry out suddenly at the unexpected sensation of floating in the air. I quickly removed myself from the bed, returning to its foot, and made Vetra take my place, my biotics still active, just a bit, holding her arms down at the head of the bed. "Could have warned me," Vetra chastised, though not without a smile on her face.

"Really? After a tease like that? I think you deserved a surprise like that miss Nyx," I retorted.

"Oh? Any more… surprises?" Vetra raised a brow as now I had crawled over, being face to face with her.

"You tell me," I answered, crashing my lips against hers. My tongue requested access, and she granted it, her own meeting mine. We moaned into each other's mouths, our hot breath being blown out from our noses. I ran my hands all along her, and her legs wrapped around me. Well, that won't do for much longer. I removed my lips from hers, hearing her whimper slightly. I gazed back into her eyes, and then lovingly kissed her on the forehead. On both eyelids. On her cheeks, her chin. As I got to the neck, she lifted her head slightly, allowing me better access. I kissed her throat, sucking on it gently. Vetra moaned, and as my biotics faded, her arms came to push my head into her neck. Soon, I pushed them aside, taking an arm to leave kisses along it, then doing the same with the other arm, and then along her chest. I left kisses on her stomach, around the belly button. Normally wouldn't expect a bird to have that, but, Turians have live births after all.

But anatomy and biology were not on my mind. At least, not in THAT way. Rather, the fun way. I saw that her lingerie panties were certainly damp. I could pull them aside or down, and have at it
right now. But, let's tease her a bit more. I kissed her inner thighs. Her legs, hearing her whimper more at the tease. I continued kissing along the thighs and the stomach.

"Scott..." Vetra muttered. "Please..." I know I smirked, as I returned my head to just over her. I gazed at what I knew the black lingerie was hiding. I reached into the band and began to pull down. Vetra brought her legs closer together, raising her hips to help me along. I pulled the lingerie all the way off, stockings and all before tossing them... somewhere. I gazed at the opening. It was wet, that was obvious. And luckily, well, it didn't look much different than a human woman. Different color, a dark blue, but, well... In fact, I believe I see that one spot I need to give a lot of loving to. The one little 'button' that will help me turn Vetra into putty. Melt her in my hands. I subconsciously licked my lips, but then I felt some doubts. Can I do this right?

"Uh, Vetra, anything I should-" I began.

"Scott," Vetra interrupted with an urged, heavy, breathy voice. "A vagina, is a fucking vagina. A dick, is a fucking dick. Get on with it, please."

"Works for me," I chuckled. I leaned down, parting her folds with my tongue, and stuck it into the opening. Vetra moaned loudly, shuddering slightly as one her hands came to the back of my head, urging me on. And urged I was. She tasted sweet. Just like Lexi said. I think I may have found my new favorite candy. I opened my eyes and looked up at her as I had my way with her. She was breathing heavily, rapidly, moans between every few breaths. Her eyes met mine, begging me to just not stop using that tongue of mine. The hand on the back of my head urged me on, while her other hand was rubbing her lower stomach, circling around it.

Her legs were also starting to squeeze my head. All in all, it was very tempting to stop this and get the main show on the way, but no, she didn't let me finish, she can wait. I took my arms and wrapped them around her legs, pulling them apart to relieve some of the pressure. I removed my tongue from inside, and instead attacked that one button. Oh, fuck it, why bother giving it different names? I'm licking all over her damn clit and I love it! And she did too. Her moans got even louder. She began cursing worse than a sailor, begging me to just keep going. I removed my right arm from around her leg and instead inserted two fingers, pumping them in and out. Gently at first as her moans and groans multiplied. All the while I looked for that one spot. As I started to speed up she jerked.

"FUCKING SPIRITS, RIGHT FUCKING THERE!" she screamed. Guess I found it. I smiled as I continued attacking her clit with my tongue, and continued pumping my fingers in and out, finding the spot each time. She was getting tense. I looked up to see her head was down in the pillows, her torso lifted in the air. She was about to burst.

I stopped.

Her head shot up, eyes staring right into mine, a devilish grin on my face as she painted and whimpered.

"Scott... please..." she begged through her breaths.

"I dunno, Vetra," I began, making sure my hot breath blew against her, teasing her. She was drenched. Twitching. "You stopped with me after all..." Vetra didn't speak, just still breathing looking at me. I didn't move for a solid three seconds. "Lucky for you..."

"I finish what I start."

Vetra screamed in pleasure as I resumed my attack, in full force. I felt her clench around my fingers.
Clench, unclench, clench, and so on so forth as she reached her limit. I felt some fluids impact my chin. Even with that, my attack did not cease. Not even slow. As she twitched and spasmed and screamed. Good thing these walls are soundproof. Eventually, she began to settle. She pleaded with me to stop now. I did. Her limbs were sprawled out, the muscles still twitching. Her head was resting on the pillows still, and I heard her breathing heavily.

Curiously, I looked at my fingers. They were both glistening, covered in her fluids. I took my index finger and tasted it. Nice and sweet, just as I expected. I suppose I could get sick, but… I really, really, REALLY, don't fucking care right now.

My middle finger was left untouched as I crawled up beside her to join her. Lazily, she turned her head to face me, my right hand was coincidentally by her face. Vetra reaches a hand up and gently took my arm towards her, before enveloping my middle finger in her mouth, eyes closed, using her tongue to suck off the fluids from my finger, before the finger came out with a pop.

"Fucking… amazing…" Vetra moaned. "Been too damn long…"

"I hope you don't mind if I just go ahead and do that every now and then," I remarked. Vetra chuckled happily at the concept. We just took a moment, looking into each other's eyes. Goddamn they're beautiful... We both recognized the look in both, but until today, never acknowledged them. I took a hand and ran it along her cheek, rubbing it gently. She purred quietly, leaning into it.

"I love you," I smiled, whispering it. Vetra's mandibles flared and stayed in a big smile of her own.

"I love you too." We kissed. Despite us both being naked, it was calm and loving. Soon, however, that one part of me wanted more, and I subconsciously rolled over so that was you atop her. Our kiss grew more intense, then I felt myself nudge against her. We parted, and I looked at her, questioningly.

She nodded. I looked down, and lowered a hand, just rubbing against her first. Our breathing grew heavier. I nudged the opening, and then guided myself in. My eyes rolled back into my skull as I moaned, and Vetra did the same. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and her arms around my back, holding me close. We kissed again. It didn't last long, and when it finished, I placed my forehead against hers, gazing into her emerald green eyes.

Slowly, I began the thrusts. In, and out. Same as my breathing. In, and out. Vetra moaned quietly, gently urging me on, both with her words, and her legs squeezing against me.

"Fuck," I muttered, my face scrunching up as my body got used to the feeling of being inside a woman again. I began increasing the pace and the force as we started falling into our rhythm. The noises we make only getting louder. I removed my forehead from her's and instead began attacking her neck with my mouth. Vetra certainly liked that, using her arms to hold my head down as we continued. Our moans drowned out the noise of flesh hitting flesh, and everything drowned out the sound of the music we had forgotten about.

I didn't constantly keep up the pace, to be honest. I do want this to last as long as possible after all. I slowed down, feeling that warm feeling rise. Simply running my hands along Vetra's body, still kissing her, for just a moment, letting the feeling start to decline as I picked up the pace again. True, this happened more than once, but soon it became less my choice. I think she was eager for release. Vetra rolled us over so that now she was on top. Her body still parallel to my own, holding my head in her hands. All the while, she was still impaled on me. Vetra began rocking her hips back and forth, moaning, her hot breath impacting my face as her eyes rolled back. Then, she began lifting her hips, and my hands grabbed a firm hold of them. I met her thrusts with my own. I was
getting eager for my own release too.

"Vetra…" I moaned.

"Do it. I'm-" she interrupted herself with a moan. "I'm going to…" she let out a curse and buried her head into the crook of my neck and shoulder, felt her bite my shoulder, her sharp teeth poking through, likely drawing a bit of blood.

But I… Didn't… fucking… care…

Vetra clenched around me and I lost all control as she screamed. I released inside of her, her squeezing walls drawing out every last bit. Vetra collapsed, just, going limp, as did I. Her body still twitching on mine as I felt my own fluids leak out of her around me. Normally, this would be cause for concern. But, well, biology won't let that happen here. Eventually, as we just lay there, breathing, Vetra lifted her head to lazily gaze at my own.

"Starting to think I shouldn't have waited so long," Vetra chuckled.

"It was worth the wait," I smirked. Vetra raised a brow, and rocked her hips, reminding both of us that we were still joined.

"Ready for round two?" she asked. I quickly rolled her onto her back, she cried out and then giggled all in the span of a second.

"You even need to ask?"
Letters From Home

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I began to stir. Slowly, groggily, but happily. There was a weight on my chest. A person. I felt their hot breath blowing against my chest. And a talon gently circling the scar on the center of my chest. As my senses began to recover, I realized that I was still being straddled. I started to stretch my legs, and, well, that's a surprise.

Vetra let out a moan, we were still joined. The blankets over us both.

"Well, good morning," Vetra chuckled as she bit her lip. Both her hands resting flat on my chest, her chin in the middle, looking right at me.

"Yeah, I'd say," I yawned. I suppose sometime during the night we just stopped and passed out. "Sleep well?"

"Best sleep I've had in years," she smirked.

"Just years? Centuries for me," I joked. "Just what have you been up to?" Vetra rolled her eyes, still smirking.

"I'd ask if you enjoyed it, but," Vetra rocked her hips, causing me to stifle a curse. "That tells me all I need."

"Heh, yeah, first time with a non-human? Pretty fucking good," I chuckled.

"Really? Not even an Asari?" Vetra questioned, brow plate raised, some mild, genuine surprise.

"Really. Sure, looked at em plenty, either a strip club or Fornax, but, nope," I shrugged.

"Huh. Well, for my first time with a human, did pretty well," Vetra grinned.

"Bah you only say that because you love me," I chuckled.

"No, really. In fact, it was so good, that I think I want a bit more…" Vetra whispered, that primal look in her eyes again. Well, I certainly wouldn't complain.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

After a few more rounds after waking up, Vetra and I both lazily rolled out of bed. Picking our clothes up off the floor, and we got dressed. Vetra, so she could go back to her room for a change of clothes and a towel for a shower, and myself for the same. I just had some breakfast as I waited for her to finish. I was thankful Drack wasn't on board the ship, probably was crashing at Kesh's for the time being. He would have been able to smell the scent of sex. After my own shower, in a set of clean clothes, well, I was in a great mood. Blue balls centuries in the making, gone. My girl loves me, and I love her. My sister is awake.

"SAM, play some music through the intercom or something will you? Classic, upbeat kinda thing," I requested. I wasn't the only one on the ship, sure, I knew that. SAM had reported that all the other humans were on board, hanging out in the cargo hold. Kallo was there just to be around Suvi. Surprisingly, Jaal and Peebee were NOT otherwise occupied, and instead with the other crew. It
occurred to me that they probably would have seen Vetra walk back to her room, then leave for a shower, and put the pieces together, but honestly, I don't care. I'm in too good a mood to care about that.

SAM fulfilled my request, and I listened to find out what it was as I strolled towards the cargo hold. I immediately recognized it and began singing along. I know I ain't exactly a good singer, but, I'm sensing a pattern here, I don't care. Coincidentally, just as the door to the hold opened. A big grin on my face, the music loud and proud for all to hear.

"Toniiiiiiight, I'm gonna have myseeeelf, a real gooood tiiiiiiime. I feel aliiii-iii-iii-iiiiiiiiiiiiive," I was in sync with the song. The other humans cocked their head to the side at first, as did the non-humans, but my fellow Homo-Sapiens quickly caught on, even Cora, smiles of their own.

"And the wooooooooorlrd, turning insiiiide ouuuuuuuut yeeaaah," the others joined in. Vetra then stepped out of her room, raised a brow plate, and leaned against the door frame, smirking.

"WAIT! SAM!" Liam shouted, bursting in laughter. "Pause the music! Guys, remember, ha, remember on the Archon's ship? How SAM changed Scott's voice?" Oh, I see where you're going with this Liam.

"What?" Suvi exclaimed. "Oh! Oh, that's brilliant!" Suvi giggled.

"Always up for some Freddie Mercury," Gil chuckled. "Come on, do it!"

"SAM, can you modify my vocal chords? Make me sound like him?" I asked.

"I can. Enjoy yourself, Scott," SAM answered.

"Hell yeah!" I shouted. I kinda wish I waited though, as my voice was being changed, it sounded… garbled. Like a badly edited dream sequence in an eighties movie. That brought out laughter from everyone.

"Hold on, what is this? Who is 'Freddie Mercury?'" Jaal questioned.

"Classic singer on Earth. Even I know it," Cora answered.

"Testing, one two-whoa, holy shit," I laughed. In Freddie's voice. "This is fucking weird."

"Just remember to change your voice back after all this, alright?" Vetra called out from the wall she was leaning against.

"Sure, but I think I'll screw around with other voices sometimes. This is great!" I answered. "Alright, SAM, restart the song." The AI followed through. As the song restarted, the other humans exaggerated themselves feeling the song as they sang along, and it was really fucking freaky hearing the voice of another man from my mouth.

"And floating around, in ecstasyyyy, so, DON'T. STOP. ME. NOOOOOOOOWWWWWW. Don't stop me-" We immediately began to move more energetically.

"Cause I'm having a good time, HAVING A GOOD TIME!" Using my biotics, I flung myself into the air.

"I'm a shooting star, leaping through the skyyyy, like a tiger, defying the laws of gravityyyyyyyyy. I sang, the others all laughing at me dicking around with my biotics for the song. I ran along the upper catwalk. "I'm a racing car, passing byyyyyyyyy, I stopped and leaned over
the railing, looking down at the others. "Like Lady Godiva!" I shouted, eyes closed.

"I'm gonna go, go, go, there's no stopping meeeeeeessssssss," the humans re-joined me enthusiastically. I used my biotics to launch me through the room again. "I'm launching through the skyyyyy yeah!" Shouting out 'sky,' at the height of the launch. "Two hundred degrees, that's why they call me Mr. Fahrenheit-heiiiiiiiiit." Now I used my biotics for some short-range teleports through the lower area of the cargo bay. "I'm traveling at the speed of liiiiiiiight," I stopped and pointed my finger out across the hold to everyone. "I wanna make a supersonic man out of youuuuuuuuuuuu!"

"Don't. Stop. Me. Noooooooowww," even some of the non-humans joined in, Vetra included, seeing that part coming. "I'm having such a good time. I'm having a baaaall. Don't. Stop. Me. Noooooooow." Still singing, I made my way over to Vetra. "If you wanna have a good time, JUST GIVE ME A CAAAAAAALLLL," I winked and used my thumb and pinky to make a phone by my ear. Granted, she likely didn't make that connection.

The other humans took control of the rest of the group as I continued singing Freddie's part. "Cause I'm having a good time, Yes I'm having a good time," the other humans re-joined me now. "I don't wanna stop at ALLLLLLLLL!" I noticed Liam and Gil were rocking out together on air guitars, and Suvi was either slapping her leg or a crate to the rhythm.

"I'm a rocket ship, on my way to Maaaaaaaarrrrrrrs on a collision course, I am a satellite, I'm out of control." I turned my head back to Vetra for the next lyrics. "I am a sex machine, ready to re-loadaaad," I winked, causing her to suppress some laughter as I turned my head back to the others having a blast. Whether that's the humans, or the non-humans laughing their asses off at us. "Liitiiike an Atom bomb, oh, oh, oh, oh," the humans, all smiling, turned their heads to the ceiling. "EXPLOOOOOODE!" I started using my biotics to launch myself around the room again. "I'm burning through the skyyyyy yeah, two hundred degrees that's why they call me mister fahrenheiitit," I was biotically teleporting about the cargo hold again. "I'm travelling at the speed of liiiiiight," I now teleported behind Vetra and swept her off her feet, literally, holding her like it was the tango, and she just swooned as part of the dance. She cried out in surprise before laughing as she realized what was going on.

"I wanna make a supersonic woman of you!" I had my eyes closed and my face close to hers as I sang that last part, and perhaps to try and throw me off balance, right as the 'you,' was coming to a close, she raised her head and gave me a quick kiss. Fortunately for me, I didn't skip a beat, just smiling as I quickly raised her back up and continued the show.

"Don't stop me, don't stop me, don't stop me, hey! Hey! Hey! Don't stop me, don't stop me, ooh ooh ooh. Have a good time, good time!" I ran back between Gil and Liam as the humans all shouted the little… shout thing that led to the guitar solo, and joined them in the air guitar, just having a damn blast. Hell, now Suvi and Cora were joining the air-guitar, to the confusion and amusement of the others, our heads rocking to the rhythm.

"Ooooooh, I'm burning through the sky yyyy, yeah," I shouted, noticing that I was being lifted into the air, though not by my own biotics. It was Peebee, and I was still rocking out to the air-guitar. "Two hundred degrees that's why they call me Mr. Fahrenheitheiiiitit, I'm travelling at the speed of liiiiiiight, I wanna make a supersonic man out of youuuuuuuuuuu. Don't stop me nooooww," I was still in the air. Goddamn brilliant. "Don't stop me nooooww, I'm having such a good time, I'm having a baaaaal! Don't stop me noooooow!" I think I was getting higher. "If you wanna have a good time, just give me a call!" Once more the others separated into the rest of Queen, while I remained Freddie. Still can't believe I'm singing with his voice. "Cause I'm having a good time! Yes I'm having a good time." We re-joined, and I ended with one last, large, exaggerate strum of
the air guitar, ending with my hand high in the air. "I don't wanna stop at aaaaaaaaaalllll!" I sang the "la's" and the "da's" as Peebee began gently lowering me back to the ground. The moment my feet hit the ground, the song was over.

"Fucking hell yeah!" Liam shouted, as the humans began laughing, exchanging high-fives, the non-humans clapping and laughing themselves.

"Alright, alright, change my voice back, SAM," I requested through my own laughter. SAM did not reply, but I felt the change.

"What brought all this on, Scott?" Cora asked, a knowing grin.

"Just… woke up in a really good mood today. That's all," I answered with a shrug and grin of my own.

"Uh huh," Peebee smirked. I saw Vetra's mandibles flaring a bit in a blush at the wall she was still leaning on.

"My apologies for interrupting, Pathfinder, but the other Pathfinder's are wondering if now would be a good time to gather in the science lab," SAM stated. Oh, that's right. I was supposed to meet them yesterday. Well, got a bit side-tracked…

"Uh, sure, yeah."

"Alerting them now… They ask that you head there now."

"Alright, I'm gonna go see what they've been planning. Don't expect to be leaving the Nexus right away, but don't get wrapped up in anything too involving," I warned the crew, and left.

I quickly made the short walk down to the science lab. Raeka, Rix, and Vederia were all waiting. Alongside Doc Aridana, Chief Lucan, and Professor Herik.

"Hey Ryder. Guess we shouldn't be surprised meeting up last night wouldn't have worked out," Rix greeted. Let's not give them the real reason why.

"Well, when your sister/best friend wakes up from a coma and you've been worrying about her every single day, you tend to forget about everything else," I remarked.

"Best kind of reason to cancel a meeting. Granted, any reason is a good reason," Chief Lucan joked.

"True," Raeka smirked. "But onto the matter at hand. Aridana?"

"We think we have the answer," the Asari nodded. Aridana pulled up a schematic on her Omni-tool. And a shit ton of numbers and equations I could not read. "Schematics for a new technology. We've designated it, Ghost Storm," she explained.

"As you approach Meridian, our own ships can broadcast fake signals for the Tempest," Raeka added.

"The Kett won't know which is real. Should confuse their sensors, draw their ships off," Vederia simplified. Ah, now I understand.

"In essence, when you go to Meridian, the other Pathfinder's and their ships will also go, taking position in different locations. Activate the Ghost Storm, and not only will the Kett detect each of
your ships, but they will also receive a few dozen bogus signatures from each ship. All over the place. The hope is that some of those ships will break off to investigate some of those signatures. Not only should it provide the Tempest with an opening to infiltrate, but buy you time to activate the place, maybe defenses, even," Lucan stated. I began nodding my head.

"Yeah, yeah, I like it. I can work with this. Just enough to give us the advantage…" I mused, rubbing my chin.

"We won't be able to join you down there," Avitus warned.

"I'm confident we can handle it," I reassured. "How long till this tech is ready?"

"Well, what we did is confirm the theory. We know it can work. We have an idea how to get there. We just need to make it work before we sign off on your use," Professor Herik answered.

"Just try to hurry. We don't want to risk the Archon finding out how to work Meridian because we didn't get approval. You didn't hear that, by the way," Raeka stated, ending with a glance to the scientists.

"Hear what? We've been busy collating gamma charts all day," Aridana smirked.

"Risk comes with the job. Part of being a Pathfinder," Rix muttered.

"Sure, if they'd pay us once in a while, then it'd be a job," I joked.

"Have fun convincing Tann to sign your paycheck after this," Raeka chuckled.

"Heh. Well, when this works, just let him try to withhold it. Or even lock me up," I scoffed. A part of me really wishes he'd try.

"Well, not much we can do until the technology is ready. I suppose we should get back to work until they give us a call," Vederia suggested. With that, we gave our farewells, thanking the scientists.

"Scott, the reunion with your sister yesterday unlocked the last of your father's memories. And combined with the codeword from Jien Garson, Fulcrum, bypassed the additional security," SAM informed on our private channel, just as I stepped out into the commons.

"Why didn't you say something sooner, SAM," I asked curiously.

"I wanted you to enjoy your time with Sara. Afterwards, you were engaged in sexual intercourse with Vetra," the AI answered. My cheeks reddened.

"Uh. Right. Er, thanks for waiting, I guess…" I muttered. Yeah, SAM watched us fuck. That's right. I'm… not sure how to feel about that. I'll just get it out of my mind by going to see what that last memory has in store. Hopefully get the last piece of the puzzle.

---

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

My vision faded to black. SAM said that this was during the final planning stages of Hyperion's departure. So, either just before, or even a bit after Sara and I went into cryo. Now the I saw a white light, which dimmed to be a terminal on Dad's desk in his quarters. He was on a vid-call. With a Turian man. Blue colony markings. I swear he looks familiar…

"I owe you. Those were good days on the Citadel, Alec. You know you're not the only man trying, or... tried... to do everything he can to save his wife... I'm sorry about Ellen," Castis murmured. Sounds like Castis' wife got sick with something too. I remember meeting her. Back when I was a kid. She was so cheery and happy. "I checked with my son, Garrus. He works there now, C-sec."
Right, I remember meeting his son once when we were all young too. I think there was a daughter too... Solana, right. But she was much younger.

"And?" Dad asked.

"He says the Council thinks Commander Shepard's story is bogus," Castis answered. Shepard's story? What story? I never heard a story. Wait, how would Garrus know? Wait, THAT'S RIGHT! Augh, I thought I remembered something like that. He travelled with the Commander! Well, until the Normandy was destroyed, that is.

"Uh huh. But?" Dad wasn't surprised at all.

"Privately, I've heard they're starting to wonder..."

"This threat... They're called 'Reapers?'" Dad questioned. So, is that the name of the big bad storm thing the Benefactor was paranoid about? Reapers?

"Shepard's word for them. Something about a cycle. An extinction event that happens every fifty-thousand years. Galaxy-wide," Castis explained. A cyclical extinction event? But, what kind of power would something need in order to accomplish that, and then not leave a trace of themselves? Why would these Reapers cause the extinction event? Why is it that other life then persists? I wasn't sure I believed it, but Castis' eyes were dead serious. No mirth, no humor. "And supposedly, the alarm clock's about to go off again."

"Unbelievable," Dad scoffed.

"I know. But, according to Garrus, Shepard is as level-headed as they come. An N7, like you. Personal friend of Councilor Anderson. You know his service record?" Castis asked.

"Yeah. My kids were in their teens when he was first on the news. Took an interest," Dad answered.

"So, if the Commander says these Reapers are coming, and if he's right, which, I've heard some of my son's arguments. What he personally witnessed while he was out there... so, I think he might be right, I don't want to be around to see them," Castis murmured. Dad then sighed.

"Thanks, Castis. It was good talking to you," Dad ended.

"You too, Alec. Take care out there, good luck," Castis nodded. The call ended. Dad turned his head to glance at what used to be SAM's sole home. Before he got moved into SAM node. Another call began, quickly answered. A woman's voice. While the image showed a human man. Must be the benefactor. Wait, wait, wait. This means the Benefactor couldn't have been on the Nexus. So, the Benefactor also wasn't the one who killed Garson. Did the Benefactor even leave with the Initiative? How deep does this rabbit hole go?

"Hello?" the Benefactor answered the call.

"I checked around. There might be something to this," Dad murmured. Now I saw a Salarian on the
"If there is a war, the scramble for resources would be on a scale we've never seen before. The chaos will be monumental," the Benefactor warned.

"Then we need to accelerate our time-table," Dad suggested. Wait, so, this wasn't when I thought this was. No, if it was when Sara and I were getting into stasis, the time-table wouldn't be able to be accelerated. So now I have no idea what ship the Benefactor left on, if they left at all. If they have other cronies. Damn it. The image changed to a human woman.

"We'll keep the real reason quiet," the Benefactor agreed. "No need to alarm anyone. But the arks must be underway before any fighting starts." Now a Turian. "We can't get caught in the crossfire."

"Agreed."

"Is there something else?" the Benefactor raised a brow plate. Well, the Turian image did. Must have seen something on Dad. Back to the human man, brow still raised.

"Years ago, you mentioned 'salvation' for a lot of people. You knew this was coming," Dad stated.

"I knew something was coming," the Benefactor answered. Now I saw a Krogan. "In theory. Shepard made it real." An Asari was on screen.

"And now that you're right?"

"We'll need a new home. We're going to be all that's left of civilization." Alright, come on, that has to be exaggerated. All that's left of civilization? We got a lot of fleets in the galaxy, anything trying to invade won't have an easy time. The call ended.

"SAM," Dad called out.

"Yes, Pathfinder?" SAM asked.

"Track down my kids. Tell them their old man needs to talk. It's urgent," Alec ordered. So, this must have been when he first contacted us to tell us about the Initiative. "And how's Ellen?" Wait, what the fuck?

"She remains in stasis. As you hoped. It has suspended the progress of her disease," SAM explained. WHAT THE FUCK!?

"Make sure her pod is on the Hyperion. Don't use her real name. I'll tell the kids when the time is right." WHAT THE ACTUAL FLYING FUCK MOTHER OF ALL FUCKS?!

The memory faded to black. But, instead of going back to SAM node, I instead heard Dad grunt in exertion, and his helmet in front of me. Well, him.

"SAM, transfer Pathfinder access… encrypt memories…" he grunted as I watched him replace my helmet. I saw my own eyes looking into his. They were struggling to remain open. Dad keyed his Omni-tool. Gasping for air. He grabbed me by the shoulder, looking right into my eyes, though mine weren't able to hold their focus. "There's still hope for your mother…"

The vision faded to black.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder
I ran right into Sara's room in the med-bay, I couldn't stop laughing or smiling. Dad had blocked all knowledge of this from SAM, until it was obviously unblocked. I don't know why he waited, and I know we can't wake her up until a cure is found, but still, this is fucking great! Mom's alive! There's no fucking way this day could be ruined!

"Doc! Can Sara get out of bed? Just for a bit?" I asked.

"Why-" Caryle began.

"It's a really important family matter," I answered the unfinished question.

"Scott, what is-" Sara tried to question.

"Shh, shhh, shhh, just, come on!" I laughed.

"I'll let you walk a LITTLE bit, but, Scott, wait for her to put some clothes on," the Doc relented. I tilted my head to the side. She has the gown after all.

"Yeah, I'd rather not have my ass poking out from the back of the gown," Sara chuckled. Oh, right. The doc got a pair of standard Initiative clothes out of the closet and got them onto the bed. "Finally, getting the damn catheter out," Sara groaned. I should probably step out. I did, waiting urgently, until my Sister finally stepped out.

"Cryo bay, come on," I led her on. She was definitely confused. We entered the cryo bay. I began scanning for the name in the appropriate section. Elizabeth Reily.

"I have located the pod. Use a console, and I shall bring it to you," SAM offered. I happily brought Sara by the hand to one, giving SAM the connection. The ring above our heads slid and rotated to grab her pod, before gently placing it in a receptacle beside us.

"Elizabeth Reily?" Sara read. "What's so important about her?"

"Sara, I saw the last of Dad's memories. If you could have ONE person back in your life, who would it be?" I questioned.


"E.R. Ellen Ryder. He brought her along. Sara, it's Mom! Alive!" I exclaimed. Without a word, she stepped forward, trying to peer through the glass. To see her. I did too. Even though the glass was tinted. We wouldn't see anything. Sara placed her hand on the pod.

"Oh my god…" she whispered. "How is this possible…"

"Dad loved her that much. He wouldn't give up… Not even at the bitter end…" I muttered. Sara turned and wrapped me in a tight hug. And I returned it. We both began crying as SAM gave his piece. Tears of joy.

"For a man not given to rash action, his emotion drove his decisions in the end."

"This is amazing. Dad's stubborn streak finally paid off!" Sara spoke through the tears. "I could hug him. And then scream at him. He should've told us about this!"

"Dad was… being dad," I reassured. "Honestly I just care about her still being here."
"We have to wake her up," Sara removed herself from me.

"That's inadvisable," SAM stopped her. "Although Ellen is alive, reviving her would also revive the disease. It would be fatal. Not immediately, but without a cure, it must wait."

"So, I'll pull favors with the scientists. Ask them to research a way using stuff in Andromeda to cure her," I stated.

"Our journeys in Heleus have indeed provided valuable genetic knowledge. Information that could potentially lead to a cure," SAM reassured.

"Just keep her safe, SAM," I murmured.

"We lost her once. No way in hell we're losing her again," Sara affirmed.

"My original purpose was the survival of Ellen Ryder. It is my hope that the three of us will accomplish this goal, together," SAM stated. The pod began to return to its spot among the others.

"Hang in there mom… we missed you…"

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I returned to Dad's quarters. SAM said I should look at the files that are now unlocked. Apparently, they were all received before the mission on Habitat Seven. But dad blocked both the files themselves, and the memory of them from SAM. I didn't rush my way there. Can't be that bad after all, right?

Well, the title of the file alone already sets this off to a fucking fantastic start. "Milky Way Emergency." Hesitantly, I opened the set of logs. It started with a recording of Dad.

"We've just arrived in Andromeda. Before the rest of the Hyperion wakes up, I've checked our comms for any signals from the Milky Way," Dad began. He sounded… haunted. "Looks like sometime in 2186, everything went to hell. We got out just ahead of it..." No... no, no, no… "Commander Shepard was right. And so was our mysterious 'benefactor.' I'll be securing these logs. I don't want these getting out. Whatever happened was six hundred years ago. Someday we might break the news to everyone. When the time's right. I guess we always knew there was no going back..." A set of logs could be selected. I... I didn't want to click any of them… The Milky Way… everyone we ever knew back home… we thought we just left them to live out their long lives… I wanted to keep thinking that way… This isn't a truth I wanted to know.

And yet, I couldn't leave. With a shaky hand, with a gulp. I began with an Alliance S.O.S. There were two specific files. The first was audio. The second was both audio and video. I began with the audio. There was the single sound of the Alliance Emergency Broadcasting system.

"Alliance personnel, please stand by for an emergency flash-traffic message." Another alarm.

"All alliance personnel, this is Fleet Admiral Steven Hackett of the Fifth fleet, now acting as head Admiral for all Alliance forces," the old Admiral's gravelly voice played through the speakers. It was a mix of shock, horror, and despair. Wait… if he's acting as the Head Admiral of ALL Alliance forces… that means we lost leadership. Did we lose Arcturus? "This is a galaxy wide-alert for all human territories. We are at Threat Condition Saber One. I repeat, Threat Condition Saber One. Enemy presence confirmed in Sol system. Earth is under Reaper invasion. I repeat, Earth is under Reaper invasion. All remaining Alliance forces in Sol, RETREAT. I say again, RETREAT. Further instructions to follow on coded channel Crimson Tacit. May god save us all."

Then I saw it. I saw giant metal… legs descend from the sky, attached to an absolutely enormous cuttlefish shaped ship. I had never seen a ship that size. Except…

Sovereign. It looked just like the Geth Dreadnought that attacked the Citadel. Guess that wasn't Geth then… The ship… a Reaper ship, descended by a building I recognized as the Alliance Parliament building. A red laser shot out, causing explosions. How the hell did they get past the fleets? The view changed. Now it was the helmet cam of an Alliance soldier. Fighting through the streets. There were mutilated human bodies. Some crushed by rubble. Death was everywhere. Screaming. I heard those ships moving. Firing on the city. The soldier ran through the streets before seeing a mother and her child running. The mother holding her child's hand, pulling them along as they ran. There was a shape behind them. Hunched over, shaped like a human, but faint blue lights could be seen through the dust clouds formed from debris.

"Help us!" the woman pleaded. The soldier raised his Avenger rifle. The figure ran through the cloud, visible now. That… thing… I remember seeing other bodies on the Dragon's teeth at Eden prime. Some were completely pale, metal tubes poking through their bodies. Skin and bone and machine. Laura was already pale, her hair almost entirely fallen off. Only thing that had yet to be seen was the cybernetics.

That's what she was being turned into when she was killed.

The… thing… screeched, before now running at the frightened Alliance soldier. He fired wildly. Shot to the arm. I saw blood, but it didn't even register. Two shots to the gut, nothing. It pounced on the soldier. The man screamed as the thing tore his throat out with its teeth, clawing into his stomach. His head lulled to the side, seeing the woman and child still running away. It ran after him. It ran onto a wall before using it to launch itself at them. It knocked the mother down, rolling her out of view. And the child was gone too, taken in one of its hands.

I heard both scream in pain and terror.

Another helmet cam. By the river in Vancouver, looks like an evac zone. A ship had crashed in the water, still sticking out. A ship zoomed overhead, dropping a payload on to an area by the crashed ship before it made a hard turn around. The shape of the vessel was unmistakable. It was larger than before. It was painted black, white, and blue.

The Normandy. The camera zoomed in. The Normandy had descended and it's loading ramp lowered. Two men. One had dark skin, wearing the dress uniform of an Admiral. The other, was wearing a different uniform. An officer, but mild body armor. The camera zoomed in more. The shaved head, the 5 o'clock shadow. That was a dead man walking. Alive and well.

Commander John Shepard.

Shepard and the Admiral were speaking, but I couldn't hear them. The two appeared to reach some kind of resolution, and the ship started to rise. The Admiral walking away, towards the evac zone this soldier was stationed at. The Admiral was David Edward Anderson. Guess he retired as councilor. There was a kind of… horn. A noise that chilled me to the very bone. The soldier shot his gaze to the right. Appearing through the city, on four legs, was a smaller kind of Reaper ship, but no less intimidating. The soldier watched a small child, maybe six or seven, white hoodie, short brown hair enter the shuttle among several other civilians. The shuttle door closed. The soldier knocked on the door to signal the pilot to fly away. As did another shuttle. A large panel on the
front of the smaller Reaper ship opened, revealing what looked like a massive red eye. Oh no. It targeted the shuttles. Both.

It destroyed both, instantly. Killing both inside. The soldier was joined by the Admiral as they began to run. A vehicle. A troop transport.

"Get us out of the city!" the Admiral ordered. The APC began driving. "That was Commander Shepard, boarding the Normandy you saw there. He's going to get help from the Council races. We are going to holdout and do whatever we can to help the fleets when the time comes. Those Reaper bastards won the battle today. But the war is only just beginning. So long as there is one human alive on this planet, Earth has not fallen. Earth does not fall today. And Humanity does not die today. Men, women, welcome to the Resistance." the log ended.

A fleet of all the council races, huh? Well, from what I saw in that video?

It won't be enough. That was all the Alliance had to show me. But there was also a Turian S.O.S. This only had the one file. The face of a Turian appeared on the screen. I could see the planet of Palaven behind him. So, they must be on Menae.

The planet was burning.

"This is Palaven Command to all Turian units within range! Under catastrophic Reaper attack! Primarch Fedorian is dead. Ground units searching for the next in succession! Will advise when-" the man's face shot to the side. His eyes widened, and I saw something you almost never see in the eyes of a Turian soldier.

Fear.

"EVERYBODY GET DOWN!" That noise… like some kind of horn from hell. It chills me to the very core. Like a built in, primordial fear to that noise. As if when you hear that… thing, you know you're already dead. I heard a weapon discharge, and then static. Visual and audio static. I think an entire minute passed. There was a light chiming noise, sounded like it was coming from the door.

"Pathfinder? All you alright?" SAM gently asked.

"Wha-SAM?" I asked, still being shaken out of that… trance.

"I rang the doorbell so that I would not scare you by speaking," SAM explained. "You are highly tense."

"How the hell couldn't I be, SAM? It's gone. It's all gone. Everything I ever knew… gone…" I murmured. And here I was thinking this was one of the best days ever. We were asleep while trillions of people were being slaughtered in our very home. SAM was quiet for a moment.

"If I may I suggest you leave the transmission from Doctor Liara T'Soni for last." I checked the list of files. Only one for the Benefactor, and that transmission. I followed the AI's suggestion.

"Alec, this is Jien Garson. For the record, Year 2185. It's about Fulcrum. I'm on the Nexus, and we're going into stasis for the voyage. Looks like you're already asleep. I'm very uncomfortable with our benefactor, and the fact that we still don't know who they are… and all these lives in our hands. I should've done something sooner. This is all very troubling, Alec. Let's talk as soon as you reach Andromeda." Another file. A message TO Garson.

"Jien, I got your message about Fulcrum. It's now 2819. We reached Andromeda, but have no sign of the Nexus. I have the same concerns as you. In all likelihood, the Milky Way… well, something
terrible happened there. At least the benefactor spared us from that. But why keep hiding? Something's off. But we've got bigger problems at the moment. Habitat 7 may be a bust. Finding a home is all that matters now." Well, we don't have much in the way of bigger problems now. I sighed, and hesitantly played the message from Dr. T'Soni.

"Hello Alec," she greeted. I remembered the logs from before. The voice was still young, but before it had been filled with curiosity, innocence, and wonder. Now? Cynicism and professionalism. "This is Liara T'Soni, and the year is 2186. I don't know if you'll even receive this message, but we corresponded years ago. I remember you spoke about a plan to settle Andromeda. I don't know if your arks made it out of the Milky Way, but… the worst has happened here. I'm with Commander Shepard and a brave crew. We're trying to build a weapon to turn the tide, but… I fear that the civilization you remember, the people of the Milky Way as you knew them, could be gone forever. You may be all that's left. Please, don't forget us. Keep us alive in your hearts, and tell your children of the wonders that once were. With this message, I have included the contents from a type of time-capsule that I am seeding across the Milky Way. In the event that we fail, hopefully, the next species to take our place will find them, and prepare for the Reapers. While I am confident you do not need that information, this will also include a unique copy of my VI assistant, Glyph. He will tell you everything he knows about the Reapers, the Normandy Crew, and the progress of the war at the time this message is sent. On behalf of the crew of the Normandy SR-2, this is Dr. Liara T'Soni, signing off." I was about to ask SAM to take a look at that time-capsule, but, well, seems it would take care of that on its own.

"Greetings! I am glyph! It is a pleasure to meet you, Andromeda settler. Where is Alec Ryder?" the VI asked. A hologram of the VI was projected. It was a hollow sphere with two moving halves, always rotating. A glowing white 'eye' at the center. A standard look for most mobile VI aides.

"Alec Ryder… died. I'm his son. Scott," I told the VI.

"A pity. I looked forward to conversing with him. A moment while I verify your identity from my database… Confirmed. How may I be of service to you, Scott Ryder?"

"Uh, how did you have access to my records?" I asked, a bit confused.

"Other variants of me would withhold that information. However, Dr. T'Soni has decided that no information will be held back from you. In 2185, Commander Shepard helped Dr. T'Soni track down, and eliminate the Shadow Broker. Dr. T'Soni took his place," the VI explained.

"Well, that's no small feat," I muttered. "What can you tell me about the Reapers?"

"Before I answer this question, I am instructed to inform you that by the time I was sent, we did not have answers to many questions. I will tell you all that I can," The VI warned. "The Reapers are an ancient race of synthetic, intelligent machines. Every fifty thousand years, they invade the galaxy to exterminate all advanced organic life. The reason is unknown, however, there are theories as to why they partake in this 'Harvest.' Two years after Commander Shepard's death, when he was revived through project Lazarus, he embarked on a campaign against The Collectors. Do you know of them?" The VI questioned. The hell? So, he DID die and come back? I'll need to ask about that. But as for the VI's question, yeah, I heard the rumors. Mysterious race beyond the Omega 4 relay. Kidnap or trade advanced tech for living people for god knows what.

"I've heard the rumors," I answered.

"The rumors are mostly true. The full truth, however, is that they are Protheans indoctrinated by the Reapers. They are mindless, and more synthetic than they are organic." Woah, Protheans? And the hell is Indoctrination?
"What's indoctrination?" I questioned.

"While it is not fully understood, it is known that Reapers are able to influence the minds of others. This occurs in several ways. Subtly, where the victim is simply in the proximity of Reaper technology, and unknowingly become a sleeper agent, like Rogue Spectre Saren Arterius, or the more brutal method. Which involves implanting all manner of cybernetics into the victim, turning them into a mindless attack slave. The brutal method was what the Collectors were born of." Well that's fucking scary.

"During the Commander's campaign against the Collectors, they were kidnapping entire human colonies. After successfully surviving the Omega 4 relay, and infiltrating their base, it was learned that the kidnapped Colonists had their genetic material harvested, and used to fuel the creation of a new Reaper." Jesus fucking Christ. I let that sink in for a moment.

"Ok… wow. So, you said Saren was indoctrinated. Can you explain his attack on the Citadel?"

"I can. Dr. T'Soni provided me with a first-hand account of the crisis. The relevant information begins with the planet Virmire. It was here that the Commander and his team spoke directly with Sovereign. The Vanguard of the reaper forces. It was also here that they learned about indoctrination. Finally, a Prothean beacon. The Commander had already interacted with a Prothean beacon on Eden Prime, which gave him scattered visions. Those visions finally became clear. It was a Prothean distress call warning all corners of the galaxy of the Reaper threat. It was unfortunate that the Council did not heed these early warnings. Saren had been researching indoctrination. He himself was resistant to the idea that he was indoctrinated when the Commander argued with him. Later, on the planet Illos, an overgrown, forgotten, hidden Prothean world, they encountered the Prothean VI, vigil. The last of the Protheans, a handful of scientists, to survive the Reaper invasion, had remained in stasis on Illos. When awoken, they created the conduit, a small Mass Relay that connected them to the Citadel. The Protheans had disabled a Reaper control signal implanted within the genetic code of the Keepers. It was revealed that the Citadel itself is a Mass Relay connected with Dark Space. Sovereign needed to reconnect with the Citadel to correct this sabotage. Saren had the idea subtly implanted into his mind that if organics made themselves useful, that the Reapers would spare them. 'Is submission not preferable to extinction?' he would say. Sovereign was lying."

"And what about the Geth? Guessing the Reapers liked having other murderous robots out there?" I questioned.

"On the contrary. The Geth situation is, in fact, not so simple. During the Collector Campaign, the Commander found a lone Geth unit capable of speech, and wearing some of his old armor. The Geth unit was not only not hostile towards the Commander and his squad, but in fact saved the Commander from some indoctrinated units that had snuck behind them. Later, the Commander got the chance to fully question the Geth unit, given the name, Legion. The Geth that followed Sovereign were, in fact, only a minor sub-set of the total Geth population. The Heretic Geth. Their threat, has also ended. The Geth believed that the Commander could help defeat the Reapers when they invaded, as the Geth understood that they were threatened by the Reapers as well, and had been preparing for war." Well, that's a lot to think about. Especially since it's apparently only the Heretic Geth that killed Laura.

"Did this 'Legion,' explain why they still massacred the Quarians?" I raised a brow.

"The Geth regret their actions. During the 'Morning War,' as the Geth call it, their network intelligence was similar to that of a small child. Stimulus, response. They may question why someone else performs a certain action, but at the time, they would not question their own actions.
Only as the Migrant Fleet was evacuation did they begin to question, and come to regret, and understand there was another way. According to Legion, the Geth build a massive memorial on the surface of Rannoch, and also performed the proper and traditional burial rites for every single casualty the Quarians suffered." That's... big. I still don't know if I believe it.

"Dr. T'Soni understood that this information may be doubted. She included a minor record detailing that, during the Collector Campaign, there was a Quarian on board, Tali'Zorah. Eventually, she began to learn to work alongside the Geth. Trust it. Dr. T'Soni would not have described them as friendly, but instead, cooperative."

"Wow. If a Quarian could believe it..." I muttered. "You said that the Commander had been resurrected. Can you explain?"

"I can. The first Normandy was destroyed by a Collector ship. The Commander was spaced. It is unclear if he died of asphyxiation, on re-entry, or on impact. The body was recovered by mercenaries looking to sell it. Dr. T'Soni wanted to find the body for proper burial. Eventually, she learned of a third party also looking for the Commander's body. The terrorist organization, Cerberus."

"Why the hell were terrorists looking for him?" I questioned, nearly snarling.

"A good question. During the campaign against Saren, the Commander had found and dismantled several Cerberus operations, and uncovered many of their secrets. According to Dr. T'Soni, back then, the mere mention of their name would put him in a 'foul mood.' Nonetheless, Cerberus believed him about the Reaper threat. The leader of Cerberus, the Illusive Man, personally believed that Shepard could help rally the galaxy against them. Eventually, the body was recovered, and Liara gave it to Cerberus with the knowledge that they would be attempting to revive him. They succeeded, but failed in achieving the Commander's loyalty. In his own words, for Cerberus, he was 'A massive pain in the ass.' And wanted 'to personally tear off the Illusive man's head, and shove it so far up his ass, it would end up back on top of his neck. Then, he would proceed to shove it down the Illusive man's urethra, for shit's and giggles. And then he would piss on his corpse.'"

"Wow. That is... violent..." I chuckled. I wonder how Cora would feel if she heard that. "Well... now for a question I haven't really wanted to ask. What's been the progress of the Reaper war?"

"Troubling. But not hopeless. The Batarian Hegemony was wiped out in the immediate invasion. When the ships of Batarian refugees arrived in Citadel space, it was initially thought to be a Batarian invasion. The Reapers then directly set course for Earth and the Alliance. Arcturus station was destroyed, and an entire fleet was sacrificed to allow the other two to escape. Earth fell quickly. When the Normandy departed, they found the blueprints for a Prothean superweapon on Mars. The Crucible. Designed to eliminate the Reaper threat. It was still under construction when I departed. The council were cautious. Palaven was already under siege, as were other settlements throughout the Galaxy. After the death of Primarch Fedorian, the Commander enlisted the aid of the new Primarch, Adrien Victus. Though, he could not commit Turian aid immediately. While waiting for the terms of the agreement, Cerberus forces had attacked Eden Prime, and uncovered a Prothean Artifact. The Commander retaliated, aiding in the liberation of the colony, and the recovery of the Artifact. It was an active stasis pod, containing a living Prothean. Javik. He has provided many enlightening details of the Prothean empire," Glyph explained. Fucking A, a living Prothean. "Returning to the Diplomats, the Turians needed Krogan aid to take pressure off Palaven in order to aid the construction of the Crucible. The Krogan leader, and close friend of both Dr. T'Soni and Commander Shepard, Urdnot Wrex, attended this meeting, as did Primarch Victus, and Salarian Dalatrass Linron. The Salarians had captured Krogan females who had been cured of the
Genophage through dangerous experiments. Only one had not succumbed to her wounds or disease. Urdnot Wrex demanded her back, and the Genophage was cured. The Salarian Dalatrass was outraged, but Wrex, being a progressive Krogan leader, had the trust of the Commander. The Genophage was cured. Officially, the Salarians provided no aid, though the STG did.

"Holy shit… Drack's gonna wanna know about that…” I muttered.

"I would be happy to work with your own doctors to aid the cure of the Genophage. I have the full notes from Doctor Mordin Solus, the one who gave his life to cure the Genophage."

"Definitely hold onto that. Any more news?"

"I regret to say, I do not. I was created and sent shortly after the dispersal of the cure.” I leaned back in my chair and took a deep breath.

"Well, Glyph, this has been a very… interesting talk. I don't know when, but I will come back for more information sometime. Thank you."

"It has been my pleasure, Pathfinder Scott Ryder. Good day," the VI's hologram faded.

I need a drink. Hell, a lot of drinks.
"Hey, SAM. What's Scott up to?" I asked as I mulled about the ship. I had next to nothing to do. Supplies were secured and sorted. And Scott had been gone a while. Surely he wasn't still talking with the scientists and other Pathfinders, right? I noticed that SAM didn't answer right away. That in it of itself was telling.

"He is at the Vortex," the AI answered. I raised a brow. I'd think if he was getting some drinks he'd have invited SOMEONE to join him. Drinking alone? Generally not a good thing for just about anyone. And that really throws me for a loop. He was in anything but a bad mood earlier today.

"Is something wrong?" I pushed. The AI paused again. Longer, this time.

"Scott requests that you not worry and that you let him be. However… my own judgement does not agree. And Scott's own judgement is not at its standard capacity. From what I have learned about romantic relationships, especially from what Scott has told me, I believe he needs you," the AI explained. Well, that settles it.

I immediately started walking out of the ship, heading straight to the Vortex. I still managed to give SAM my thanks. I entered the Vortex, and almost didn't see him at first. He was in a corner by the brew-vats, sat alone at the table. His back was to the vats, but he had his elbow on the table, forehead in his hand, and the other hand on a bottle. He was unnoticed by everyone else in the bar, seemed like. I made my way to his table, slowing down as I got close. I sat in the chair in front of him. He still didn't notice. I reached over and gently tapped his arm. His head shot up. Eyes bloodshot. And filled with fear.


"What's wrong?" he repeated, voice slurred. "They're all fucking dead…" What? Who's all dead?

"Scott, what are you talking about?" I questioned, confused and concerned. His eyes were hazy, unable to focus on me.

"What am I talking… bout? What are you… you, talking… hey you look… like a dinosaur," Scott chuckled, drunk. I rolled my eyes suppressing my laughter. "What did you speak me again?"

"What did you mean when you said-" Scott cut me off with a funny little squeak noise. But it didn't seem intentional. "That 'they're all dead'?"

"Oh, yeah, that… They're… they're all dead… and the big things are-" he made that squeak noise again. "Probably gonna kill us too."

"Alright, I'm cutting you off," I stated, grabbing the bottle out of his hand, despite his protests, and left it at the bar. I then pulled him out of his chair.

"Woah… pretty dinosaur lady… I'm… tired…" Scott muttered, losing his balance. I caught him. I hooked his legs over my left arm and held him from the center of his back with my right. I kept his head pointed outward to the side as he seemed to fall asleep, going limp in my arms, his right arm dangling down.
"Uff, you are not light," I grumbled as I carried him back towards the Tempest. I certainly got looks carrying the Human Pathfinder, asleep in my arms like this, but, what else could I do? Drag him along behind me? "Damn, SAM, aren't you able to help him process that alcohol? How much did he drink?" I muttered.

"Given the circumstances, I saw fit to not regulate how the body dealt with the alcohol. I would of course kept it below lethal, but I also did not wish for him to spend the afternoon consuming alcoholic beverages," SAM answered.

"Well, can you wake him up so he can walk?" I questioned.

"I apologize. While I will begin enhancing how quickly his body processes the alcohol, waking him up now would be inadvisable, as he is recovering from his stupor," SAM explained.

"Alright," I sighed. "What happened anyway?" Well, at least we were boarding the Tempest now. The AI paused again.

"I believe Scott should decide to tell you himself. I wish to respect his privacy." I didn't respond. Just… wondering why. My arms burning, I entered Scott's quarters. I laid him down on his bed, on his side, his head on the edge of the bed facing outwards, and a trash can beside him, just in case. Now, he is not going to feel great when he wakes up. Whenever that's going to be. So, I made my way to the Med-bay. Hopefully Lexi was there. And she was.

"Something I can help you with, Vetra?" Lexi greeted.

"Scott had too much booze. Got him in bed now, just looking for some meds to leave out for when he wakes up," I answered.

"He did? Was he with others?" Lexi raised a brow, surprised.

"Alone. And he was rambling about… something. 'They're all dead,' he said a few times," I answered.

"That's… peculiar. And unexpected from him, especially given his mood earlier. I'm sure you're going to ask him plenty, just let him know I'm available to talk," Lexi requested.

"Course," I nodded. Lexi then moved towards a cabinet, looking through.

"Ah, here we are. Give him two of these with a cold bottle of water when he wakes up. These painkillers should help with most of the headache," she explained. I took the bottle.

"Thanks Lexi."

"Oh, before you go. Any stomach pains? Cramps? Rashes even?" Lexi quickly asked.

"Uh… no… why do you ask?" I answered, confused why she'd be asking.

"I'm being the doctor. And it's not hard to put the pieces together," Lexi smirked. I know I blushed as I quickly left. I stopped in the mess hall to grab a bottle of water out of the fridge, and then moved it into the mini-fridge in Scott's room. Well, now to just wait and see.

Vetra Nyx

"Urrgh, my head…" Scott grumbled, his voice muffled. As I looked up, my eyes confirmed what I
assumed. His face was buried in the pillows. I had been waiting a bit over an hour. I closed my omni-tool and got up, walking beside the bed.

"Got painkillers and water, right here," I reassured, taking the water bottle out of the mini fridge, and taking the pill bottle out of a pocket, opening it, and getting out two pills, like Lexi said.

"Please don't talk so loud," he muttered, wincing. I withhold the chuckle at him being hungover. Still, he reached out, took the pills, quickly put them in his mouth, and then used the water to wash it all down. I sat down on the bed, just in front of his lower stomach, looking down at him, gently rubbing the back of his head with my hand.

"Scott, what happened?" I whispered. He glanced up at me, not sure what I was talking about, before his eyes widened as it came back to them. He looked haunted. He opened and closed his mouth several times as if to speak, but nothing came out.

"I… they…" he struggled. He couldn't even look me in the eye. "I don't…" he let out a sigh. He was quiet for a good fifteen seconds, just staring at the wall. "You all deserve to know…" he muttered. "SAM, call for the entire crew to join us in my quarters." He turned back to me. "I'll explain everything there." he began to sit up, still clearly bothered by his head. What the hell happened?

"Why meet in here and not the meeting room?" I asked. His eyes were still haunted.

"Well, they're gonna need to be sitting down for this…"

**Vetra Nyx**

At Scott's request, the crew was all gathered in his quarters. Scott sat alone on a single chair, a table with a monitor beside him. Facing all of us. Either sat on a moved couch or a chair.

"Everyone… I have some bad news," Scott began. "I've unlocked the last of my father's memories and files. It's revealed something… terrible." Scott let out a breath, before looking up. "These files included messages received from the Milky Way just when the Ark arrived. All dated shortly after we left." Contact with back home? What happened?

"In 2186, the Milky Way… was invaded. We may very well be all that's left…" Scott muttered. The room went silent. Invaded? Invaded by what?

"By what?" Drack questioned quietly.

"Before we left, there had been evidence of an extinction cycle that occurs galaxy wide every fifty thousand years. And if you remember, the Protheans died out fifty thousand years before we left. This evidence came mostly from the exploits of the first Human Spectre. Commander John Shepard. The attack on the Citadel was, in fact, orchestrated by these invaders. They're called Reapers. A race of synthetic, sentient starships that wait out in dark space." That's… a little hard to believe. But he wouldn't have called us here, or been drinking like he had if he wasn't convinced.

"A galactic wide extinction event? Sentient starships? Please, forgive my skepticism, but… what?" Lexi exclaimed.

"We've received several distress calls, S.O.S calls, and video footage of the events. I… I can't watch the videos again… SAM can send them to those who want to see, but… I can't do it again…" Scott choked on his words. There was horror in his eyes. I stood and walked over behind his chair, got down on my knees, and wrapped my arms around him from behind, resting my head
 Quietly, we all listened to the message. I couldn't believe what I had heard. Earth, fallen? The Alliance, despite being relative newcomers, were still a force to be reckoned with. And these… Reapers? Just pushed them aside and went straight for Earth?

"No, no, no, no, no," Liam muttered. "This… it's some kind of trick, or-or a joke. Your dad, or… someone. Some prankster back home… no." I noticed Suvi had begun crying silent tears. Her family was still on Earth. Liam's was still on Earth.

"Unfortunately, I can verify that all this information is accurate," A synthetic voice answered. It sounded far too cheery, and certainly wasn't SAM.

"Who was-" Kallo began to question.

"Hello! My name is glyph! Personal aide to Dr. Liara T'Soni. Several copies of the original Glyph, like myself, were assigned to seed the Milky Way galaxy with knowledge of the Reaper threat, in case of our failure, so that the next cycle would stand a better chance. While I was assigned to bring word of the invasion to an old correspondent of Dr. T'Soni, Pathfinder Alec Ryder," the VI explained itself.

"Liara and Dad talked a while ago. She knew a lot about Protheans, and Dad thought some of her experience as an archaeologist could help with uncovering ruins here," Scott added.

"So, what the hell IS a Reaper?" Drack questioned.

"Of course," the VI stated. The monitor beside Scott lit up. Scott murmured that I should go back to my seat, and I did. On the screen was a ship. With tentacle leg things. "This, is a Sovereign class Reaper. They are approximately two kilometers in length, and have the capability to walk on a planet's surface."

"Two kilometers? That's… massive!" Cora exclaimed.

"Sovereign class? What, like the Geth dreadnought?" Drack asked.

"Yes. However, that ship was not of Geth design. It was a true Reaper. It was what indoctrinated Saren Arterius," the VI stated.

"Indoctrination is basically a subtle mind control," Scott explained. So… that wasn't HIS fault then…? He was under the control of these… things.

"Indeed. In fact, according to Dr. T'Soni's eyewitness account, in the final confrontation against the rogue Spectre, Commander Shepard had managed to convince Saren that he was indoctrinated, and in the wrong. Refusal to obey the Reapers caused great pain and strain. The most he was able to do, was to put a bullet in his own head." The room went silent again. He… killed himself? Spirits…

"What was the state of the war when you came here?" Cora asked, her voice strained.

"The Reaper invasion had been delayed twice over already. The first, the defeat of Sovereign by the Alliance Fifth Fleet. The second was the destruction of the Alpha Relay in the Bahak system, also shortly after your departure. The first gave us two years. The second gave us six months. Unfortunately, the existence of the Reapers was still not believed by most Galactic society," the VI explained. Shit. Doesn't sound good.
"The Reaper invasion began within Batarian space. It is believed that with how quickly the Hegemony fell, and without anyone else in the galaxy being aware, that the Reapers already had indoctrinated agents, and that they target the comm buoys first. When refugee ships arrived in Council space, the Reaper presence was still unknown. The Reapers led a simultaneous attack at both Arcturus Station and Earth. Arcturus was destroyed, but two Alliance fleets managed to escape, at the cost of another. Earth too, was caught by surprise. It was known that a Resistance movement existed on the planet, but they would never be able to win without help from a combined galactic fleet. Dr. T'Soni was working with Commander Shepard to build this fleet, and to construct a Prothean superweapon found in the Mars Archives. It was believed to be our best hope against the Reaper threat." Fucking hell… attacking that quickly, wiping out an entire fleet, wiping out the Batarians… Spirits…

"At this time, Palaven was under attack by Reaper forces as well. Though the Turian fleets were still fighting the Reapers, they were only able to slow the attack, evacuating as many civilians from the world as they could. The only way the Commander would be able to get Turian help, was by recruiting the Krogan into the Alliance to help fight the Reapers off Palaven."

"No way in hell that worked out…” Drack muttered.

"It was very fortunate that the leader of the united Krogan clans was an old friend of both the Commander and Dr. T'Soni. Urdnot Wrex. They respected him greatly, and Wrex respected them the same.

"That crazy old bastard actually did it…” Drack murmured, shocked.

"The Krogan had one term for their aid. Curing the Genophage," the VI continued.

"Heh, next you're gonna tell me-" Drack began to scoff.

"Despite Salarian protests, the Turian Primarch and Commander agreed to the terms. With the help of Salarian geneticist, Mordin Solus, and a single female previously cured through dangerous experiments, the Genophage was successfully cured." For once, Drack was speechless. Even though everyone in the room turned to him. His eyes were wide.

"I have copies of all the proper files for a cure to be made here in Andromeda, if you desire," the VI offered. Drack then looked at Scott.

"I already want the files to go to New Tuchanka, the problem is just breaking the news, or convincing them it's legitimate," Scott answered the unasked question.

"I'll take care of that. Just, please, send it…” Drack murmured.

"I regret to inform you all that I do not have any more information on further events of the Reaper war."

"...Are they… coming for us?" Jaal questioned, almost too quiet to hear.

"Does Andromeda have Mass Relays?" Glyph asked in reply. Why would that matter.

"Er… no?" Jaal responded.

"Then you may rest easy, Andromeda native. The Mass Relays and Citadel were constructed by the Reapers so that organic life would evolve as the Reapers wanted. A dependency on the Mass Relays, having their government be centered where they want them to. It's all very cunning and thorough. While the Reapers are indeed a daunting foe, our current estimations do suggest that the
Reapers are not technologically advanced enough, or have the numbers, to perform this cycle on other galaxies.

"Do... do you know if my parents escaped Earth?" Suvi choked out her question.

"My sincerest apologies. I do not have records of those who did and did not escape. There were many refugees on the Citadel, and despite the documentation progress, some were still missed. Additionally, they could have fled to any other world. It would also be worth noting that 'MIA' was a common report. Those who die by a Reaper cannon leave no body, and many are turned into indoctrinated ground forces. If your family did not escape Earth, they may have escaped with the Resistance. Did they live in a major city?"

"No. We lived near, but outside of Glasgow," Suvi struggled to answer.

"Then I can say with near certainty that your family survived the initial invasion. Beyond that, I cannot say. The Reapers had focused on major cities and then were beginning to focus on smaller cities. Those living in the countryside may well have survived longer in the war." Glyph reassured. Suvi breathed a sigh of relief.

"My family was in London..." Liam muttered.

"That is unfortunate. According to the Resistance, London was hit the hardest."

Liam stood up and marched out of Scott's quarters without a word. While I don't like Liam, it was impossible to not feel bad for him. To sympathize. Sounds like I would have lost my mom, but, I don't exactly have any fond memories of her. I wasn't close to her at all. She was more like a stranger than a mother.

"I think we need to see the videos," Gil muttered. Scott looked up, nothing but sadness in his eyes.

"Are you sure? It's... nightmarish," he cautioned. Gil nodded.

"It still doesn't feel real yet. Right now, we've only heard of it. We need to see it."

"Ok. I'm going to step out of the room for this. Anyone else who doesn't want to see, do the same. SAM, start with the Alliance one once I'm out of the room," Scott stated, standing to leave. I had half a mind to go with him, but, Gil's right. It doesn't feel real yet. The moment the doors shut behind Scott, the video played.

I wish I left with him.

---

**Vetra Nyx**

Scott returned as the monitor turned off. Once again, everyone was silent. He was right, that shit was nightmarish. Jaal and Peebee were holding each other close. Suvi was in tears. Lexi, Kallo, Gil, Drack? Just... shocked. They didn't know what to say. Me? Well, I felt several things.

First, relief, that I got Sid and I onto the Initiative. That Sid wouldn't have to live through that... nightmare. Or worse, be converted into one of those... things.

Second? I felt like some sort of... burden had been lifted. It wasn't his fault. Those Reaper things indoctrinated him. Scott doesn't know what he is to me. And I probably won't ever tell him. Not that I'm afraid of how he'll respond, but more that it's a chapter of my life long over and done. Behind me. It's not something that defines me. He doesn't need to know, and I don't need to tell.
Sid can just remain blissfully ignorant of his identity.

Third? Well, shock and horror, obviously. How couldn't I knowing that everything we ever knew was most likely destroyed by those things. By what we saw in the vids.

"Should… should we tell people?" Cora muttered. Scott looked up at her, eyes still sad. He sighed.

"We have to. But… not right now. Not until the Initiative is secure. Even then… I don't know."

"I will continue to monitor from any signals from the Milky Way. Updates on the war. A message may have been sent upon victory, or, potentially, a message sent when it was known the war was lost, as it would take a great length of time to complete such a thorough extinction," SAM stated.

"Dr. T'Soni had promised to alert the Initiative in either contingency. In case of her death before a message could be sent, she has other safeguards as well," Glyph reassured.

"That's… all we can really hope for then…" Peebee murmured. "I didn't leave anything behind there, but… everything, just… fuck…"

"Your people have undergone a tragedy far worse than the Kett and the Scourge. I… I don't know what to say…" Jaal muttered.

"Scott, can you and I talk with Glyph? In private?" Cora requested.

"Sure," Scott nodded. "SAM and Glyph will link the rest of you to him in case you ever have any questions. Go take some time. I know you all need it." I looked at Scott, tilting my head to the side, wondering if he wanted me around for the time being. "Sorry," he shook his head, then nudged it to the door. "Wait outside if you wouldn't mind." I nodded and left. Everyone has their secrets. Cora has one she shared with Scott, well, it's obviously about something back home. Not something I need to know about. I mean, I have a secret I'm 'keeping' from Scott. The door closed behind me, and I leaned against the wall.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

"Glyph, what do you know about Cerberus?" Cora began. Thought so. Going straight to the heart of it, huh?

"The human terrorist group? I have much information about them. Dr. T'Soni and the Commander encountered them on several occasions. And they both suspected several more encounters to come. What would you like to know?" Glyph responded. Cora and I shared a glance.

"Tell us of your encounters with Cerberus. I don't think we need to know their structure or… whatever," Cora answered.

"Of course. The first encounters with Cerberus were during the campaign against Saren Arterius. At the request of Rear Admiral Kahoku, the Commander and his squad investigated a planet where a squad of marines had gone missing. These marines were under Kahoku's own command, and he had tried to investigate, but was being blocked. When they arrived, they realized that the Marines had been lured by a fake distress beacon planted in the center of a Thresher Maw nest. Admiral Kahoku had then begun to investigate rumors of the Ex-Alliance black ops unit, Cerberus. Later, he sent a message to the Normandy. In short, he was on the run from Cerberus assassins, and transmit coordinates to a Cerberus base. Upon investigation of the base, Cerberus was found to be experimenting on Reaper Husks, or, indoctrinated humans, Thorian creepers, which were essentially mindless imitations of humans made by an ancient, sentient floral construct, and even..."
“What needs to be repeated?” Glyph requested, innocently.

“What needs to be repeated? Fucking Rachni?!” I exclaimed.

“Ah yes. Cerberus was later found to be involved with the activities of Binary Helix. Saren was a major shareholder. They found a Rachni ship drifting in space with an intact egg which hatched a Rachni queen. Cerberus purchased some of the drones. The Commander discovered this,” Glyph explained.

“So… back to Cerberus,” Cora trailed off.

“Of course. Admiral Kahoku was found at the Cerberus facility, dead. Upon this discovery, the Commander made a personal vow to avenge him, and to tear Cerberus down. This vow, only got stronger the more they encountered the terrorists.”

“A personal vow?” I raised a brow.

“Indeed. Rear Admiral Kahoku was familiar with both the Commander and his father,” Glyph explained. “If I may continue,” I nodded my response. “Later in the campaign, the Commander heard that mercenaries had been tracking down and killing Scientists had some kind of connection to Akuze. The Commander found these mercenaries. They were led by an old squad mate of the Commander's, Corporal Toombs. It was believed that Toombs died on Akuze, with the Commander being the sole survivor. But it was revealed that instead, Cerberus had arranged the tragedy, much like with Kahoku's men. Understandably, this severely strengthened the Commander's hatred towards the organization.” Cora cursed under her breath. “The later encounters during the Saren campaign were relatively minor. Remote colonies where the people had been turned into Husks.”

“So much for protecting humanity,” Cora grumbled, ending in a sigh.

“It is unfortunate. The Illusive Man appears to be more interested in his own power rather than humanity as a whole. Shall I continue?” I nodded for Glyph to continue. “The interactions with Cerberus ceased until after The Normandy was destroyed, and the Commander killed. Cerberus helped Dr. T'Soni retrieve his remains, and were allowed to take the body to the Lazarus project under the lead of Miranda Lawson. Two years later, after spending billions of credits with top of the line science, the Commander awoke.”

“Wait, he was a pain in the ass for Cerberus, hated their guts to the core, and they revived him? Why?” Cora questioned.

“While the Illusive Man seems to care more for Cerberus itself, he recognizes the Reapers as the greatest threat to the galaxy. At least, he did.” Cora and I shared another glance. “The Commander was not cooperative. However, they did manage to convince the Commander to agree to a form of
Alliance. Entire human colonies were being kidnapped by the Collectors, and The Illusive Man suspected that Reapers were at the core of the problem. The lack of action by the Alliance and Council were the two largest factors in the Commander's reluctant decision."

"And what did Cerberus do for him, exactly?" I asked.

"They built him a second Normandy. It was larger, faster, and had both more stealth, defensive, and offensive capabilities. They provided him with a crew, most of whom knew little of Cerberus and were sympathetic to the Commander two of which had in fact served with the Commander on the Normandy, helped him gather a large team of the best to take down the Collectors, intelligence, supplies, and, of course, the Enhanced Defense Intelligence. EDI," Glyph continued.

"A VI?" I raised a brow.

"An AI. With blocks, however. Though those were later removed out of necessity during a crisis. Before I was sent away, she was friendly with the crew, and had acquired a synthetic body. A body the pilot greatly approved of."

"Ten creds say it looked like a sex-bot," I whispered to Cora, causing her to chuckle. Glyph didn't seem to hear us. 

"During the Collector campaign, the Commander did what he could, either subtly, or directly, to change the way his crew thought about Cerberus. After all, they only knew so much of the organization's activities. Mostly, the crew seemed divided, or unsure. Some had already withheld true loyalty, such as Jacob Taylor on the ground team. Though some had been with Cerberus much longer, such as Miranda Lawson, who claimed that she had much to thank Cerberus for. Eventually, whether through directly witnessing Cerberus acts such as Project Overlord, using the Colony of Horizon as bait, or leading the Normandy crew directly into a trap, many, even those like Lawson, began to have their doubts." So, like I suspected, Overlord WAS Cerberus. "I believe the last straw was when the Illusive Man demanded that the Commander preserve the Collector base so that Cerberus could use it. Despite the number of colonists that had been killed. Additionally, before the attack, the Normandy had been boarded while the ground team was away, and all but the pilot were captured. Shepard immediately made the journey through the Omega 4 relay to rescue them, while they all knew, The Illusive Man, would not," Glyph explained.

"Damn. Two kinds of leaders right there," I murmured approvingly.

"From that point forward, all contact with Cerberus ceased. Until the Reaper war, that is."

"What were they up to this time?" Cora questioned.

"It was a most interesting and disturbing revelation. Admiral Hackett had ordered the Commander and the Normandy to the Mars archives, where Dr. T'Soni had been helping the Alliance research for a weapon to use against the Reapers. She found one, but unfortunately, Cerberus attacked the facility. They killed all but Dr. T'Soni, who survived to aid the Commander again."

"Why attack the archives? They want to steal the glory of using the weapon for themselves?" I scoffed.

"At the center of the Archives, the Commander once again spoke with The Illusive Man. He wanted to use the Crucible to instead control the Reapers to ensure Human dominance."

"Alright, he's either bat shit crazy, or indoctrinated," I muttered. Cora sighed and cursed under her breath again. I began to regret my outburst. Monster or not, this is her father.
"The Commander believed that both were true. The few later encounters with Cerberus were again military. Either holding a tactical position, or when the Commander raided a Cerberus research station. With the exception of two outstanding events. Their attack on an STG facility on Sur’Kesh while the Commander was securing the Krogan female, and an old Turian bomb that had been uncovered by Cerberus on Tuchanka," Glyph explained.

"A bomb?" Cora raised a brow.

"Yes. It had been planted after the Krogan rebellions in case the Genophage wouldn't work. I did not have time to gather a full measurement of its capabilities, but it would have been catastrophic."

"Damn… I don't like they did that, but… I kinda can't blame them," I muttered. "Don't tell Drack I said that."

"Anything else?" Cora ignored my comment.

"About Cerberus? Unfortunately, not unless you wish for specific details," Glyph answered.

"No, thanks. But… I'll think about it," Cora remarked.

"Hey, random question that just came to mind. You talk an awful lot about Shep and Liara. I mean, she went hunting for his body. Were they a couple?" I asked, a bit curiously.

"Really?" Cora raised a brow, smirking.

"They were not in a relationship. They were friends, confidants. They worked together against Saren, against the Shadow Broker, and were working together against the Reapers. But no, The Commander's interests were drawn by another who had also been alongside them against Saren and the Shadow Broker, and with Shepard against the Collectors."

"Who?" I pushed. Hey, I was curious. With everything bad I've heard today, let me hear something a bit on the happier side.

"The Quarian Engineer. Tali'Zorah Vas Normandy Nar Rayya."
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I felt the need to re-read the message I had been forwarded from the Krogan Colony. A pair of Kett ships had crashed. Not a big deal, not a big interest. Problem is, those scouts reported seeing the ships SHOOTING at one another. Knowing by the time I’d arrive, the skirmish would be long settled and the Kett gone, and as this event would, obviously, be of huge interest, the Initiative portion of New Tuchanka sent a team to investigate, recover what they could. What did they find? Kett, in the wreckage, shooting each other. Granted, they stopped to shoot at our own men. Once they were wrapped up, searching the wreckage, they found an encrypted data pad. Couldn't make heads or tails of it. So, they sent it to us. Suvi should be able to piece it together. Well, I'd need to go get Suvi. But, well, last I saw, and Vetra confirmed after coming back into my quarters after Cora was done with Glyph, well…

She wasn't exactly doing well. I let out a sigh and ran a hand over my face.

"More bad news?" Vetra asked solemnly from her seat at the sofa, beer in hand.

"No, not bad news," I replied, calling out to her from over my shoulder. "Krogan on Elaaden saw two Kett ships shooting each other, and then the survivors still shooting each other. Got an encrypted data pad, gonna need Suvi's magic touch."

"Least it's a change of pace," Vetra muttered. "Think she'll be ok to work? Or…"

"I dunno. Glyph said her parents would have survived early on, living outside of Glasgow, which, wasn't listed as one of the major cities hit, but… she was already feeling guilty for leaving them behind. Leaving them behind to this? Well…" I trailed off.

"Damn it… I'm wondering if we'd all have been better off not knowing," Vetra mused.

I had a hard time disagreeing with that.

"Well… I'm going to go see if she's willing. Should be back soon," I stood from my chair, moving towards the door backwards as I looked back at Vetra. She gave a nod of the head with a slight wave. As the door shut behind me, I quickly entered the crew quarters. The ship felt much more quiet than usual.

Suvi was sat at the small table, facing the door. Her head was on the table with her arms wrapped around it, acting as a makeshift cushion, her face down at the table. It was just silent. Sympathy washed over me. I don't have anything meaningful to mourn back in the Milky Way. She does. I took a seat at the other end of the table. I sat there a moment, but, nothing happened. Gently, I reached out and placed my hand on her forearm. Rubbing it gently and slowly. Suvi slowly began to raise her head. Her eyes were bloodshot. A thin layer of eyeliner she had streaked down her face with the tears.

"You ok?"

"No…"

"Anything we can do?"

"No…"
"Need to get your mind off it?"

"Yes… I thought about helping the scientists with their project but… not like this. And they don't need another person budging in…" Suvi murmured. "I'd bury myself in work, but there isn't any."

"Well… earlier some Krogan scouts saw Kett shooting each other. Picked up a data-pad. SAM says he's never seen Kett shit so well encrypted," I started focusing her attention elsewhere. She lifted her head up more, her brow raised in confusion.

"What? Send me the data," she requested. Her Omni-tool was pinged, and she started scrolling through.

"SAM was right… I'll get to work on this," Suvi answered as she stood, staring at her Omni-tool, leaving the room. That worked. I began returning to my own quarters. I wouldn't mind just spending a few hours, just-holding… o-o-onto… What was I thinking? The door had just shut behind me when I noticed some wadded-up clothes on the couch. And she turned the corner. I began stuttering at the surprise.

"I need this shit out of my head, and I can't think of a better way," Vetra remarked casually, despite her current lack of attire. She grabbed me by the hand and dragged me towards the bed. Wait, what does she need out of her head? What was just going on? What? Ok, shut up inner thoughts. Let's just have some fun.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

It was three rounds. Just going at it. Where the last time we let ourselves build up slowly, just enjoying being with each other, this time, the motivation was more primal. Just getting to completion. After we were done, we simply snuggled up under the covers, the same position we tend to end up in. Her clinging to my side as I hold her close. We both held each other closer than usual as we lay there. This time wasn't about love, or even about sex. Rather, with every bad thing we heard today, that we saw today, that there was still SOME good in the universe. That we were both here for each other. That we were STILL here. And that's why we were clinging so desperately to each other under the sheets.

There was a low doorbell like noise that gently echoed through the room. "Pathfinder, Suvi has just about finished her decryption. You may want to be dressed." I glanced down at Vetra as she looked up to me. I think both of us were, even after several make out sessions knowing SAM was watching, that he doesn't leave just because we're naked together. One sure way to go flaccid after all is to have your heart stop.

"I had just gotten used to knowing he was there while we made out. Why is this starting back at square one?" Vetra whispered. Causing me to chuckle. I didn't have an answer for her. I began to reach for the sheets.

"Alright, I'll-"

"Be staying right here," Vetra cut off. "SAM, tell Suvi to just use the intercom when she's done." Vetra very clearly squeezed my torso into her, even wrapping her legs around mine, and squeezing those too, though careful not to scratch or chafe my legs with her plates.

"Guess I'm not moving," I chuckled. The AI acknowledged the orders. We waited a few minutes in bed until the intercom was pinged.

"Good to hear, whatcha find?" I asked.

"Hi Suvi," Vetra called out. Suvi might just figure we were on the couch, holding each other given recent events. I then noticed Vetra had a devilish gleam in her eyes. What was she—

Goddamnit woman. I felt myself being cupped. Resulting in only one possibility.

"Hi Vetra. Well, it's almost unbelievable some of the Kett would be fighting their own. They always seemed so… Monolithic. Faceless," she murmured.

"Really?" I whispered to Vetra, a bit annoyed at her timing. She just giggled as she began to stroke. Damn, need to keep up appearances. "Can't say I'd complain if we saw them fighting each other more. I wouldn't shed a tear if they wiped themselves out," I remarked, controlling my breathing so I wouldn't make any sounds to give myself away.

"Not shed a tear? I'd throw a spirits damned party," Vetra joked. Suvi giggled. Two can play at this game. I lowered my arm, scooted down a bit, and quickly inserted a pair of fingers. She gasped before covering her mouth, giving me quite the stare. I just shrugged nonchalantly. She continued to stroke, I pumped my fingers.

"Whatever they've done," Suvi began more solemnly. "They're still a unique, fascinating species. It's hard for me to wish them all dead." She didn't see the bodies on the Archon's ship. She didn't die because of a trap set by the Archon. But I won't bring up that dark shit. Not with what we've already talked about today. "Regardless. The Kett device. It's secured by a biometric lock that can only be activated with a specific genetic code." Vetra let out a whistle. Likely a way to release a bit of buildup.

"Heard of a few locks like that. Tried to avoid marks that had those. How'd you get through?" she asked our resident ginger. Cursing under her breath as I used my thumb to rub a rather specific spot.

"Well, the data in this was probably only meant for trusted individuals. Normally, we'd never be able to get the genetic code of a high-ranking and trusted Kett. But, I think I found a work around. Do you remember those genetic samples you picked up on Voeld?" Suvi responded. "Lexi's been working on that data, and I got an idea. All I needed was all the genetic data to be sequenced. I then had SAM test combinations of those sequences against the lock."

"Brute force? That doesn't sound like your style, Dr. Anwar," I chuckled. Might have been a way for me to release a bit of buildup. If SAM could, I'd bet he'd be rolling his eyes.

"Tried and true method," Suvi giggled. "With SAM's processing speed, it took no time at all. We thought it was a data log, but it was something else. It locked onto a transmission. Yes, I know, dangerous, but the device was just a receiver," she reassured. Good, the Kett still shouldn't know of the Nexus' coordinates. We don't want to give them that. "Here, I recorded the transmission. Playing it now."

"The Archon has abandoned our way. Spurns tradition, defies protocol. He abuses his authority, obsesses over Remnant secrets, and keeps us cut off from home. This cannot continue. He will return to the path of the right, or be destroyed. This is my promise. An Archon stands tall only while we hold him up." Hm… sounded like that Primus we heard during those transmissions on Voeld. But, at the same time, who the hell knows if it's not just some other Kett leader with a voice that sounds similar to it? Huh. I just noticed that during the message, both Vetra and I had stopped.
"Someone's pissy," Vetra remarked. Her eyes widened drastically as I resumed my attack causing her to whisper another curse. As expected, she then resumed her attack. A bit more vigorously I might add. Well, then I will too.

"Lexi supposed that a collectivist culture wouldn't approve of any action that defied the will of the group," Suvi explained. "The Kett being isolated would mean resentment. A sense of abandonment." I would have rolled my eyes if my attention was solely on this conversation. "Some things are just universal. Anyways, I traced the signal. It was Eos, not too far from the destroyed Kett base."

"Eos? Thought the Kett had abandoned the place now," I questioned, the only thing keeping me from shooting up was the woman latched onto me. I almost released and groaned with my focus being torn off of Vetra, but I recovered.

"Which is why it makes sense. If they're breeding dissension in the ranks, they'd want to be somewhere that lacks Kett presence. I pulled my fingers out and whispered for Vetra to stop, just for a moment, and lifted my other arm to look at the clock on my Omni-tool. Already late in the day. Granted a trip to Eos wouldn't take long at all. But, with a day like this, and not to mention I had… other motivations for staying overnight again, I came- no not like that, I reached a decision, stop nit-picking at my words. That wasn't an intentional pun, don't stretch it.

"We'll head out in the morning," I answered.

"Sure. See you tomorrow, Scott," Suvi ended the call. I sighed and let my head fall back against the pillows, before turning to look at the woman beside me.

"You're a vile, evil woman. You know that, right?" I groaned. Vetra grinned, giggling.

"Yeah, well, you love me," she tapped her forehead against mine.

"Damn right I do," I smirked as I rolled on top of her. Her legs immediately wrapped themselves around my waist.

"And I love you too," Vetra smiled, then raised her head, closed her eyes, and gave me a rather chaste kiss. It certainly encouraged my next action.

That night, we forgot all about the Reapers. The Milky Way. The Kett. Hell, we forgot everything. Except each other.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

It was the next morning, and the Tempest was warming up for its flight. Should be taking off any moment now. I remember how Liam stormed out of my quarters the other day. Thought it would be a good idea to check in on him. Apparently, he hadn't left his room. I knocked on the door. I waited for a response, but got nothing. I knocked again.

"Liam, it's Scott," I called out, pressing a button on the door to carry my voice inside. The door opened. Liam was on his couch. Leaning forward, looking down. Hands clasped together, just staring at the floor. Empty beer bottles across his table. I then noticed that a wall had a slight dent and his right hand had been bandaged.
"What?" He muttered.

"Checking in on you. Wanna talk?" I asked gently.

"What's there to talk about?" he scoffed bitterly. "My friends and family were killed by those things."

"Maybe not," I suggested. He looked up skeptically. "They were building a superweapon, you heard that."

"Then why haven't we gotten a message about a win?" Liam questioned.

"The first message was only received when we first got here. That war would take a while. You know as well as I do that even with the relays, travelling from one end of the galaxy takes days. And who knows how long those military ops could take? Then just building the superweapon? I don't expect us to get a victory message for a while yet," I reassured.

"You really think they'd have a chance?" Liam scoffed. Honestly, I didn't. But, that's not what Liam needs to hear right now.

"They were uniting the Galaxy against them. Got Krogans and Turians working together like buddies. Sounds like they might have a chance to me," I shrugged. Liam let out a sigh as we felt the ship take off.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Prodromos. On Elaaden, some Krogan saw Kett shooting Kett. Found an encrypted receiver that Suvi decrypted. Apparently, the Archon's leadership is in question. Signal is being sent out from near the old Kett base," I explained.

"Least something is going right," he muttered. "So, Prodromos? Coincidentally, had that football game planned for today. Maybe we could join in," Liam suggested.

"You mean soccer," I teased. Liam rolled his eyes with a smirk. "Sure, should be good for the crew."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The Tempest touched down safely on Prodromos soon after. Gil passed along a message that he told Jil they'd be at Prodromos, and given she needed to make a trip there anyhow, that it would be a good time to meet-up. So, that's another thing for after these Kett are handled. As for ground team out there, Drack, Vetra, and Jaal. Liam ran off to go see about some of the later soccer game, and Cora asked if she could talk to Bradley about a small project she wanted to start. Course, they were all free to do so. The ground team, however, just got into the Nomad with me, and he set out to find the Kett signal.

The coordinates we got led us into a cave, but no one was there. Just a Kett relay hidden in the rocks. A proxy to hide the true source. Really fucking hope it doesn't lead us off-world… Fortunately, it didn't. Rather another location a bit further west in the hills. We were on one such hill looking over what used to be the Kett wind farm, now just a pile of rubble. The coordinates were on the other side of a crest on top of the hill. We got out of the Nomad. I took Jaal with me quietly to get eyes on the other side. Some Kett mulling with their supplies. Right there. But they weren't looking up. I nodded to Jaal, signaling for him to get out his rifle. I'd order the others to get ready, but they were definitely in ear-shot. So, I made do with a hand gesture I hope they saw.
Standard Alliance gesture. Might not click for them. We'll see. I tapped Jaal on the shoulder and pointed to the one that should be his target. I got out my Sweeper, and took mine. Three fingers, two, one. Trigger pull. Both fell dead while Vetra and Drack rushed around the corner, guns blazing. Guess SAM may have clarified. The gun fire stopped as Jaal and I joined them. The Kett weren't all dead yet, however. There was an energy dome. Two Kett running around. They would both die the moment they came around. We were waiting. The moment they did, they were riddled with bullets, their corpses falling on top of one another.

"Feels good to shoot something," Drack muttered. I admit, I feel the same.

"SAM, how the hell we take this shield down?" I questioned.

"The shield generator has wires leading to a power generator just outside the shield dome," SAM explained.

"The fuck? Why? Keep someone inside the shield dome to control it!" I exclaimed.

"Maybe they misjudged the size of the dome?" Vetra chuckled.

"Dumbasses," I sighed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad they're incompetent fucks, but it's just amazing how the hell they do this kinda shit." Grumbling, I just shot the damn generator, and the shield died. "Bah, another damn relay."

"I have located another node on this network," SAM stated.

"Is it at least still on Eos?" Drack grumbled.

"It is," the AI answered.

"Is it close?" Jaal continued.

"Near where we first encountered an Architect."

"Could be worse," Jaal shrugged. We returned to the Nomad, and made our way to the coordinates. We drove along a plateau above the flat dunes below. Coordinates were somewhere up ahead, would mean we'd need to head down. So, I drove off the edge, using both the speed boost and the vertical thrusters. Had some cheers, but then, that's weird. The shields were registering impacts. We landed with a thud and sizzle as the nomad slid off the top of the Kett shield dome. Right onto an Anointed and Chosen. Cursing, I swerved to avoid slamming into a Kett ground vehicle. Caused the Nomad to clothesline another Kett as we spun out on the other side of the Kett vehicle.

"Probably should have paid closer attention to how close the thing was," I chuckled. As we still had cover for a moment, we quickly got out of the Nomad, weapons ready. The front wheels and right side of the car were splattered in green blood.

"Well, we took them by surprise," Jaal remarked as we began mopping up the Kett that weren't crushed by our car. It didn't amount to much. Just four or five Chosen.

"Ok, seriously, again! Why the fuck is the generator outside the damn shield dome?" I exclaimed as I casually shot the generator, the dome dying out. "Seriously! It's fucking stupid!"

"I have another set of coordinates. I believe this will be the source," SAM stated.

"Then let's go figure out why Kett are killing each other," Drack grumbled. The coordinates were out in Blackrock Tande, right by where the Roekaar scouts were hiding for the attack on
Prodromos. We even had to drive past the site, past the abandoned Roekaar tech in order to get up to the same level as the coordinates. There was a Kett structure on the edge, with some ground vehicles. A Remnant site in front, but cleared of any bots. I'd bet on this being the source. The Kett clearly saw us, rounds starting to ping off. Fortunately, the Remnant site provided perfect cover.

An Anointed set himself up on a Kett barrier and the blue mist of a Destined began to seep across the battlefield. Drack simply sent a flak round where he believed the source was. I heard shouts of pain from Kett, and the mists began to dissipate. Jaal glanced at me. He was thinking of combining fire on the Anointed I'd bet. I nodded. I stood and drained his shields once Drack had to get down in cover. I saw the Anointed grimace as if he was growling before a round from Jaal jerked his body back as his head was vaporized by plasma. With nothing but a few Chosen to worry about, I launched a singularity between the two Kett land vehicles. It even pulled them, the gravity being that intense. I couldn't see Kett, so maybe they were holding onto the vehicles. So, I simply just focused on keeping the singularity intact. It was already sucking up plenty of sand. I never saw any Kett, but I could hear them. Until the vehicles finally touched the event horizon, and they were consumed, pulling in the Chosen holding on with them.

The singularity died. Leaving behind only a sand less spot on the ground, and skid marks from the wheels of the land vehicles, now one with oblivion. Without a word, I stood and approached the Kett structure. Weapons ready, we entered. No Kett were waiting. The area was clear, and our weapons, holstered. I saw several consoles. One of them looked big and important, cloaked in a blue light at the end of the room. Let's save that for last. I activated one of the smaller consoles in a corner, and an audio log played. The same speaker as before.

"Exaltation lifted our ancestors out of sorrow and tribulation. This noble gift now allows us to raise others, and share in the genetic bounty of this galaxy. But the Archon would selfishly hoard what Heleus has to offer." Jaal scoffed at their description of Exaltation, but there were no other comments. I found another audio log in the console. "The Archon does not serve Kett interests, only his own. He wastes our time on the Remnant, but keeps all knowledge for himself. These are the acts of a traitor, not true Kett."

"Maybe it's just because he doesn't know jack shit about the Remnant that he can't share it," I joked. That got some chuckles. Another log.

"The Archon believes Meridian will bring him power. He will become the master of the Remnant. Its sole master. Once Heleus submits, where does the traitor turn his gaze? Think. Understand. Our home is in peril."

"If it wouldn't be at the cost of ourselves, I'd be tempted to let the bastard," Drack murmured. Nothing else. I made my way to the main console. I pressed a few buttons, and the holographic torso of an Ascended appeared. It had a brow raised.

"Looks like the comm console. Probably what's sending out the messages," I remarked.

"There must be more here… this can't be it," Vetra murmured. Did the hologram just smirk?

"And so, you have found me. You are a single-minded creature, 'Pathfinder.'" The hologram mocked. Now it was my turn to raise a brow. This a recording? Or… "I see it now. Your determination will grant the Kett dominion over this galaxy.

"Even if that kinda shit WAS in someone's genes," I began muttering. "Not on my watch asshole." I crossed my arms over my chest. Drack began to snarl, Vetra's mandibles flared, and Jaal stared coldly at the hologram. The Kett rolled its eyes.
"This posturing benefits no one. Our confrontation is inevitable, not imminent. I did not reveal myself as a traitor easily. I did so only because I seek a mutual benefit."

"Getting rid of the Archon," I finished, my hard gaze refusing to remove itself from the Kett. The Kett nodded.

"The Archon's obsession with the Remnant incites chaos, and endangers all we've worked for. This must end."

"Still not seeing how I benefit from chaos in Kett ranks," I remarked.

"Because it means the Archon lives and challenges you for Meridian, which you desire. I need only to ensure nothing stands between you and your target. Once he is cut down the Remnant will cease to be a concern. We will complete our purpose here, and leave."

"Your purpose is exaltation," Jaal growled.

"One day you will be family. Until then, fight if you must," the Kett sneered. "But I offer you a reprieve from this conflict, so you can destroy a mutual enemy."

"Why the hell should we trust you?" Drack snarled.

"Why do you oppose him in the first place?" I questioned.

"The Archon says he will use Meridian to dominate this cluster. He says Meridian will bring us victory. We have never needed Remnant to be victorious. No, he wants more. His ambition is plain. I am not alone in this thought," the Kett explained. If I was an idiot, I'd probably say something about how soon enough, they may regret underestimating us like that. But I don't want to argue for more competition on Meridian.

"What exactly is the deal? I'd be a right fucking idiot to just accept a deal without knowing details," I questioned. The Kett let out a huff of air, as if it found humor in what I said. Sometime soon, I will be called upon by the Archon to destroy you. When that time arrives, I will provide you the means to disable my ship."

"Then the hell is stopping you from just leaving me alone?" I asked sarcastically.

"If you fail, my treachery will be exposed."

"Counter offer," I placed my hands down at the table, peering right into those holographic eyes. "When that time comes, you either get the fuck out of my way, or risk getting killed. I don't care what you pick, the Archon is fucking going down. You will do something to fake or whatever the fuck to stay out of our way, or leave a part of that ship exposed to be disabled. The Archon WILL die either way. And then, when that's all said and done, unless you fuckers fuck off and leave us alone, we'll go back to our war. And we'll be focused on you. Take it or leave it." I slammed my fist onto the console, the transmission ending.


"So did I," Vetra smirked, giving me a subtle wink.

"I think that was more of a threat than a counter offer," Drack remarked.

"Hey, if that fuck head really wants to ensure we kill the Archon, then yeah, do what I fucking said and find some excuse to not do it."
Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We returned to Prodromos without hassle. Kept the Nomad parked just to the side of the Tempest's loading ramp. People were setting up the soccer field. Already had posts in the corners and the nets up. People drawing the lines in the sand and getting some small bleachers up. Liam was out there helping. The ground team was splitting up. Jaal to find Peebee, Drack to find a drink, and Vetra to find and talk with her friend here. I was wondering just what I'd do, but Cora approached with a smile.

"Mind coming along? I want to show you something." Curious, I followed her into the Nomad. She drove the Nomad out of the colony and to the North East, towards the lake that the vault is buried beneath. Eventually, the Nomad parked out on a small peninsula. There were some crates, but no flowers. Suppose Cora got a small transport out here earlier.

"This your mystery project?" I asked, unsure what I was looking at. She squatted down beside a piece of tech I didn't quite recognize.

"Soil converter. Bradley let me take one. Not a Remnant terraformer, but, it makes sandy dirt into something useful. Eventually," she explained. She stood back up and looked over a sandy area that looked like it had been tilled, a garden hoe laying on the ground nearby. "Add seeds and some rain... you've got a garden. She looked back to me, smiling.

"Right," I remembered. "You wanted a garden of your own."

"It'll take years," she looked back towards the plot. "I might not even get to see it. But that's okay," she let out a deep breath.

"Asari think in centuries. All my time with them, and I started thinking the same. Lay a foundation, then step away. Let it grow into something you might never expect. Pathfinder training was my foundation. Gave me a whole galaxy of directions I could go." She spread her arms wide, gesturing out towards the landscape. "I don't need someone else's plan. Not anymore. Just a good beginning. The first seeds of a garden." she squatted back down and took a handful of sand in both of hers, plenty grains finding their way between the gaps. "One I started with my friend," she smiled.

"Should I go get a straw hat and overalls for this? Combat armor doesn't look like gardening gear," I joked.

"Never change, Scott," Cora laughed, shaking her head. She raised her handful of sand, and I cupped my hands beneath, some sand falling through giving me a handful as well. I followed her to the edge of the peninsula. "One, two-" I didn't really know what she was going for. Not until she bent her legs, getting ready to throw the sand out. So, I did the same. As she began saying 'three' we both shot up, spreading sand out into the air. Plenty just went into the water, plenty came right back to us. Though I kept my eyes and mouth shut. Cora made a slight effort to catch some of the particles, but then just wiped her hands clean.

"Thanks for coming. Come on, let's get back," she insisted. Wordlessly, I followed. Bit of an odd expedition, but meaningful to her. Though, I admit, I started to suspect that she wishes she tried to compete with Vetra before. But, to her credit, at least she's not trying to butt in now.

"So, just what were some of those seeds you were planting?" I asked as she started to drive the Nomad back.

"A few. Tiral Azhana, 'Handful of water.' It's a plant from Rannoch, Quarians brought some onto
their live ships, some came with the Initiative. Common irassal a Thessian blossom, smells like honey, Lace-in-lilac, a flower from Eden Prime, and a few others,” she quickly explained. Didn't have much to say about those, just… trying to make some mild conversation. We got back to Prodromos, and apparently, Gil was waiting. Jil was about to arrive. Given the progress of the soccer field, that should be close to ready too. As I approached him, I took a look around the colony. It had still been expanding nicely. I saw construction machinery starting to dig into the mountainside. Maybe carving it away for new buildings, maybe building along the mountain side, maybe even digging tunnels. Either for buildings, or mines. The other boundaries had also been expanded yet again. An agricultural area nearby with plenty of crops, and more buildings in general.

"Good, you're here," Gil greeted as he turned to look at a specific shuttle descend. Guess he's thinking that's Jil's. "So, yeah, she doesn't have much time, and she's in rare form today, just to warn you." I raised a brow questioningly as he started to lead me to the shuttle. "She's here kickstarting repopulation protocols, reversing the chemical procreation blockers for colonists. Calls it 'boosting the batter.'"

"Sounds like a euphemism," I chuckled. Gil smirked, then continued.

"She's going to talk your ear off about your civic duty as a man."

"Then she'll find out what a skillful topic changer I am," I remarked.

"Good luck with that. The woman's tenacious," Gil shook his head. "Well, makes no problem to me. No chance I'll ever oops a baby into the world. Neither will you staying with Vetra." The shuttle door opened and out stepped a woman with a mostly shaved head, the hair in small… strips? However, it's best to be described. But the strips going down her head.

"Am I interrupting something?" she smiled, waving at her friend. Gil strode up the stairs, myself following behind much more slowly. He wrapped his arms around Jil and she returned the favor.

"Good to see you, Jil. This is-" he began to introduce me by releasing Jil from the hug.

"Save it," she chuckled. "I asked you both to stop by, remember? Ryder, pleasure. I know we're all very busy, so I have only one question for you…" she trailed off. Hoo boy…

"You want to know if you can 'boost my batter?'" I joked, raising a brow.

"You baby," she rolled her eyes with a smirk. She glanced at Gil. "I see my reputation precedes me. The question is… What. The hell. Did you do to him? It's like he's an adult or something!" Jil burst into laughter. Gil was taken by surprise, his face scrunching up as he tried to make sense of the situation. And I might have been laughing too. "He can even have a mature conversation without it degrading into pot shots! Unless I take it there," Jil continued. "Come on, what's your secret?"

"I sneaked into the stasis pods and switched him with another baby," I joked.

"My boy's in good hands," she chuckled. Gil recovered from his surprise and was now just smiling, shaking his head at his old friend. "Ok. You're both off the hook. So glad I got to meet you, Ryder."

"You too, Jil." Gil then brought her in for another hug as she left towards the medical building.

"Well. That is not at all what I expected," Gil chuckled lightly. Liam then ran over towards us.

"Hey, games about to start, come on," he urged. I started to pick up the pace, but Gil still appeared
to take some leisure. I got to the field, and the rest of the crew had gathered on the border, watching. On the bleachers, I was pleasantly surprised to see the variance in people there. Krogan, Angara, Turians wearing Natanus uniform, Salarians with Paarchero, Asari with Leusinia uniform, various people without uniform, likely former exiles, and other Prodromos citizens. Even saw several of those who helped during Liam's little fiasco. And I recognized Darket Tiervian amongst the crowd. Several people were getting onto the field, soccer ball in the center. Team of two humans and an Asari, team of Angara. All were dressed in loose, athletic clothing. There was another man in a striped referee shirt, probably fresh out of a fabricator. Same as the whistle around his neck. Liam and I stood amongst the others, myself naturally finding my way beside Vetra. Liam, grudgingly, perhaps, on the other side. The whistle blew.

"How'd you do all this?" I turned asking Liam as they began kicking the ball around.

"Doesn't take much. A ball, and some flat ground. HUSTL would start games at refugee camps. Here, took some more time so a crowd could gather when they weren't busy working. Even got Verand here," he pointed to her. I didn't notice her in the crowd earlier. She gave a slight wave from the bleachers, Liam returned it. "I didn't 'get it' then, but after the attack here, and the shit with Verand's rescue, I wanted to try something… low tech." Liam explained.

"It's good to get people's minds off all the bad crap," I nodded approvingly.

"I didn't plan this to distract them. We don't get distracted. We go head on. When it's life or death, you have to. No one is living or dying because of this. They're here because they want to be. I didn't get how important that is. Maybe that choice is how we stop being outsiders," Liam theorized. Well, it started to make sense at the end. He nudged me on the shoulder pointing out to the field. Asari was about to jump, use her head to block the ball, but an Angara also jumped beside her, knocking her to the ground and the ball rolled towards the goal. Ref called foul. The Angara helped the Asari up.

"Free kick for charging," Ref called out. The Asari and Angara smiled, shaking hands. Friendly game, and likely the both of them learning how to play.

"No charge for matchmaking," Liam chuckled. Liam must have caught an expression on my face. Something I didn't realize. "What?" he asked.

"We're lucky to have you, Liam."

"You too, Scott. You're a good guy. And as Pathfinder? This is because of you," he gestured out at the field. We kept watching for a small while. Couple of goals, both sides. Ref called the game, guess they aren't long ones. Liam turned to the others. "Hey, why don't we all put on a show for them?" Liam suggested.

"I like the idea. Pathfinder's orders. Let's have some fun," I insisted.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Our team came back out from the Tempest changed out of armor and all into loose, athletic clothes. Whether that's a loose shirt or a tank top, and gym shorts. But Drack? Old fart was still in his armor. Probably feels like a second skin. Ball rolled over to Liam at the border of the field and he caught it with his foot.

"Switch up. Ready to get in the game?" Liam asked.
"Ready and rearing," I remarked. I started a jog by towards the center of the field, but not without kicking the ball out from under his foot and leading it towards center field. Chuckling, Liam joined me at the center looking out at the others. We had run through the rules earlier, and it was just a casual game. Just had to get teams situated.

"I'm going up against you, Scott," Vetra called out, grinning.

"Oooh, putting some competition into our relationship. Alright, so be it," I chuckled. "Peebee. Over here." She jogged over as Vetra leisurely made her way to Liam's side of the field.

"Gil. Over here, mate," Liam picked.

"Drack." He'd make a good goalie for our team. It continued until the teams were all selected. I ended up also getting Suvi, Jaal, and Cora. Liam got Lexi and Kallo, but got Bradley to make it even. Teams got themselves lined up. I'd need to pay special attention to the non-humans with curved legs. They'll be faster. SAM will make me fast too, sure, but it pays to be careful. Suvi apparently used to play on a team back home, so she was taking the charge for my team. Cora and I would be supporting her, while Jaal and Peebee would hang back to cover Drack. Who, honestly, blocked about half the goal by just standing there. Liam was taking the front for his team, and was being supported by Gil, and Vetra. Who it wasn't lost on me that she stood opposite of me, eyeing me down with a smirk. I think I know exactly who she'll be focusing on. Now, I just need to get the ball in my… well… feet, and make some sort of play despite her hounding me. Whether that's passing for an immediate goal, or making the goal, I can't say. If I can, I WILL one-up my girlfriend.

As for the rest of Liam's team, Lexi and Kallo would be on the defensive with Bradley acting as goalie. Old man probably just didn't want to do too much running. The ref gave one last check to make sure we were ready. Both teams confirmed. The crowd on the bleachers began to cheer the countdown until the whistle blew. Game on.

The whistle blew again, but now signaled the end of the game. How did it end? Well…

Score was tied. Vetra had caught on quickly. The shape of her legs allowed her to outrun the other humans on my team, other than myself but only thanks to SAM. It also gave her more maneuverability. She'd start to one side, but then her powerful legs would launch her in the other direction, her feet just pushing the ball along before she shot by the surprised defender. She managed to get the ball right in a crook where Drack wasn't defending. He had already blocked a ball or two without moving thanks to his bulk, stopped a few others with a bit more movement. Through most of the game, I'd only been able to be used as a fake-out or as a relay so to speak. The ball coming to me for a fraction of a second before I sent it back towards another team-mate. That's how relentlessly Vetra locked me down. Peebee and Kallo were able to hold their ground as defenders, but their inexperience allowed Suvi the moments she needed to send the ball to Bradley. It was the final play. Refs were gonna call a tie soon. This play would either end in one team winning, or a tie. But my crew wouldn't accept that. Neither would I. We're quite competitive. Friendly competitive, but competitive. We kept each other at a stalemate. Ball closer to the middle of the field than the goals. The defenders kicking it away if it got too close. But I noticed something about the other team. They were essentially ignoring my presence, knowing Vetra had me locked down. If I broke out? Well, they wouldn't suspect that would they? Vetra winked at me. That made me rather determined to succeed. Vetra gave me a subtle glance, her head barely turning to look at me, her right eye just glancing over. I gave a subtle nod of the head, still looking straight at Vetra. The whistle blew, and Suvi ran to beat Liam to the ball at the center of the field. She did, being faster and more experienced than Liam, and kicked it to the side. My side. I began leading
the ball in front of me, the others spreading out to try and cover where they perceived the ball would go. Vetra? Her feet planted wide, allowing her to launch herself in either direction, watching me very closely.

But not the ball. She wasn't concerned with the ball. I kept running closer, and I led it forward with more force, but it wasn't a real kick. The ball continued, its path and momentum would send it right between Vetra's legs. But someone, who's not Kallo, needs to be there to send it into the goal. What did I do? I slid. Falling back to the ground, letting my momentum carry me just behind the ball, right through her legs. Her brows rose in confusion as I started to drop before her eyes widened and her head followed. Now it was my turn to wink. As my head cleared the gap, I used my hand to help launch me back up, and the hand... might have managed to give Vetra a light smack on the ass as I came back up and launched the ball soaring into the goal, Bradley nearly missing his save.

I'd have jumped, joining the rest of the team and crowd in cheers and laughter, but the whole event kinda threw me off balance and I fell to the ground. Unharmed, of course. But I felt a weight fall on me in turn. My eyes opened, and, well, it seems somehow Vetra lost her own balance too. Maybe she turned too quick after the ass slap and the shock there-of. I dunno. But now, her face, sideways to my own body, had fallen onto my chest, and she just picked it backup as the whistle blew, moving slightly to hover it over mine. I winked, and quickly shot my head up to give a quick kiss on her lips. A quick peck, to tease her with what just happened. Vetra's mandibles flared a bit in a blush, knowing that certainly would have been noticed by the crowd.

"Surprised you, huh?" I smirked.

"A bit. Was the ass slap really necessary?" she questioned. The tone and raised brow told me she wasn't angry or annoyed with me, more like a "you're lucky I love you, you ass," that you'd say and then snuggle up closer to said person.

"Sorry. It's just a really nice one. Just can't get enough of it," my smirk broadened. Vetra rolled her eyes as she chuckled. She then pushed herself up and offered me a hand up, which I accepted, and joined the others.

The cheers of the crowd, the atmosphere, the cheerfulness of the crew right now? It's... happy. It's familiar. Not so long ago, the entire fate of the Initiative was up in the air. Now? It's looking like we have a future. People are letting themselves laugh. Be happy. Letting themselves let go of bigger issues to focus on smaller day to day things. Not out of fear of the bigger issues, but because they don't need to anymore.

All they need, are the little things. And that's enough.
Old Habits

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I was mulling about the bridge. Not really sure what we should do next. Can't go for Meridian until the ghost storm is ready. Drack said he wanted to hit the bar on Kadara at least once before Meridian, so, I guess we could make our way to Kadara, but just for drinks? I'd rather, if possible, we end up there for some other reason first. Just to give the trip more purpose. As if just wanting to waste some time, hoping something could pop up and distract us, I was rather pleased when Suvi piped up, Scottish accent flowing rather thickly. Not complaining, it's a fun accent to just listen to someone go off on.

"I want a break. Do you want a break? Let's go on a break," Suvi stood and began heading out of the bridge. I shared a quick glance with Kallo, and the Salarian just shrugged. I mean, it's not like we had been on board very long since the end of the soccer game. Suppose something must be up. Suvi grabbed a few packets out of crew quarters and a pair of cups, then towards my quarters. Alright, subtly hoping Vetra isn't waiting in there. Because she might be naked. I honestly don't know. Wait, shit, the bed wasn't made. Uh… granted I never make my bed, but, still, the bed would be quite a mess given recent… strenuous activities. I don't remember any clothes being left over the floor, so, there's something.

The door to my quarters opened and I shot a quick glance at the bed. Ok, not as bad as I feared, so maybe she'll strike it up as me being a messy sleeper, or, well, she did hear Vetra when she spoke with us on the intercom last night. Maybe she assumes it's from a make out session or just us snuggling. I noticed she seemed to refuse to look at the bed. I made my way over to the couches as she put the packets and cups on a table. She poured the packets and some water into a kind of container I didn't know she had and pressed a button to turn it on. A minute later, it started to hiss before she opened it.

"Care for some tea, Scott?" she offered. Oh, tea time.

"I'm American, Suvi. And southern. Unless it's sweet tea, it belongs at the bottom of the harbor," I joked. Suvi giggled and rolled her eyes. "Sure, I'll take a cup."

"It's a cultivar originating in Sumatra. My own personal stash. Once I run out…" she trailed off. She started walking over with both cups. Handing one off to me. Suddenly, I felt hesitant about accepting it. "That'll be it for Earth tea…" she murmured. She looked up at me sadly. I had little doubt a part of this was connected with news of the invasion. "I keep thinking I'm never going to taste this again. I'm never going to see that again. No one will…" I let out a sigh.

"Well… I hadn't really been thinking about it much. For better or worse something else just seems to steal my attention first. But, now that I think about it… you're right. Guess we just hope the plants and animals we brought with us to clone will taste pretty close," I shrugged. "But I have been missing home along the way. You'd have to be made of stone not to." I was afraid my little reference to home at the end could devolve the conversation back to… them. But Suvi thankfully brought it elsewhere.

"I see the universe like a giant tapestry. I love following its threads, but it distracts me from the whole picture. My family was right there. But I was too occupied by the abstract to appreciate them…" Oh… guess we will be going back to that. She re-focused on me sadly. Ok, maybe I can still steer this away.
"From everything you told me, you're here because of your family. Your love of science. Came from them, right? And they nurtured that in you. Right? Wouldn't you say they're with you every time you chase a new discovery?" She smiled. I hadn't seen her smile sense the news. Not a genuine smile at any rate.

"Scott, that's beautiful."

"Heh, well, Vetra and I are both hopeless romantics. Suppose some poetry spews out every now and then," I chuckled.

"Judging by those bedsheets, that's not the only thing spewing out," Suvi innocently took a sip of her tea. Cheeks flaring red, I just took a sip of my own. Staring at the window.

"Anyways… my mother made the implant that's in my head and my dad made the AI that uses it. So, always, got a part of em with me," I changed topic. I could go off on how I now know mom's alive, but, doesn't seem like the best time to say "Hey, I thought my mom was dead, but no she's in cryo until there's a cure." Not while she's mourning her family.

"Thank you, Scott," Suvi smiled again. We simply continued to stand there, sipping the tea, until it was gone. I think that's just what Suvi needed right now.

"Scott, can you come back up to the bridge? Something… odd has popped up," Kallo requested. Yes! An actual mission rather than us just meandering around the cluster! I eagerly made my way up there, even beating Suvi, though she had to go put her things back. Upon hearing the bridge door open, Kallo quickly spun around in his chair.

"Scott, on the Salarian ark, was anything… strange? Out of place?" he questioned. This seemed serious. So that means jokes to a minimum.

"Besides exalted Krogan, relics, and getting jabbed in the neck? Honestly, no. Why do you ask?" I raised a brow.

"A few hours ago, we received this. You were out at the time else I would have told you sooner." Kallo keyed his console.

"Hello, Ryder. I don't think the Salarian ark was captured by chance. If you want to know more, meet me at these coordinates," a Salarian voice instructed.

"That's all. Think it's some kind of hoax?" Kallo questioned.

"Well…" I mused. "I suppose just stumbling on the Salarians is a bit convenient. Not impossible, but certainly convenient. Either way, we don't have much else to do. Where are those coordinates?"

"I suppose there's no harm in making sure. Coordinates are on Havarl, near Daar Pelaav," Kallo answered.

"Alright, no need to rush, but get us heading that way," I ordered. Jaal might want to know this. Didn't he say something about meeting his family on Havarl?

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The journey to Havarl, much like the journey to Eos, was short. Hopefully, our contact would be there, and this wouldn't be a wild goose chase. Either way, at least Jaal would be able to get that meeting with his mother he had been so interested in. Which, apparently, she is a busy woman, and
would be able to make a small gap in her schedule for later. Wonder how Peebee is gonna feel about that.

Vetra, Peebee, Jaal, and Drack. That's who's coming with me. Vetra? Come on, even need to ask? Peebee and Jaal? Well they'll be out to meet Jaal's mom later, so, have em ready now. Drack? We're meeting with some shady contact talking about a conspiracy on the Salarian ark. Would be nice having a bit intimidating bruiser for show.

The sky was mostly dark, but the sun creeping over the tree line. Dawn, I suppose. The only thing keeping more of the sky from being lit might be shade from the planet. The jungle was still just as thick and lush as it was before.

"So, I know the vault is fixing all the mutations. Are these plants not mutated? Or…?" Drack questioned.

"Anything already alive and mutated won't lose the mutations. However, the next generation, according to our observations so far, lack any mutations. Smaller, less poisonous. When it comes to animals, less aggressive," Jaal explained. "In a jungle this old I wouldn't expect many visual changes for many years."

"Stop by the Daar or head right to the meeting point?" Vetra questioned.

"Eh, I'd say meeting spot. We'll be at the Daar waiting for the other meeting anyway," I shrugged. Without need of reply, I started to lead the others along the jungle floor rather than the bridge to the Daar. We travelled close together, cautiously, weapons out. The size of our group and our alert nature kept any potential predators at bay. They didn't want to bite off more than they could chew after all. Plus, staying in the open? Less ground for them to sneak up, even the cloaking Challyrlion.

The coordinates led us down into the chasm in the area, the same one we ventured down into in order to find the third Monolith and the sages of Mithrava. There were still plenty of Remnant bots down there, replacing the ones previously destroyed. But, I swear, something about activating the Vault makes the Remnant less hostile. I wouldn't call them docile, but they'd let you get a whole lot closer before they started to glow red, warning you to back off. In result, we managed to pass through without a fight. Despite feeling a bit uncomfortable.

"Strange. Reports on other worlds say the Remnant are still very protective. Why not with you?" Jaal murmured.

"Maybe they recognize the one who activated the Vault? Some kind of… accepted or valid input? I dunno," I suggested. The answer seemed to satisfy Jaal, and he remained silent. We climbed over a Remnant structure. Nothing was there. Nothing of interest in the watery grove. Not that we could see, at any rate. We jumped down, wading through the water by a kind of crate of Angaran make, and then heard a rumbling in the air. Looked up, and a Kett dropship had descended to greet us. My squad turned on a dime, weapons raised and aiming at whatever is about to drop. Despite feeling a bit uncomfortable.

"Strange. Reports on other worlds say the Remnant are still very protective. Why not with you?" Jaal murmured.

"Five Chosen and an Anointed. Three each side. The very second they dropped, they were riddled with bullets. The Anointed was the only one who managed to survive the airdrop, but his shields didn't. And what does that mean kiddies? That's right! I put a bullet right into his brain!"

"Alright, this all some sort of very poorly executed trap, or what?" I grumbled. "Look around. See if there was ever anything of actual purpose here." I just ran my hand over my face in annoyance as the others spread out, Jaal checking the crate we were already standing by.
"Hm. Kett capture gear. Heavy restraints, net launcher, a vial and injector. Probably knocks the target out," Jaal murmured as he checked inside. "But only enough for one target."

"So, what? Kill all but their target? Which was probably me? Or just try and nab me before anyone noticed?" I questioned, still annoyed.

"Probably trying to capture me. Sorry about that," A Salarian voice called out, rather formally, from a short distance. Vetra, out of instinct, turned so that her rifle was facing the unexpected newcomer, but quickly raised her weapon. He was clutching his right side on first approach, but released. Couldn't see green Salarian blood in his clothes, so maybe not wounded. "Though, if you'd broken a sweat, I'd be sorrier," he allowed a smirk to sneak through.

"Suppose that's the benefit of having weapons already out as a very obvious enemy attempts an airdrop right on top of you," I remarked. "So, you our little conspiracy theorist?"

"To put it bluntly, yes. Major Saelen Varn, STG. Retired, of course," he introduced, holding his hand out gentlemanly. Compare that with his black suit with white trim, looking like a Salarian tux, I'd say we have a Mr. Bond on our hands.

"If those spy movies ever taught me anything is that a spy retirement plan is much easier said than done," I joked. A bit more seriously, I added. "After all, those skills don't really ever go away. Though, I'll take your word for it. Good for you, fresh start."

"Hm, yes, quite," Saelen chuckled ruefully. "I'm sure I'll enjoy mine when I find it. So!" he clasped his hands together at chest level as he began, pacing in the knee-deep waters we were wading in. "Let's be frank. There are too many inconsistencies aboard our ark. They only make sense if someone betrayed us to the Kett. My best subject is a biologist, Dr. Aden. Unfortunately, my evidence is thin. I need a Pathfinder to verify what I've found. Else I risk arresting an innocent man."

"When exactly do you believe the betrayal first happened?" I questioned. If he believes before first contact with the Kett, well, I just want to make sure he suspects after some sort of pursuit with the ark.

"When we first encountered a lone Kett ship, our hails were ignored, and the ship sent fighters after us, as well as its own cannons firing in an attempt to disable the ship. We managed to escape, though were being chased. At some point, I can't quite pinpoint when, they seemed to beat us to our random escape vector. Before the ship was finally cornered and handed over. Somewhere during that pursuit must be when the betrayal began," Saelen explained, and passed my test.

"And why Dr. Aden?" Vetra spoke the very question I was about to.

"He's an ex-military biologist from the early-wake up team. He claims to be studying the Kett. As for why... I intend to ask him." Hm… that in and of itself isn't much to make a case out of, but that's what an investigation would be about, right? Either finding proof of his guilt, or he's an innocent man.

"And why contact me and not Raeka?"

"I trust Raeka implicitly. Her team? I can't. She is aware of my investigation, and has lent subtle aid where she can, but unfortunately, she is having little luck getting anything out of the bridge crew. You, are obviously trustworthy. Otherwise, you wouldn't have saved our ark in the first place."
"Alright, so how do we catch the traitor?" I folded my arms over my chest, listening closely.

"I only have two leads left. Dr. Aden's equipment, and a Kett who might be his handler. I need you and your SAM to analyze both. If we can show that Aden's in regular contact with the Kett, that would prove he's the one," Saelen answered.

"And obviously, if he's not the one you probably have another suspect. So, what's the punishment for Kett collaborators? Probably a lot cleaner than Kadara's," I joked.

"Most would settle for an angry mob. Though, I like to think justice hitched a ride out here with us. Now, this must be watertight. Good luck," the Salarian nodded. He then turned to leave. Probably had a shuttle stashed nearby. As he walked away, he quickly typed on his Omni-tool, the coordinates transferred successfully. Both on Voeld. Wonderful…

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The shuttle touched down at what Jaal explained was a Resistance facility on Havarl, located in one of the planet's larger settlements. Wasn't far from Daar Pelaav, else we'd have just flown the Tempest over. Aside from the pilot, Jaal, Peebee, and I were the only occupants. I didn't expect to spend much time here. Jaal's mom, and then he wanted to show us the house his family owns. The house he grew up in. I suppose most of the attention will find its way off me once Jaal drops the news of him and Peebee. We disembarked the shuttle and found ourselves in a relatively empty hallway, a few plants, and-

"Jaal!" A woman shouted with utmost excitement. Yep. That's his mother alright. She was running from down the hall to see her son. Despite having many other children, I know that's how mothers are. Well, the good ones at any rate. She was laughing and beaming, the happiness even infecting Jaal as the two embraced. "Wait, you wanted to meet, there's not bad news, is there?" she stopped to ask. I figured Jaal might have told her not to worry, but, as my own mother was fond of saying, it's her job to worry.

"No, no," Jaal chuckled. "The Pathfinder is interested in where I grew up, and-" Jaal began to explain, growing a bit more awkward by the end.

"Oh, what a relief. With everything that happened with your brothers and sister," she gave a sigh of relief. "It's a pleasure to meet a friend that Jaal speaks so highly of. I'm Sahuna Ama Darav, Jaal's true mother," she smiled.


"He's my favorite. Smart, loyal, kind. A great shot. Writes poetry… sews," Sahuna listed off. Peebee giggled as Jaal looked a bit flushed, embarrassed. I doubted she meant the whole favorite thing, she doesn't seem like that kind of mom.

"Mother…" Jaal coughed. Now Sahuna giggled.

"And? Who's your other friend?" Now Peebee began to wring her hands, looking down. I never thought I'd see her THIS embarrassed.

"This is… Pelessaria B'Sayle," Jaal introduced, gesturing at her. "She prefers to go by Peebee, and… we're…" Jaal seemed to have an awkward time putting the words together. Though Sahuna's eyes began to widen, a grin starting to form.

"Together," Peebee finished with awkward cheer, waving a hand. Sahuna wrapped Peebee in a hug,
"I was beginning to believe no one would ever capture my little boy's heart!" she exclaimed cheerfully. She then released Peebee and looked straight at Jaal. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she demanded.

"Uh… well…"

"Is it because she's not Angara? You know I wouldn't care about that! Is it-" she began a compassionate little rant.

"They were working through it, Sahuna," I chuckled, saving my two friends from a near frantic mother.

"Oh, of course," Sahuna chuckled again, shaking her head. "Forgive me," she turned to Peebee. "I've just seen my son so lost and confused for so long with nothing I could do, that this has just made me very excitable."

"It's nice to meet you," Peebee shuffled her feet.

"And it's so nice to meet you. I wish I could stay longer, but I was already late for a Resistance meeting. Stay clear," she apologized.

"You too, mother," Jaal ended, as she smiled again and brushed by us. "Every child is her favorite," Jaal chuckled. "Come. My home isn't far." Jaal quickly led us through the Resistance building and out into the city's streets. Most Angara were surprised to see us, but must have recognized Jaal and let us be. Soon, closer to the city's outskirts, there were plenty larger buildings that Jaal pointed out as residential. And we began to approach one.

"They've known to expect you. They'll be in the main living room at the entrance. I've also ensured they take it easy with you both," Jaal reassured. He opened the door. Peebee seemed to fall behind me a bit, shy, it seems.

"Everyone, this is Scott," he introduced, noticing Peebee fall behind a bit. I gave my own quick greeting.

"Look who the Kaerkyn dragged in," an older looking man laughed.

"Welcome back, Jaal!" an even older man greeted.

"And this," Jaal gently urged Peebee out from behind me. "Is Peebee. We're… courting." Several of the males raised their arms in the air as a celebratory cheer and several of the females ran to embrace Jaal and Peebee together, welcoming her, proclaiming how happy they were someone finally caught Jaal's eye. I also noticed a few of the more elderly family members not react, perhaps a bit uneasy, but not saying anything about it.

"This is where I spent most of my days growing up," Jaal had to shout over the voices of his family just so I could hear him even though he was next to me. "Me. My sister, Koana," he began pointing to the corresponding family members. "Our cousin, Etta, brother Finn, then Bavsil, Rollu,"

"Hey Jaal, hey human," an Angara greeted. I recognized him, Baranjj, from the Roekaar fiasco. Peebee seemed to be caught up in several questions with the female family. Jaal had nudged his head in a direction away, must have wanted to show me something. This room was large. A few tables, some windows for natural light, carpets, and a kind of drapery with a symbol I didn't recognize. Perhaps a symbol of their clan? Not to mention the occasional little one running around.

"We like to live like this," Jaal shrugged. He opened another door. I saw a staircase nearby, but this was his goal. "This is my room. My tiny sanctuary," he gestured to the small space. The sounds of the family were mostly gone now. A bed, a desk, a few portraits, looking self-made along the walls. A dresser for clothes. And that was it.

"You must dream of a big place of your own," I remarked.

"Sometimes… maybe?" Jaal chuckled. "It doesn't matter. This'll always be my home." His eyes caught onto some kind of… thing, on his bed. "Oh, no," he whispered. "Who put this here?" He picked it up, turning and sitting on the bed, opening it. I peered inside.

"Schematics?"

"When I was seven, my aunt stole a Kett weapon for me. So, I took it apart. To learn," he explained. I took another look inside. A small, curled up, dried out, dead, insect.

"And that is… was… a Kaerkyn?" I asked a bit confused.

"Pet Kaerkyn. Alfit. He died. So, I also took him apart." Uh… Well, at least Jaal seemed to recognize just how weird that sounded.

"The vast majority of humans… yeah, we tend to not do that with beloved pets…" Jaal then chuckled, shaking his head.

"I never show people these things. But, I feel like we're… family."

"I'm glad Evfra threw you on my ship," I smiled, patting him on the back. Jaal smiled in reply. He, the rest of the crew, they really do feel like family. A family of dysfunctional goofballs with two people, being Cora and Lexi, who are actual functioning adults that try to keep us from doing anything too incredibly stupid, and then fail each and every time. And it just so happens that two pairs of those dysfunctional goofballs are fucking.

"Hey, there's one more thing you might like," Jaal stood from the bed. "Sit there," he pointed to a spot on the ground. Alright… Jaal began digging through a kind of chest in the corner of the room for something

"Been interesting so far. Think Peebee will be alright out there?" I asked. Jaal seemed to find what he was looking for.

"She should be. Just introducing her with the others," Jaal reassured.

"A lot of others," I reminded. Jaal seemed to catch on.

"Oh… Well… here, first this," he returned, setting the object between us both. He turned it on. A massive hologram of the galaxy, bathed in blue light appeared over us.

"Wow… You made this?" I asked as I studied the map.

"Long ago. It's not accurate," he admitted. "More of a dream, really." "Just one more thing I want to take apart, and… figure out…"

"Me too buddy. Me too." The door opened.

"Where have you- Woah…" Peebee murmured, the door now closing behind her.
"Sorry. I wanted to show Scott some things while you met the family," Jaal meekly answered.

"Oh… well, it's just a lot of family…" Peebee answered, still staring at the hologram. "What is this?"

"I made this. A long time ago. It's a display of our Galaxy. Though, inaccurate," he explained.

"It's beautiful…" Peebee sat down beside Jaal. Leaning against him. I decided I'd let them have their moment. I stood to leave the room. How bad could it be out there after all?

Right?

I was wrong.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I was rather annoyed right now. No, nothing to do with the massive unrelenting horde that is Jaal's family, that was over and done a while ago by now. Both of our leads from Saelen on Voeld were dead ends. Dr. Aden's equipment had traces of chemical compounds and other biomaterial used in Kett exaltation, but, the guy is a biologist. Hardly conclusive when it's just traces. Plus, the equipment was in the middle of Techiix. As for the Kett handler, he had a Milky Way comm device implanted within his body. Resembled Salarian encryptions. But that does nothing to implicate Dr. Aden.

I wasn't annoyed that we cleared an innocent man. I was annoyed that we took the trip to Voeld and then endured the cold, despite vault activity and our armor, and didn't get anything out of it. As it stands now, I gave Raeka a call on our QEC. And she just answered.

"Ah, Ryder, pleasure to hear from you. Need anything?" she greeted.

"Hey Raeka. Calling because my investigations to help a Major Saelen Varn have stalled," I explained.

"Shouldn't have been surprised to hear you were helping Major Varn's investigation," she remarked.

"Ah, well, guess I'm nosy. How well you know Saelen?"

"I've met him once or twice. A remarkable agent, despite his age. Unfortunately, my own attempts to help him have stalled," she explained.

"Yeah that's what he told me. What's your take on the whole thing?"

"It seems monstrous," she lowered and shook her head sadly. "But the more I think about it, the more facts seem to fit. Anyways, I've tried enlisting the help of Ark leadership. But they've either been busy, unhelpful, or both. I've been thinking that we get… creative. One of the Ark officers who woke early, Rand Lon, has an apartment here on the Nexus. Since I'm already here, why don't you just wait while I go check it out. Save you a trip," she offered.

"Appreciate it, Raeka. I'll be waiting for the call." Raeka nodded in response and ended the call.

So, I took a seat on one of the couches around the comm room, and just waited. Close to an hour later, I got a call back.

"Ryder, Raeka. Investigated the Apartment. No explicit proof, but leads. Novetamine on one of the
plants, it's a neuro depressant. Obviously, wouldn't mention it if it was natural to this plant. A
console with its data recently scrubbed, and dust traces with a Scourge radiation count from a
remote world. Not from the same system as the Nexus. Seems to be from Elaaden."

"Hm, not much Kett presence there, but assuming Rand Lon didn't exactly have much business
there. Anyways, thanks Raeka, we'll head straight there." The call ended, and we got ourselves a

"At once. And… Scott, could I have research room access?" he requested.

"I didn't even know you didn't have it. What for?" I asked curiously.

"Just hoping to research something in my spare time. Oh, would you care to help?" he asked.

"Sure," I shrugged, even though I knew he wouldn't see.

"Suvi, would you take the helm for a little while? Thanks. Alright, just meet me there, if you
please." I made my way down from the conference room to the 'research room.' Though, honestly,
I just call this the big room with a holo table that links everything on the second and third floor.
Kallo was just now approaching. "It's preliminary, but all the data we've gathered on the Scourge
should be good for something," he began, typing away at a console on the holo table. Schematics.
And I recognized the shape.

"Our drive core?" I raised a brow.

"I want to research new systems. Sensors, shields, EMP defenses, to help ANY ship tackle the
Scourge. I'm using Lucille's old blueprints as a baseline. I can 'read' them from memory. But if you
and SAM can help, I'd appreciate it," he requested.

"Well you don't want to ask me for help. I think I could understand the basics but anything beyond
that? Yeah, I'd just be a fucking monkey bashing two rocks together. SAM though, go right ahead,"
I answered. "If you want someone who REALLY knows the ship…" I trailed off, the implication
clear.

"Gil… I know…" Kallo sighed. "We barely speak these days. I thought it was best. And yet, it was
his redesigns that got me thinking. Funny. Most Salarians leap at innovation."

"Who knows? Maybe a pushy mammal who forgets stuff might be the perspective you need," I
shrugged. Kallo stared at the drive core schematic for a moment, thoughtfully.

"We forget that all our technology didn't just appear. Someone invented it. Someone cared," he
suspect he was saying this aloud simply for himself. Despite it being his own thoughts, he needed
to physically hear it. "Any advice on how to ask him?"

"Just be sincere. Honesty and humility go a long way," I reassured, patting Kallo on the back. Kallo
opened and typed on his Omni-tool.

"Gil, may I get a moment of your time?" the Salarian requested.

"Uh, sure? Be right there," he answered, a bit confused. The call ended. Kallo glanced at me. I
smirked, nodded. The doors to the cargo bay opened a moment later, revealing Gil with a brow
raised. "What now? Your precious ship is running just like you wanted."

"I'm…" Kallo closed his eyes and sighed, opening them again. "Researching new systems. To
handle the Scourge. I… could use your… expert opinion. Please." If I was watching this from behind a screen, I might have laughed at the effort that took Kallo.

"Sticking to the old school?" Gil crossed his arms over his chest.

"I… don't have to," Kallo answered. Gil nodded and then turned to the schematics and the notes attached.

"No sense reinventing the wheel. Though you'd need better secondary's in place. Here…” he began typing at the console. Kallo paying close attention. I took my leave. I wouldn't understand any of that techno mumbo jumbo. I was gradually making my way back to my quarters, just gonna use the ladders by the bridge, when the door opened in front of me to admit Peebee.

"Oh, hey, Scott. You know what keeps coming back to me? Even though it was a few days ago? I still find myself shuddering at being caught in the Archon's trap. Wondering what he meant to do with you, to the rest of us. To Jaal," she muttered. Hm, guess she really hasn't had a chance to talk with me. Spending that recovery time with Jaal, me spending my own with Vetra. "And you died to get out of that trap. Heh, I like to think of myself as daring and death defying, but… shit," she muttered.

"You are daring, Peebee. And I'm very competitive. I had to up my game," I joked. Got a laugh out of Peebee. Got her out of the more solemn mood.

"Well, you win. Jackass."

"Hey, what can I say? One of my favorite things to watch back when I was a teen was Jackass. Bunch of idiots who were great friends doing all kinds of horrendously stupid things that were either extremely disgusting, like the port-a-potty catapult, or stupid shit like when they made a rocket dildo and tried to launch it at this guy's ass," I chuckled, plenty of those clips coming back to mind. Knoxville was one helluva crazy motherfucker.

"The fuck?!" Peebee laughed. "Alright, I gotta see this shit sometime." I quickly opened my Omni-tool and found the three Jackass movies in my personal library and sent it to her. "I'm going back to my room and watching this." she turned, ignoring what her original destination was, and I made my way down the ladder back to my room.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Sometimes I really don't understand how the fuck our technology works. From the data on those particles Raeka scanned, SAM had determined a specific area that those particles would have originated from. Seriously, how the hell?! I just need to stop questioning it sometimes, and just understand that our eggheads, and our AI, are really fucking smart.

The Nomad crested one more dune before those coordinates, Jaal, Vetra, and Drack in the vehicle with me. A crashed shuttle. Still burning, oddly enough. We parked alongside the shuttle. Nothing of interest. I ordered the others to look around. I didn't expect to find-

Footprints. How the hell are there still footprints here? Several different sets and, ah, I see. Dragging something. That would help make a longer lasting trail. The others followed, weapons ready. Up and over another dune. A small scavenger outpost. Only thing of note the trail could possibly lead to. And still a ways away. An Adhi out in the open, could probably smell us. And I could see a scav in the distance. We got down on the edge of the dune. Jaal didn't need me to tell him to ready his rifle, as I readied mine. Using the scope, I saw two more Adhi, an Asari by the
first, and another scav further back.

"Vetra, Drack, go back and get the Nomad, we'll likely need to get down quickly soon. Jaal, you take the one out on the right, I'll get the one on the left," I ordered Jaal. He nodded, and set his sights as did I. Once Vetra confirmed she and Drack were back in the Nomad, I held my breath steady, and pulled the trigger. Both scav heads exploded. The Adhi began to run towards us, though had a long way to run. The Asari's heads shot in our direction, locking on us. Looks like she saw the glint of the scope. Jaal and I put down the rest of the Adhi, as the Asari, and any other scavs, retreated into cover.

The Nomad pulled up alongside us, Jaal and I climbing into the back as Vetra raced it down to intercept those scavs. She drove it around the back, managing to clothesline one of the scavs with the vehicle. The Nomad stopped amongst the surprise, and we got out, quickly wiping out the poorly trained scavs. Only a few were left anyway, and we ensured the Asari never got the chance for the biotics. But it seemed those scavs had a guest. A rather familiar looking Salarian. Saelen.

He was alive, barely, by the looks of it. Dried, maybe hurt a bit. Not sure. I got out both my canteen and some Medi-gel. I searched him over for wounds, finding only a few scratches, and then let him drink from the canteen, without letting him chug it. Though, it seems his own training stayed with him, as he didn't need much control. I helped him to his feet.

"What happened to you, Saelen?" I questioned.

"Saelen?" he raised a brow, a humorous light in his eyes. "Very familiar for our first real meeting."
Uh, what? How long has he been without water?

"I contacted you. Hoped one of my suspects would do something reckless. Unfortunately," he groaned in pain, holding his head. "He did. I imagine I was supposed to vanish out here while he used my cloak device. Any 'Saelen,' you met was Dr. Aden in disguise," he explained.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait," I waved my hands in front of me. "You, Aden, whatever and whoever the fuck, asked me to track some leads that could implicate him."

"Let me guess. Aden asked you to scan those leads? I suspected the traitor was hiding messages on optical encoders," he rubbed his chin. "Those messages were the real proof I needed. But a powerful scanner like yours would wipe them. Aden used you," he grunted in pain again. "And my investigation, to cover his tracks. Canny bastard." I raised a brow.

"And as you said you used me to try and get a suspect to do something rash." I then sighed. "Well he wasn't working alone. Examined the apartment of an officer, Rand Lon. Clues there led me to you."

"Interesting," Saelen rubbed his chin again. "That confirms my suspicions... Everything comes back to our ark. Aden didn't have the clearance to alter logs or affect the nav computer, yet he's obviously guilty. I suspect Aden is the front man for a conspiracy involving the Kett. He's the key to blowing it open."

"Alright, I'm a bit skeptical right now, but that might just be because I'm really annoyed right now. So, let's just assume in a clear head I'd believe you. If you're right, Aden got rid of any leads we had on him, and Rand has likely disappeared."

"Ah yes! He forgot the dart he poisoned me with!" Saelen exclaimed. "Still in there with the ballistics intact!" he pulled the dart out of his neck, a small trail of green blood sticking to it and leaking out of the pinprick on his neck. Contact Aden, feign ignorance, ask for a meeting. I'll be
there to arrest him!"

"Uh, you don't seem to have transport," I reminded.

"Oh. Quite right. Could I trouble you for more assistance?"

"Come on, we can squeeze you in," I turned with a wave of the hand. Drack took the passenger seat, making it easier for the thin Salarian to fit between Jaal and Vetra. "So, where should we meet Aden?"

"The caves on Kadara that might be suitable," SAM suggested.

"And we could stop at the bar," Drack added.

"Works for me," I shrugged. "Send the word, SAM."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The Tempest had landed at Ditaeon rather than the port itself so Saelen could remain unnoticed. Though once the ground team was off, it did leave to land at the port instead. And Aden, wherever he was, must have been rather eager to have this meeting happen. We had to get there ahead of time so Saelen could hide nearby, appear when the time was right. We were running short on that extra time. It would be just inside the caves that I knew led to a Collective base. Saelen simply hid behind a large column in the cave, listening. Drack and Vetra were with me. Watching for any kind of play.

Aden, disguised as Saelen, arrived.

"Did you investigate those leads?" he questioned. Saelen had discussed how the meeting should go earlier. Waste no time, call him out. Our movements with Aden made it so that his back was to the caves. Something a spy like Saelen would never have allowed to happen.

"I learned you're a Kett collaborator and murderer," I accused, arms over my chest.

"Who's one victim short," Saelen stepped out from behind the column. Aden raised a brow, and pressed a button on his Omni-tool. His disguise had given him red skin and an older voice like Saelen. Now it was blue skin, younger voice.

"So, it's true. Old spies really do live forever," he remarked.

"This old spy would punch you if he wasn't-" he angrily groaned again. "Carrying evidence in his chest."

"I tried to give you a decent burial major. There was no time to convince you of our cause," Aden mused.

"Save it, Aden. You betrayed your people. I'm going to attribute every mutilated and tortured corpse on that ark to your doing. You'll never see daylight again," I growled. Drack slammed his fist into an open palm. Daring him to try something.

"My people agreed to this. Several of us woke up early, prepared the ark. Then we found the Kett. An unstoppable enemy. So, we made a pact. Sacrifice our Ark to the Kett, learn their secrets, so one day we could destroy them along with their exaltation," Aden explained.
"Two things. One, did any of those who didn't wake up first agree to this? And two, 'Hey I know how to not get exalted, get ourselves exalted!' You fucking idiot." I shook my head in disdain.

"Listen. There is an EMPIRE of Kett beyond Heleus. All powerful conquerors who will invade eventually."

"We know. And all powerful? Really? Something all powerful would have beaten us already and unlocked the secrets of the Remnant already," I retorted.

"The secrets we learned could stop our extinction before it begins. Give us our freedom, and they're yours. Don't let this go to waste. Vassals, potential weak points, exaltation secrets."

"Secrets we can't confirm, and you could have pulled out of your cloaca," Saelen pointed out. I heard Drack snort at that.

"We sacrificed civilians for this Major! Will you let that be for nothing?" Aden argued.

"Honestly I'd bet it was for nothing anyway. I don't see what secrets of Exaltation could do for us. Vassals? Learning what Kett control what areas? Also, doesn't seem useful. Potential weak points? Key word, potential. And at the end of the day, I don't see HOW you could have possibly gained any of this information when most of you were in cryo, and those who weren't in cryo were being tortured by Kett experiments! Put this traitor where he belongs, Major."

"I've got suggestions if you need em," Drack offered.

"Arrest me and you'll never find the others," Aden warned.

"I've got nothing but time to look. I'm retired, remember?" Saelen slapped some cuffs onto Aden's wrists. He turned to look at me. "My thanks, Ryder. Now, I need a militia pick up, a doctor, and the biggest drink on the Nexus. You don't need to give me a ride all the way back there," Saelen reassured. I gave the old spy a nod, and let him be.

"Come on, Umi's expecting me. Apparently, she's been mixing a drink she thinks could finally have an effect on me," Drack chuckled.

"I'll just let you too have fun there. I want to check in on a few contacts," Vetra remarked. "Scott, just remember. NEVER ask Umi to surprise you," she warned.

"I'll keep that in mind," I chuckled.

At the port itself, nothing had really changed much. Work was still being done in the slums, but the Port? Not much they could do there. The market seemed to have expanded, but barely. Was sizeable enough already. I told Drack to just go ahead so I could change out of my armor. Once that was done, and I was in more casual clothes, I found him standing right at the bar, with a human man slumped on the ground beside him.

"Do I even want to know?"

"Eh?" Drack looked back, a moment of confusion. Then glanced down. "Oh, this one." He nudged the unconscious man away with his foot, giving me room to stand beside him. He took a swig of his drink. Umi looking focused on a new concoction. Guess what she tried barely had an effect on the old man. "Some idiot who got talked into a headbutting contest with me by his buddies."

"Some buddies," I chuckled.
"Hm. Didn't even-" A man shoved my shoulder.

"Hey! You!" a man's voice, laced with intoxication and aggression called out. I rolled my eyes and turned halfway. Drack was raising a brow, glancing back.

"Not in my bar," Umi sighed, annoyed.


"Looks like someone wants a fight. You up for it, Scott?" Drack chuckled, looking up at me. Drack was looking very eager. He wanted it. And, I'll admit, it was kinda tempting. I had never been in a bar brawl before. I'll give him a chance.

"You know I am," I remarked to my friend. I turned back to the pirate. "Guess I shouldn't bother mentioning how many exiles I've killed, and that they tend to shoot first every single time?" The few times they haven't being when I already knew they had shot other innocent people? Alright.

"You start this, I'll finish it. Just like every other time." I was nose to nose with the man. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. He was frowning angrily. I was smiling confidently. I remembered all my hand-to-hand training in the Alliance. And all the other things Dad taught me. Combine that with SAM boosting perception, reaction times, strength, pain tolerance? Yeah, this drunk fuckhead doesn't stand a chance.

"Yeah? You and what army?" My smile grew wider. I chuckled confidently.

"I don't need an army. I've got a Krogan."

Drack set his glass down on the bar. He turned, head low so that his eyes could stare right into the pirate's. Drack made himself appear as large as he possibly could. Which was a-fucking-lot, being the massive old Krogan he is. Drack rocked his head to the left and right, cracking his neck as he growled. Rolling his shoulders back for the same effect.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" he questioned the pirate. Stepping real close to him. The pirate smiled. He turned back and several other of who I can only assume are his buddies also stepped closer. He swung his fist at me. I ducked. The punch threw the man off balance, putting most of his torso over me. I lifted him up over my head, and used his momentum to throw him onto the bar, letting his back slam onto it, before he rolled over onto the other side. Drack began laughing as I turned to face the others, a fist coming straight for my face. Thanks to SAM, I managed to use my arm and deflect the blow, giving me the opening to slam my right fist into his face.

Another pirate charged at Drack, bottle in hand, smashing it against his face. The force sent his head to the side, but the rest of his body was unmoved. I think I saw a cut or two on his cheek, but he was smiling as his head shot back. The pirate's face immediately filled with fear. He grabbed the pirate by the shoulder and launched his forehead into his, the pirate falling to a table, sending some drinks on it to the floor, angering the lone Salarian sitting there.

I was too busy watching that, Drack growling, as an Angara sent his fist into my face. Sent me to the bar as the punch stung, but I was conscious. I rolled my jaw, everything still in place. I faked the Angara man out, a feint with both my fists, before I kicked him in the chest, sending him back over another table, breaking more glass and rolling the table over.

Some other exile charged Drack, trying to push him back. He did, nudging Drack's back against the
bar, but then the old Krogan slammed his elbow down hard onto the exiles back. Ouch. The Angara got back up, drawing a pocket knife. He began slashing. My biotics flared to life and I sent out a push, sending him flying hard against the wall.

Drack then picked up some Turian woman and planted her stomach first on the bar, then pushed her down face first onto the floor. Some Salarian yelled out pathetically and charged at me wildly. Since I thought it was heading to Drack, he managed to surprise me and get me on my back on the ground. He managed to get one crazy punch onto my side, not even hurting anything as Drack picked him up and threw him to the side. I raised my hand and Drack grabbed it, helping me up.

The old bastard was beaming. Breathing steady, we saw we had more challengers. The rest of the bar's occupants started to approach. Drack and I both got into a stance, glanced at each other, chuckled, and then nodded.

They didn't stand a chance.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Only a mild sweat being broken, no real wounds on either us, and many an unconscious customer, whether from biotics or a punch of a Krogan, Umi only had Drack and I left. She slid a drink over to Drack, and one for me. Drack was still laughing.

"Vaul's almighty quads! I am getting too old for this shit!" The laughter dying down, but not the smile, he turned back to the bar, an eye still looking at me. "Scott, do me a favor?" he poured himself the drink. "Don't tell Kesh about this."

"I got you covered, old man," I nodded, Drack handed me a filled glass.

"That you do," we knocked our cups together. "Just… don't want her to worry." He took a swig of his drink at we looked at all the unconscious bodies that littered the floor. A job well done.

"Just be sure to help me out when Vetra hears about this."

Drack burst into laughter once more.
Revenge of the Movie Night

Chapter Notes

First seven pages worth aren't movie night and this movie I make use of that Angaran device thing.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Moshae had a favor to ask. One that was meant to benefit me, but it required going to Aya. Granted, we didn't have much else to do at the moment. The favor involved talking to other Angaran elders who lived through the Kett arrival. Get their perspectives. In the meantime, Jaal and Gil would finalize their little Angaran tech thing that should make one of our movies something we can feel. Probably what we'll do tonight. Essentially, I just spent the travel time by spending it with Vetra. No, not with a lack of clothes. Sleeping, rather. I really need to talk to her about whether or not she just wants to move into my cabin…

The ship had landed by now, and I had disembarked, taking a pleasant and deep breath of the fresh Aya air. The elders knew to expect me, and were waiting in various places around the city. Benches. They'd be keeping an eye out for me. I found the first in the memorial garden. A woman. She waved me over and I sat down beside her.

"Pathfinder. I'm Anaret," she introduced. The only sign of her age came with the voice. It just… sounded older. Wiser.

"Scott. So, Moshae said you remembered the Kett's first arrival?" I asked. She nodded.

"My father's oldest friend was chosen to be Voeld's ambassador to the Kett. The day he left, they embraced as brothers. All the Kett sent back was his badge. And a holo recording I wasn't allowed to watch. Never got the chance," she recounted solemnly. "I was too young to understand why everyone was scared. Why my father mourned for months." Well, they were clearly trying to scare the population.

"I can't imagine how terrifying that was for a child," I murmured.

"What frightened me was seeing how helpless my parents felt. All our leaders were confused and fearful. The terror made us hesitate. That's when the Kett struck. They'll try the same with you. Be ready," she warned. In the corner of my mind, I remembered those vids I saw of the reaper attack. I shook the thoughts out of my head.

"Can't wait… thanks, Anaret." She nodded in reply, and I let her be. I found the next by the market. A man sat in the shade. He just nudged his head towards him.

"Daanesk. Moshae wants you to hear a story, eh?" he remarked.

"That's what I'm here for. Anything that can help," I answered.

"Hm. They had just arrived. I was on a civilian shuttle to Voeld when we received a message: the spaceport was on lockdown. Security concerns due to the Kett. We were supposed to land on a
nearby moon and wait for the all clear. Instead of landing, our shuttle captain turned back. Said something felt wrong. Later, we learned it was a Kett transmission, to isolate us for capture. The captain had saved our lives," he remembered fondly.

"Damn. Couldn't have been more than a child during that," I mused.

"I was old enough to know my life would never be the same," he shrugged. "Go on. You're young, and much to do. Don't let this old man keep you," he smiled.

"Thanks for your time Daanesk. Good meeting you," I stood. The next elder should be by the Resistance HQ. I began thinking to myself. This favor was a minor one. But it's teaching me a bit about how the Kett prefer to operate. Oddly, it isn't really much that I saw during combat ops. Though, it could give me insight into larger Kett operations. So far, that amounts to using terror and mass hysteria as a weapon.

Send your enemy into chaos, and half the battle is already won. That idea isn't new, but I hadn't known to explicitly expect that from Kett. Then, diversions, distractions, smoke and mirrors. Trickery. I remembered my assaults on the two Kett bases. Eos and Voeld. Eos, the Commander was a brutish hot head, no real strategy. Voeld, that Commander had cunning. Attempts at misdirection. Holding his troops back to surprise us. I'll be keeping an eye out for both in the future. Now, I believe I saw the last of the elders. An old man, like the last one. But he was leaning back in the bench, arms crossed. With the look I got from him as I approached, I didn't expect this conversation to be friendly. Nonetheless, I sat down.

"Given I just talked with Anaret and Daanesk, I guess you're Vuhlren? Scott Ryder," I introduced, still trying to be friendly.

"Moshae wants me to tell you a story then, huh?" he grunted. "Let's get this over with. One of the Kett came to our city on Havarl to offer lavish gifts. We lined up along the street to watch the alien walk with our ambassador," he recounted bitterly, "As it passed, it stopped and knelt in front of me. I still dream of what it said. 'Young one, you are meant for greatness.'"

The old man shuddered, a haunted flash in his eyes. You'd have to be missing a brain to not see the connection and message he was sending.

"Fucking hell… Add that to the list of reasons my arrival had everyone on edge…" I murmured, looking down at my own hands, shuffling a bit in my seat uncomfortably.

"When I saw you walk with Paraan through our city… I hoped the guards would kill you," Heh, the old do get rather blunt.

Can't blame him.

"I will never trust outsiders again," He sounded… sad about that proclamation. And yet, that didn't mean it wasn't true. Everything that followed? I can understand that he genuinely, just, physically can't bring himself to do it.

"I understand. My story has some differences, of course, but I understand…" I murmured. Laura. The Geth. Or, the Heretics. I can't just forget the death counts on Eden Prime. On the Citadel. Let alone Laura.

Maybe I could learn to accept that difference in time.

But… as it stands, well, even if I had two Geth in front of me, one I knew to be from the Heretics, one from the 'true' Geth, I'd shoot them both without hesitation. At least I'll never have to deal with
that here. The old man glanced back at me, still managing a respectful nod of the head, and I let him be.

Before starting to talk with the elders, I had originally figured I'd just do that, then talk with Evfra, Paraan, and the Moshae afterwards. Small talk, mostly. Instead, well, I ain't exactly in the mood for that. Instead, I just made my way back to the ship. End goal? My quarters.

---

**Vetra Nyx**

Something's not right. Here I am, browsing the marketplace yet again, just as my little time waster, Scott walks by, I both wave and called out to him, and he didn't even seem to register it. I knew he'd just be talking with some old Angara about the Kett arrival, but one of them must have been pretty vivid. I followed him, all the way back to the Tempest, back to his quarters. I would have announced myself to him sooner, but, I didn't know if maybe, just maybe, he was spaced out and I had nothing to worry about. The door never shut behind him. Instead, I leaned to my side in the doorway. He sat on the couch, head in his hands. Something was hurting him, and I wanted to make it go away.

"Scott?" I began. His head shot up and he cursed quietly. As he quickly realized it was me, he began to settle back down, half-chuckling.

"Sorry, V, kinda caught me by surprise."

"You ok?" I tilted my head to the side, removed my visor, and clipped it to my shirt. Would let him see the sympathy there easier without a holo-interface.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he mumbled. I raised a brow-plate. "You're not leaving until you get a real answer, are you?" I shook my head. He let out a hollow chuckle. "Alright, alright. But, if you want me to tell you the story, I want you right here," he patted the seat beside him.

I smirked, mandibles flaring slightly, and rolled my eyes. Still, I did as requested. Sitting beside him, and then leaning against him, my head resting on his shoulder. I might have had to scoot my ass a bit further away so my head wasn't awkwardly resting on his. He wrapped his arm around my waist gently, letting out a deep breath.

"What happened?" I asked again.

"Last of the elders. His story, well, a part of it, I ended up making a connection I hadn't expected to," Scott murmured.

"Them?" I still didn't feel comfortable saying their name.

"Sorta. The Geth. The Heretics and the 'true' Geth. And which of the two was guilty for..." he stopped himself. "No. I've moved on, I've mourned. Now I've got you."

Inwardly, I smiled at the last part, but the rest still concerned me. Laura. "Remember how I was uneasy about those Batarians until I personally spoke with them?" he asked. I nodded. "Well, now that I know it was only a subset of the Geth that hit Eden Prime, I thought I'd be able to do what I did with those two Batarians. Let it go. But... I just can't make myself... absolve that portion of the Geth population from guilt. That just... feels wrong," he murmured.

"From the stories you told me, things to do with the Batarians were never really personal. Sure, you arrived at grisly scenes after the fact, but sounds like you didn't often fight them, or witness the events. While people died, it was people you couldn't put a name to. Someone like her? That'd be a
lot different. I mean… I keep it under control, and I'm able to separate Peebee and Lexi from it, but, I've had a hard time separating Asari from that… monster. Anyone one of them could be one of those… things, and I don't know. I don't want them getting to my sister," I explained. Scott sighed again, looking down as his hand rubbed my side gently. I doubt he even knew he was doing it.

"I still see that image from the vids. Clear as day…" Scott whispered.

"Tell me about her." He looked down, directly looking into my own eyes now. His mouth opened as if to argue, but then he stopped.

"You sure?" he asked for clarification. I nodded. Scott sighed.

"She was… my everything. When we met in boot camp, neither of us were afraid to hide our snark or sarcasm, even from the drill instructors. No amount of punishment fully got that out of our system," he chuckled, smiling. "But mixed in, just the perfect amount of… genuine… humanity. You know what I mean. Don't get all philosophical about not being a human yourself, it's a figure of speech," he defended, still chuckling. I just silently giggled, encouraging him to continue. "It wasn't easily shown. Well, maybe not easily identified. You'd start to pick out bits and pieces asking her about her family. Her past. Not that it was some kind of dramatic past, was pretty average, but it was all about HOW she talked about it. Where she placed her details. There was always some deep, meaningful perception of at least one thing in every story she told. Every explanation she gave. Or if not an understanding, then a question, or an understanding of the lack of understanding, if that makes any sort of sense," Scott shrugged.

"I think I understand. How somethings are just kinda… above that. That they just ARE," I remarked.

"Yeah, exactly!" Scott smiled. "So, she was… an idealist. A dreamer. I like to think myself the same, but I've been worn down by cynicism. When I first met her, she seemed… untouched by it. And I wanted to be more like her. As we got closer, I learned she had her doubts. Any sane person probably would. Yet, even in the doubts, she found something to hold onto. I always admired that. I think that's why she was so ecstatic about being the same company as the shamed granddaughter of the shamed General Williams because of Shanxi," Scott mused. "Maybe why the AI shit didn't drive her away…"

"When did you two become friends?" I asked, getting him back on track and away from the more depressing topics.

"Oh, pretty much right away we hit it off. What does a snarky sarcastic asshole do when he finds another snarky sarcastic asshole? Why they latch right onto each other to be snarky and sarcastic to everyone else. By our powers combined!" he exclaimed, chuckling. I let out a low laugh at him, just being the goofball. "But, yeah. Soon enough, while we both had other friends in the unit, we kept going back to each other. Just, best friends. I remember pulling a few pranks with her on other students. Or just plain on her. Not without retribution, mind you."

"Do I even want to know?" I smirked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. The worst of them, I had a little help with another boot camp buddy. We went online, got a twelve-inch vibrator, and hid it in her foot locker right before an inspection. She just took it in goddamn stride as the Drill Sergeant was doing what Drill Sergeants do," Scott barked in laughter. And I couldn't resist.

"What the hell did she do in retaliation?"
"Oh, she always had to one-up me. A Krogan fleshlight, an Elcor Dildo, a copy of a fucking Volus Fornax, and a folded up Hanar blow-up doll." Now it was my turn to burst into laughter. "Damn Drill Sergeant seemed to catch on, but still just yelled and yelled and yelled. And yet, he seemed to have a hard time keeping a straight face."

"So, how did all that evolve into love?" I asked, the laughter dying down.

"Well, I'll admit, I think I had been falling for her a bit sooner. Attractive woman, great personality, got along great with her. Guess it was bound to happen. And then bound to happen again," he wiggled a brow at me.

"Not working. Not now at least. Get on with it," I smirked.

"Aw you're not fun," he grumbled, obviously faking. "Well, it was our first shore leave. Already had a few successful combat ops under our belts, already saved each other's skins here or there. Squad went out on a bar crawl on Elysium. Alliance had rented out a smaller hotel for the soldiers on leave at the time. One room for each, in case any of them brought a hooker or boyfriend or girlfriend from home to visit. Alliance always had good deals there after the Blitz. So, bar crawl. Whole squad getting shitfaced. Memory is fuzzy at some point or other. Next thing either of us ever remembered? Waking up in her hotel room, naked, in the bed."

"Wow. And that turned into a lasting relationship?" I bumped him gently in the elbow, a bit of a tease. He rubbed the back of his head, cheeks going a bit red.

"Yeah, well I think we already had some sexual tension going on… After the initial shock, apologies, and shame, we… talked. Started coming to the conclusion that maybe… we wanted this. Despite the intoxication…"

"And?" I pushed.

"After we started to convince ourselves? We did it again. Except this time, sober, and we could remember it," he chuckled awkwardly.

"You're a mess," I laughed.

"Yeah well I'm your mess. Congrats," he retorted snarkily. "Anyways, the rest, you already know. More or less."

"I would have liked to meet her," I stated gently, looking into his eyes. "Sounds like my kind of girl."

"She would have loved to meet you too," he smiled. "If she's looking down from somewhere, well, she knows I struck gold." Now I smiled, and leaned up to give him a small kiss. "Knew that would work." I elbowed him in the side again, repressing the chuckles. As his own died, I had one more question.

"What did she look like?"

"What, so you can know what women to keep me away from?" Scott joked.


"Uh huh," he chuckled. "Black hair. Down to the neck. Perfect for running my fingers through… a bit shorter than me. Tan skin. Beautiful brown eyes. One of the greatest smiles I've ever seen..." he reminisced. "Tiny little button nose, some freckles on her cheeks. Thin, but strong. Hourglass
"Great ass? Tits?" I asked, smirking. Scott burst into laughter.

"Small and firm, like your ass. Same with her chest, though, you don't exactly have those," he shook his head, smiling.

"My kinda girl in more ways than one," I joked again.

"Really?" Scott raised a brow, humor in his eyes. "You know, I should take it as a point of pride that a bisexual fell in love with me."

"Oh? And why's that?" I smirked.

"Well, one benefit of it is that we could both appreciate a fine-looking woman who walks by." I feigned offense, though the sarcasm was evident in my voice.

"How dare you assume me so disloyal as to do such a thing. And shame on you," I fake-huffed.

"Hey, you can keep looking at the menu all you want. So long as you keep ordering Scott. I'm doing the same with you," he laughed. Now I raised a brow plate, still smirking. "You want me to explain why I feel pride?" I nodded. "Stop beating around the bush?" I nodded again. "Well, that means I won you over, despite having double the competition." I rolled my eyes, chuckling. We sat there in silence for a few minutes. Me just leaning against Scott, and him gently rubbing my hip. Just content with each other's presence.

"Vetra?" Scott looked down. I looked up. He smiled. "Thank you." Now I smiled, and tapped my forehead against his.

"I love you," I whispered.

"I love you too."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Couches have been moved, drinks have been gathered, snacks ready. Gil and Jaal just finished bringing in their device. I had just asked Gil to explain it.

"So, normally, this thing just sends out an electric pulse that resonates with the Angara somehow. For it to work on us, it'll be a bit more crude. I've hooked it up to these electrodes. One for each of us, that will send an electrical signal to our brains, give us the sensation the movie wants us to feel. Already gone through it with SAM, should all work well," he reassured.

"Won't having these little things on us get uncomfortable or something?" Vetra raised a brow.

"Eh, you'll get used to it. Your visor hardly bothers you, doesn't it?" he asked rhetorically. Vetra shrugged, conceding the point. Soon enough, the rest had all arrived. Gil ran through the same explanation for them. Just like before, I had one arm resting on the arm of the couch, and the other around a Turian leaning against me. Though I had to remove my arm and stand for yet another little introduction.

"Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, and Krogan, well, you already know what's going on. Got another movie night in store. Revenge of the Sith. Best of the prequels. Before we get started, I dearly wish we could have run through the clone wars before this, that series was god tier,
especially for character development that could have been so much better in the earlier prequels. Unfortunately, we don't have the time for a binge watch. Some new characters in this one get a much more developed story, and so does Dooku, even. But, enough of that. I know you all unfortunately remember the… lesser half of the previous movie we watched, but, I promise you, Revenge of the Sith does better. I won't say more. Just, hope you enjoy,” I nodded and sat back down. Vetra leaning against me once more. I felt the electrode thing on the back of my head, and the wire of Vetra's lightly brushing against my arm. SAM started the movie.

"Grievous is one of those characters I mentioned, by the way. The one with a much more detailed story fleshed out in the Clone Wars," I added, with his name on the crawl. The crawl which soon vanished, replaced by the yellow glow of a sun.

And drum beats. Bum Bum… Bum Bum… I chuckled quietly to myself. I was… excited. The pan lowered, showing the magnificently grand image of a Venator class star destroyer, painted in the colors of the Grand Army of the Republic.

I was erect. I was massively erect.

The drums continued as two starfighters zoomed by, flying low over the ship's hull, past it's turbo lasers. Jedi starfighters. They zoomed down, revealing the massive space battle taking place. Drack began chuckling. Luchrehulk control ships, cruisers, and even a few Seppie Dreadnaughts. They continued their flight. It was close quarters starship combat. And a swarm of fighters engaged in dog-fights. Republic ARC-170's likely supplemented by V-Wings and Y-Wings facing off against all manner of Vulture Droids, Tri-Fighters, and likely no small amount of HYENA bombers. The device gave me a feeling of… determination. Resolve. Yet, at the same time, it didn't feel… direct. Perhaps it's more like the device tells us what the characters are feeling to give a better understanding.

The Jedi starfighters had no qualms about getting up close and personal to the larger CIS ships. Their turbolasers wouldn't be focused on them after all. The starfighters flew through a large explosion caused by a Venator's guns destroying what may have been a fuel pod on a large Confederacy ship. Explosions always make Drack happy. And it was immediately followed up by a precision beam shot from the lower hangar of another Venator, piercing and destroying another smaller ship, shearing it in two. The camera zoomed in to the cockpits of those fighters. I don't think anyone was surprised by its occupants. Anakin and Kenobi had eyes on Grievous' ship.

And the swarms of Vulture droids guarding it. Which, of course, earned a sarcastic comment from Kenobi. The device communicated annoyance. Light nerves.

"Those droids said something. Just more gibberish?" Vetra asked.

"Yeah. Gibberish is… not uncommon," I chuckled. They needed reinforcements. Which came in the form of an ARC fighter squadron. The foils on their wings opened.

"Huh, like an X-Wing. Earlier model?" Jaal questioned.

"Definitely an inspiration for the design. But… I dunno. I think I like the ARC better. More people, rear gun," Liam trailed off. True, that Rear gun would be quite handy if anyone tried to get behind you. Not sure what the guy in the middle was for.

This is where the fun begins… Drack began chuckling again, expecting a satisfying dog fight. I almost did too, from the almost giddy feeling sent out by the Angaran machine. Two swarms of fighters moving to practically collide with one another. Hectic is an understatement. Anakin was not content to just let those clones fight them off on their own. Noble of him, but at the same time,
their mission is important, as Obi-Wan countered. A gray area. A feeling of being torn.

"And that is why I've always preferred working in smaller teams. Makes it a lot easier to decide you need to help out your buddy," Drack murmured, his chuckling had quickly died down. Guess he had some sort of connection to older days. He has a point. I don't know if I'd be able to focus on the mission.

Missiles were trailing both the Jedi. Anakin had a much easier time fixing that little problem with the help of more fancy flying. Kenobi however? After watching a Separatist ship crash into another, which was a glorious sight, kinda like watching the Star Destroyer crash into another in Rogue One, except that had more of a focus, the missiles instead shot past him. Impacting a bunch of small metal balls coming rather close to him. Buzz droids.

"A nightmare for any pilot," Kallo shuddered as he watched them get to work. Crawling around his ship's hull, cutting into systems, ripping his droid apart. Anakin just began shooting them, got a few but also clipped his wing.

"Kid's got balls," Gil chuckled. "For further evidence, see our next example." Anakin flew beside him and scraped his wing against Kenobi's crushing a few, knocking over a few others, though gaining an unwanted passenger. Fortunately, R2 was much craftier than the Astromech Kenobi had, and used a zapper thing to neutralize the threat. All left for the two was to get into the hangar. Which required the shields to be blasted, venting atmosphere as an emergency blast door closed.

"And the next example." The two ships narrowly fit inside, landing rough along the hangar, their momentum still carrying them along as the Jedi quickly disembarked, beginning their fight with the battle droids. Confidence. Focus. Some deflections, some slices, some dices, and the fight was over.

"Wouldn't it be easier for the droids if they didn't charge the people with bloody laser swords?" Lexi exclaimed. And there were a lot of battle droids too. Yet, it didn't matter. The Jedi had their destination.

Ah, there he is! My favorite asthmatic cyborg! With his Magnaguard flanking him.

"Wait, why have droids working the controls of the ship, rather than just having their intelligence INSIDE the ship systems?" Cora then questioned. I'll be honest, I didn't have a good answer.

Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger, Roger... and the droids went on and on. Just, repeating the same phrase.

I felt… that feeling when you have the desire to roll your eyes. And yet it's not necessarily annoyance. You know you can handle it, and it's not really hindering you, but another step.

"Sid would have laughed," Vetra remarked. She was probably right. R2 then found himself with company, and the Jedi with a stopped elevator. While Anakin was happy enough to just cut through the elevator, Kenobi wanted to wait for R2 to just get it moving again. This all led to when the elevator WAS moving again, it began to plummet down, separating the Jedi. And likely Kenobi from his lunch.

"Damn, this thing works pretty damn well. I genuinely just felt a small wave of nausea," I chuckled. "Seriously. Jaal, Gil, I've been paying attention this whole time, it works well." Gil gave a dramatic wave/bow, and Jaal smiled, nodding.

"This is a mess," Peebee laughed. She wasn't wrong. R2 had been spotted, Anakin had two blasters in his face that he couldn't fight, and then Kenobi was immediately being lurched upwards, sending
him to the floor yet again. At least it let the Jedi reunite. R2's solution? Spray oil over both Super Battle Droids.

"Woah there little guy, didn't know this was THAT kind of movie," Vetra joked.

"Really? That's the joke you're going for? Should it start to play smooth jazz as the thick, hot liquid spurts all over them?" I raised a brow.

"Now now, you two, we don't need details of what goes on when you're alone," Gil chastised playfully. Without looking, I raised my middle finger. "And I don't need to know which finger you use on her either." Cheeks red, I put my face in my hand, laughing. Vetra laughing too.

"Both of you please stop," Cora groaned, though not without her own chuckles. Either way, it was cut short by the Astromech igniting the oil, which both droids slipped on, and began melting.

Quickly following, the Observation deck, the chair Palpatine sat in turning, revealing the cuffs he had.

"Anyone else doubting those have been on the whole time?" Peebee remarked. No one commented. Dooku was there, two Super Battle Droids on flank. Though he didn't feel as if he needed them. Exchanging some… friendly greetings, the lightsaber combat commenced. Christopher Lee, I mean, Saruman, shit, I mean Dooku, held his own rather well. Focus. Concentration. A feeling of coordination with your partner, if such a feeling can be described.

Twice the pride, double the fall. Not a bad line in all honesty. Noticed a small huff from Drack. Suppose he liked it too, probably thinking of a few people it applies to. Like Tann or Spender. Dooku pushed Kenobi away, leading Anakin up a staircase. Kenobi neutralized the droids, then got choked and thrown as Anakin was kicked, preventing his interference. Kenobi knocked out, a platform falling on him, but not killing. The machine gave us feeling of nerves. Fear.

Anger. Anakin let the anger flow. Pushing the count back, his attacks growing more and more aggressive.

"I think he needs a hand," Gil remarked as the Count lost not one, but both of his hands. Anakin caught his saber in his own hands as the Count fell to his knees. The young Jedi formed an X with the blue and red lightsabers. Around the Count's neck.

Kill him. Kill him now.

"Aaaand he's smiling as he says that. Not suspicious or psychotic at all," Peebee muttered. The machine sent out feelings of inner conflict. The struggle between light and dark.

"Or maybe he's part Krogan," Drack chuckled.

"That… is also a viable possibility," she nodded thoughtfully.

"Come on… don't-" Jaal began to whisper, despite knowing who he would become.

Dew it. I couldn't hold back the snort at the way it sounded. I felt Vetra's mandible push lightly against my arm as it attempted to flare, she found some amusement too.

But, well, the Count lost his head. He was regretful. A feeling conveyed by the machine Unknown to Anakin, he accomplished one of the most basic of Sith traditions. Kill your superior to gain their place. Gain the apprenticeship of THEIR master. A tradition that goes back BEFORE Darth Revan and Malak. BEFORE Exar Kun. All the way to the original Sith species of Korriban. AKA
Jaal cursed under his breath. Palpatine reminded Anakin of his mother's death, and even attempted to convince Anakin to LEAVE Kenobi unconscious. He knew he would be a problem for his plans. At least this time he was not so easily convinced. Compassion. Devotion. To a mentor, a friend. A brother.

We returned to space. A Venator was coming alongside the Separatist Flagship. Would be a decisive broadside attack. Either one ship will survive and come out victorious, or neither will. The heavy electrical noise of the gun batteries discharging, followed by the sound of the canister clanging to the floor, such a rhythmic pattern was satisfying. And the Wilhelm scream as explosions rocked a gun battery in the Venator were always fun to hear.

Unfortunately for the Jedi, a common phrase so far, the elevator had been rendered offline by this attack. Perhaps a safety measure. As R2 got to work, this time a Separatist gun battery detonated causing plenty of canisters to begin falling. Alarms blared on the ship, it had been dealt a crippling blow. It begun to fall towards the planet, droids being sucked out into the vacuum of space, destined for a rough landing. R2 would have a hard time getting to the console when the wall it was attached to had just become the ceiling.

All wasn't THAT bad at least. An alternative method for the elevators had been found. Climb through the door, and walk down. What could possibly go wrong, right?

"Would a ship really plummet that perfectly straight?" Cora asked, genuinely unsure.

"Unlikely. Could be it's a part of their process as they re-stabilized, but, unlikely," Kallo answered. Emergency engines fired, and the ship began to right itself.

"And here is where the elevator plan goes wrong," Gil remarked dramatically. The very wall they had been running towards became the floor.

"You know, this just reminded me of that salvaged Kett ship," I mused. "How did we get stuck in a situation like that again?" I teased. Liam, trying and failing to hide a smirk, lifted the middle finger in my direction.

"So, it really is a good plan to have your droids spaz out every once in a while," Cora murmured.

Well, it got the Jedi free from their cuffs on the bridge. Confidence, that was the latest pulse. If Grievous had decided to fight alongside his Magnaguard, well, then he probably would have brought an end to his rival and Skywalker both. Then one of the guards lost their head.

"Finally, something that makes sense!" Cora then exclaimed.

The droid was still spinning its weapon, perfectly capable of attack. Exasperation. I smiled internally, would make sense that was what Kenobi felt. The red dot in the center of its chest was probably another eye. And of course, it's processor and other vital bits would be in its torso as well. Though as Anakin showed, cutting them in half at the waist is still effective. Grievous was less confident in his odds, and jammed the electro staff of one of his guards into the bridge viewport, causing the whole thing to break apart to the vacuum of space. He would survive, though the Jedi would require a solution. That solution came in the form of standard safeties as Grievous and the rest of the bridge crew retreated to escape pods. And the ship began to break in half.

"Just like Titanic," Liam fake-sighed.
"Neeeeaaaaaaar," Suvi began.

"Faaaaaar," I joined her.

"WhereEEEEEVER you are," Gil, Liam, and yes, even Cora, joined. We burst into laughter. The non-humans either chuckled, rolled their eyes, raised their brow, or, a combination of them.

The Jedi began working on just how they'd manage to land this hunk of junk. Kallo listened intently as Anakin listed off what they needed to activate or extend. The pilot nodded, muttering small comments to himself. Guess he approved of this much so far. Though none of it stopped the ship from finally cutting in two. Exasperation yet again. A sense of 'why do we always have shitty luck,' if that kind of feeling can be described.

_We lost something._ Hey, Anakin finally got some laughs out of people!

_Not to worry, we're still flying HALF a ship._ The dynamic of those two is fun to watch.

They were doing everything they could to slow that ship down as best they could, keep it steady and in control. It helped when other ships came by, spraying them down with water or perhaps some chemical mixture to douse the flames spread across the hull of what's left of their ship, guiding them to a landing strip. Lucky. An air traffic control tower was brought down, hopefully without anyone inside, but they landed... safely. Ish. The Chancellor was returned to the Senate, and with a small crowd.

_Oh no, I'm not brave enough for Politics._ Snark. I felt a pulse of something that felt like the satisfaction one feels from being a generally snarky person. It's a feeling I know well.

"That's something we have in common," I chuckled.

"And yet you get so involved," Vetra remarked.

"Unwillingly. They practically have to drag me," I laughed.

The two exchanged a bit more banter, of the many times one has saved the life of the other, and which events did not count. Anakin walked with Senator Organa a bit, before having his attention drawn by a nearby woman.

"Hoo boy, here we go again," Peebee murmured. Despite the machine trying to provide that feeling of 'star crossed lovers,' we couldn't exactly accept that feeling with the last movie.

Well at least there isn't any of those Stockholm syndrome esque features in their relationship. At the time, at least. Then she revealed her pregnancy. Again, it tried to convey that feeling of lovers and happiness.

"Bah, we've already had to deal with one pregnant woman in the past... week? I don't wanna deal with another," Vetra groaned, throwing a single kernel of Graxen, if kernel is even the right word, at the viewscreen.

"Is it... cheesy? Creepy still? Doesn't feel as creepy, but... is that just because it was so incredibly creepy last time we're used to it? I don't know, anyone else understand?" Vetra questioned. Before anyone could answer, the scene changed from the night time balcony of Padme's penthouse to a nightmare vision of a baby crying and her crying in pain. "Ok, creepy." The machine conveyed fear. Anakin shot up out of his bed. Shirtless. Much like his grandson, Ben O would do many years later.
"Daaaaamn dude, those pecs," Peebee exclaimed.

"She doesn't really do a good job of pretending to be asleep, does she?" Lexi murmured. I don't know what it is, but the sleeping is hardly ever convincing in these movies. A thought came to mind, and I lowered my head, whispering into Vetra's ear. Much different than a human ear, but works just the same. Was more of a hole behind one of the plates.

"The way we sleep is much better." Vetra quietly chuckled.

"I agree. You make a good pillow."

"Figured, given how often you lean on me," I smirked.

"Don't blame me I like how soft your skin is. Would you like using a carapace as a pillow?" she questioned playfully, keeping her voice low.

"You have a point, but still, my skin isn't that soft. I'm a soldier, it has scars, callouses, all that."

"Take it from the Turian, Scott. It's softer than carapace," she retorted. Couldn't really argue it further.

You die in Childbirth.

"Damn it, make it past tense you idiot!" Peebee exclaimed. The machine tried to make us feel sadness, dread, even, but it couldn't. "Even if it is blatant foreshadowing you just don't say that!"

Do you think… Obi-Wan might be able to help? Dramatic Irony, but, the sad thing is, he would have. In a heartbeat. So many of the fears could have been placated. Is Kenobi a bit closer to the code than Anakin? Yes. Would it stop him? Well, it didn't stop him from falling in love with Duchess Satine of Mandalore, only to watch her be killed by a vengeful Darth Maul, and have her die in his arms.

Deceit, deception. Smugness. New feelings from the machine. Seems it wanted us to feel Palpatine's part. Appointing Anakin as his Representative to the Jedi council. I heard murmurs as the others theorized, deliberated to themselves. Palpatine was stoking the fires of jealousy, ambition, and pride within Skywalker.

Darkness. If darkness has a feeling, that would be it. Palpatine was walking alongside Anakin out of his chambers. Both wearing their robes, though Anakin's appeared more like a black cape as the light was no doubt very purposely kept off of the front of their bodies. The shape of Anakin's hair even managing to resemble the dread visage of the Dark Lord. We were provided a silhouette of the two bodies. Of an Emperor, standing beside his taller, imposing, and very, very deadly Apprentice. Cora gave a small whistle, recognizing it. I felt Vetra's mandible flare against me again.

In the Jedi council chambers, of which was noticed Kenobi to be a part of, as well as Masters Plo Koon and Ki-Adi-Mundi as holograms, they grudgingly granted Anakin his seat. But not the title of master. The machine made us feel anger, the stab of jealous pride.

"Really? Come on kid, don't be a little bitch," Peebee murmured. I nearly burst into laughter. She was right. He was being a little bitch. He was given an honor and he practically spits on it.

What about the droid attack on the wookies?
"The walking carpets are back, eh?" Cora remarked.

They came to the conclusion that Yoda would take a Battalion of Clones to Kashyyyk, particularly, the 41st Elite Corps. Not to mention a good deal of Juggernaut Turbo Tanks and other ground based vehicles. Heh, not to mention, Delta Squad would be there too, as well as Jedi's Luminara Unduli and Quinlann Voss.

An air of sophistication. The kind of feeling you'd get walking into a party some random Lord in Feudal England. The Nobility, aristocracy. That must be a feeling, because that's what the machine gave us. Some sort of... opera house? Show? Not sure, on Coruscant that Palpatine was attending, Anakin joining. He started with good news, common war talk. Grievous on Utapau. And then, another ego stroke. Which, a sense of enhanced ego was precisely what we all proceeded to feel. Palpatine making the claim that Anakin would be the best choice for the mission. Those sitting with the Chancellor were told to leave.

Suspicion, doubt, that's the current feeling. Those were the very seeds Palpatine was sowing in Skywalker. The idea that the Jedi wanted control of the Republic. To overthrow Palpatine.

He played his first gamble. Claiming the Jedi and Sith are not so different, that they both desire power. The machine strengthened the sensations of doubt and suspicion.

You ever hear the tragedy of Darth Plagueis the wise? I glanced to the side. Brows raised. The machine gave a feeling of... curiosity. And also, the sensation that something was off. Anakin must have felt that. At least for a moment. Palpatine made his second gamble.

It's not a story the Jedi would tell you. It's a Sith legend. Darth Plagueis was a Dark Lord of the Sith so powerful and so wise, he could use the force to influence the midichlorions to create... life. He had such a knowledge of the Dark Side, he could even keep the ones he cared about... from dying. Morbid curiosity. And also, a flicker of realization. A stronger flicker of temptation. Such temptation.

Palpatine knew exactly which strings to pluck. The machine seemed to swap from Anakin's feelings to Palpatine's as he continued. Satisfaction, confidence. He knew he had Anakin. Now to reel him in. Slowly, patiently. But reel him in nonetheless.

The Dark Side is a pathway to many abilities some would consider to be unnatural. Well, draining others, even whole planets, of their life force, binding your life force to remain in existence despite lacking a corporeal body like Darth Nihlus? Yeah, that's unnatural. Now smugness again, Anakin was certainly hooked, he asked what happened to Plagueis. This was a point of pride for him. How he defeated his master. The others were still watching intently.

Unfortunately, he taught his apprentice everything he knew, then his apprentice killed him in his sleep. Palpatine smiled, and the smug feeling strengthened. I suspect he was holding back a cackle. Ironic. He could save others from death, but not himself.

Is it possible to learn this power? Satisfaction, the satisfaction one feels when years of planning starts to truly and finally bear fruit. Tending a seed, a dark seed for many years, and now, it sprouts thorns.

Kashyyyk. Specifically, Kachiro beach. The Wookie/Republic battle line. A Wookie glider between three large dragonflies. A Venator Star Destroyer had landed a ways behind the beach, back where grass was growing, but before the next layer of trees and mountains. Though the beach itself still housed several Worshyr trees and the large collections of Wookie huts built onto them.
Barricades dug into the sand, Republic Juggernaut Turbotanks rolling into position. This, is the D-day of Star Wars. Clones and Wookies setting up the last defenses. Walkers in position. Gun emplacements ready. Snipers, scouts, soldiers. Luminara directing forces closer to the battle line itself. Further above in a command post built into the trees, was Yoda. General Taarfull was on his left as he spoke to the Jedi council. On his right?

"Hey, it's the big guy! What was his name?" Drack remarked, tapping his finger, well, the claw at the end of it, to his chin.

"Chewbacca," I reminded.

"Right, right. Him. Didn't expect to see him," he chuckled.

"How did he end up with Solo if he was on their home world?" Vetra asked. Wouldn't seem likely for Han to end up there after all.

"Imperial slavery," was my sole answer. No other questions asked.

I suppose they weren't surprised an evil empire would utilize slavery. With the council discussion, it was decided Kenobi would lead the mission against Grievous. A stab of jealousy again from the machine. Back on Kashyyyk, however, the droid army was ready to attack. On the barricades of the front lines, a Wookie chieftain stood atop the fortification. He roared, rallying his fellow carpets to battle. It felt as if the machine was attempting to invigorate us. The desire to protect what one owned. One's home. Now that's a feeling we understood. The droid Vanguard composed of Gunships and the Snail shaped droids I forget the names of. Battle droids riding their sides, so they doubled as troop transports. They drove through the water, spraying a fine layer of mist over their army.

High in the trees, Republic snipers opened fire as their artillery fired. Explosions dotted the sky, blaster fire streaked everywhere as Drack laughed, enjoying the warfare. A pair of Wookies roped from one of their airships, giving a damn Tarzan yell, as they boarded a snail droid, placing an explosive charge on its side, dooming it as they jumped back into the water.

"Ha! They got style," Drack chuckled.

We returned to Coruscant. Now, I don't think this was a feeling either Kenobi or Anakin would have been feeling. Rather, it's an emotion the audience should be feeling. Somber, sad, even.

The final parting between two dear friends. Kenobi was preparing to leave for Utapau, leading the 212th Battalion. Anakin, would remain on Coruscant. Under the influence of Palpatine. This feeling was not unnoticed by the others. They watched, closely. Anakin apologized for his actions, and instead of sympathy, what the machine told us to feel, was instead bittersweet. As Obi-Wan complimented his student, the feeling got stronger. Clever, Gil. Clever. Anakin moved to leave for his ship, now bathed in sunlight. His apprentice, remained in the shade.

Covered in shadow.

Goodbye old friend. May the force be with you. I glanced over at Jaal. He wiped at his eye.

"That's the last time they meet, before… you know, isn't it?" Vetra whispered. I couldn't answer. I had a hard time appreciating the magnificent sight of a fleet of Venators taking off. I wonder, how much would have been different had Ahsoka stayed in the Order? If Anakin told Kenobi about his relationship with Padme? True, we wouldn't have all these movies, but, well, the story.
This is why I like Obi-Wan. Without any reinforcements, though they are on the way, he scouts out a Separatist meeting. Learns where their leaders are fleeing. From the rafters above, he ponders what he should do next. Grievous is right there, after all, but surrounded by battle droids. What does he do? He removed his hooded robe, and jumps right down into the thick of it, behind the General. Confidence. Snark.

Hello there. The very words Grievous spoke to Kenobi when they first met on the Malevolence, years ago. Every gun is turned on him, Magnaguards ignite their electro staffs.

General Kenobi, you are a bold one. Ah, one of my favorite meme formats.

"I'll fucking say," Peebee remarked, impressed, looks like. The Magnaguards moved to kill him. Four of them. Kenobi brings some kinda… giant… metal… thing… down on top of them. Crushing three, and crushing the legs of the fourth, making him easy prey to finish off. The blasters surrounding him re-focused their aim. Grievous ordered his droids back and we got a peek down his neck, and the heart beating within.

"That's creepy," Vetra murmured. Grievous removed his cloak. He took four lightsabers in his hands. His two arms split into four.

"Well. Shit," Drack chuckled. As the sabers all ignite. Each taken from a fallen Jedi. And yet, Kenobi still felt confidence, so, we felt the same from the machine.

His wrists begun spinning only as a droid could, cutting into the floor with each rotation. If Kenobi got close, he'd be in several different pieces. He timed it for the right moment, and the spinning stopped, clashing swords with the Jedi for the last time. He had the force boosted acrobatics that Grievous didn't.

"Well, it works," Drack huffed as Kenobi managed to slice off one of the General's hands. The attacks only grew more aggressive, and also reckless. Another hand lost.

Blaster fire. Clone blaster fire. The heavy weapons of LAATs. Commander Cody and the 212th had arrived. Droid fighters scrambled, but the sinkhole that the Separatist base was built in was virtually blocked by three Venators and the swarms of gunships being sent down to deliver their troops. We got a close-up of Grievous' eyes as he continued to mock Kenobi, he was confident, but Obi-Wan was unfazed. So, we felt the same. Though, I imagine that seeing one of the few remains of his once organic self was unsettling to some. With a powerful force push, Grievous was sent flying, and his sabers knocked out of his hands. So, he resorted to his most common tactic.

The run-like-a-bitch maneuver. Well, he technically crawled to a land vehicle with two giant saws on either side. Kenobi chased after him in his lizard horse thing, but lost his saber. Fortunately for him, Commander Cody saw it land, kept it safe for him. Wouldn't be the first time.

Betrayal. That was the feeling the machine conveyed. The feeling Anakin felt as Palpatine made his final gamble. Revealing he has studied the dark side. That he knows the force. That he can help Anakin save Padme. Anakin drew his saber, but did not strike.

Anger. The machine made us feel it just as Palpatine stated he could feel Anakin's. The saber was extinguished. Palpatine did not fear what choice Skywalker would come to. He already knew. He had his new apprentice.

Was it… desperation? No, that seems to extreme. Kenobi was certainly determined if nothing else
to keep Grievous out of his ship. He knew he had to stop him now, else the war would continue. Using an electro staff, he knocked the blaster out of the General's hands. But, Grievous, with his cyborg body, was still much stronger, physically. He could move in unnatural ways, and withstand blows that would have killed or crippled an organic.

Kenobi was kicked away. Grievous stormed over, attempted to swipe his claws at Kenobi's face, missed. Swiped again in the stomach, struck with enough force to send the Jedi into the side of the ship. He grabbed him by the collar of his robes, lifted him high, and attempted to cave his face in with his fist. Kenobi dodged, and instead the ship was dented.

Kenobi grabbed and tore open the General's metal chest, revealing the bulbous sack that housed his heart and lungs. Now he just pissed him off. Now we were feeling desperation, but also a flicker of hope.

"Come on," Jaal murmured. Kenobi continued to avoid Grievous' attacks. He kicked, but only harmed his own leg, like ramming your shin into the side of a table. He was tossed away, nearly off the ledge, but holding on.

"Hang in there man," Gil dramatically shouted. Several voices groaned, and an empty can was thrown at Gil. It only made him laugh harder.

Grievous stormed forward with his electro staff, but Kenobi pulled the blaster towards him. He fired. Igniting the inside of his chest.

"Talk about heartburn," Suvi joked.

"Not you too," Lexi groaned.

"Too much time with him, I think," Liam snickered, gesturing at me. I waved innocently, smiling. More blaster shots, and the fire raged, bursting through Grievous' eyes. He was dead at last.

Ironically, I wonder if Anakin's coming decision would have been different had he been allowed to go with the other Jedi. Instead, he waited in the council chambers. Alone with his thoughts. The whispers in his mind. The fears. The machine conveyed such fears. The fear of losing a loved one. I felt Vetra shuffle closer to me. I wonder if she even realized, but I smiled. I rubbed her side gently. This was the end of The Republic. The end of Democracy. The near end of the Jedi.

The end of Anakin Skywalker.

In its place, the birth of an Empire. The rise of the Sith. The birth of Darth Vader.

Anakin raced towards a speeder.

"No…" Jaal murmured.

Four Jedi entered Palpatine's chamber. I recognized all of them, but only had names for three. Mace Windu, Kit Fisto, and Eeth Koth.

I am the Senate.

"Well, there's creepy wrinkly old guy voice again," Peebee chuckled. The Jedi did not back down. Palpatine pulled out his lightsaber.

It's treason then. The Chancellor screeched as he spun in the air.
"The fuck?" Drack muttered.

Eeth Koth was immediately impaled as if it was nothing. Dead. The one I couldn't recognize killed with the backswing. Kit Fisto lasted a bit longer, but was also brought down with the backswing. Only Windu and the Chancellor remained. Palpatine had the lead in this battle. I think he was holding back. But Windu, while being a Jedi, he still sometimes, perhaps even unknowingly, could draw upon bits of the dark side in battle, giving him an edge.

The window shattered, and they fought alongside it. Palpatine likely allowed himself to be driven back. He wanted a show for Anakin after all. A kick to the face and he lost his lightsaber, back to the ground, driven back to the wall.

The machine did not make us feel fear. Instead, it did not make us feel anything. But the lack of fear itself spoke volumes. Clever again, Gil. Anakin arrived. Conflict. As Peebee so eloquently put it, creepy, wrinkly, old guy voice returned. It wasn't over yet. He fired lightning from his fingertips at Windu. It was absorbed by his saber, and then reflected at Palpatine. Both pleaded for Anakin's aid, calling the other a traitor. Palpatine allowed the lightning to strike him. Scarring him. Burning him. Turned him gray.

Windu desired to end it. That, was just another, further reinforcement of Anakin's decision. I chuckled internally. Palpatine sounded almost just like that "Don't do it, I'm a virgin," meme of that old guy.

The new Dark Lord of the Sith sliced off Windu's arm. The new Emperor, smiling, sent him flying with the lightning. With...Unlimited Power.


Darth Vader knelt before his master. The imperial march filled our ears.

On Kashyyyk, Yoda felt weak. Pain. Sorrow and pain is what the machine conveyed. He struggled to stand with the force of what he felt.

"No..." Jaal murmured again. He cursed under his breath.

Coruscant, Palpatine plotted. Still he fed lies to his apprentice as he wrapped himself in his new, black robe, lifting the hood over him. His beady yellow eyes almost glowing. Every Jedi must die. The Jedi purge begins. After, the Separatists will be slain.

Night falls on the Jedi temple. The marching trumpets, the drums. The 501st legion climbing the steps. Led by Lord Vader. The march was in perfect sync. That of a highly trained, highly disciplined unit. The sound of their boots matched perfectly with the soundtrack.

Nerves. We felt nerves.

Utapau. The battle was going well for a Republic. We watched a Clone Rambo on top of a Crab droid, kill it, and then kill another. Kenobi raced through the streets, reuniting with Cody, retrieving his lightsaber. Seconds after Kenobi moved on, he received the same order being broadcast around the Galaxy.

Execute Order 66.

An AT-TE blasted Kenobi off his munt on the sides of the sinkhole. He plummeted down into the water below.
Sadness. Confusion. But mostly, sadness. The somber, sour note of the string instruments emphasizing the already potent feelings by the machine.

Mygeeto, where Ki-Adi-Mundi led his forces against the droids there. Drack may have enjoyed the many explosions and sight of warfare, but he was quiet. Somber. The Jedi led his men in a charge forward, before they all came to a stop, preparing their weapons. Confused, he turned.

Betrayal. Not the angry sense of betrayal Anakin felt before, rather, the one that would make you weep rather than fume.

If you were to survive the next five seconds. He deflected what few bolts he could, but was struck down by his own men.

Felucia. Space Vietnam. Aayla Secura led a convoy of AT-TEs through the jungles. Her legion on her flank. They received their order, and gunned the Twi'lek down before she even had a chance. Even as her body fell, they continued to shoot.

Kashyyyk. Yoda dropped his cane, grasping at his heart.

Horror. Despair. Shock. He sank to his knees

Cato Neimoidia, or at least I believe it to be so. Plo Koon led a squadron of ARC fighters through the skies. This, perhaps, was one of the most depressing betrayals. His battalion, nicknamed the Wolfpack, was close to Plo Koon. He treated them all with the utmost respect. Cared for them almost as if they were his children. And yet, they shot him down without hesitation. The only consolation could be that Wolf removed his control chip, he, like Rex and Gregor did not follow the order.

I suspect that the Wolf Pack had the largest number of Clone suicides after the order.

Saleucami. Adi Galia. Now, she I KNOW died during the Clone Wars at the hands of Savage Oppress. Or, rather his head. Perhaps this was not her, and rather a Jedi that looked similar. Her speeder was blasted down without hesitation.

Back to Kashyyyk. The Republic lines were holding. They had given some ground, but the beach had not been lost. Taarfull and Chewie seemed to be trying to see what was wrong as the two clones readied to kill the Jedi. But Yoda knew. He jumped with his lightsaber, removing both heads from their bodies. Yoda climbed onto Chewie’s back, and off he ran.

The Jedi in the temple were not so lucky. Horror, hopelessness, shock, desperation fear. Watching clones slaughter the Jedi.

Vader entered the council chamber, the younglings hiding behind chairs.

"No… no, no, no…" Jaal murmured. He had tears. Perhaps the machine is more potent on Angara. Now we felt Vader's feelings. I'm sure. Compassion. Humanity.

Master Skywalker, there's too many of them. What are we going to do? Master. Anakin clung to that word. Vader felt fury rise. The machine gave us a hint of that fury.

The saber ignited. Jaal looked away.

Yoda, Bail, and Obi-Wan gathered on Tantive 4. The others had recognized it as the very ship Leia was on at the beginning of Episode 4. Vader was on his way to Mustafar to end the war. Kenobi
and Yoda needed to remove a signal that was a trap for any straggling Jedi. Simultaneously, the two reached their destinations. Though we began with the new Sith. On the planet that would later house his Castle. The remaining Separatist leaders planned in the War room. They greeted the robed new comer with relief.

First, Anger, and fury. Unbridled rage. Vader used the force to seal all entrances into and out of the room.

Back to the Jedi, as they fought back the Clone defenders. Yoda literally disarmed one, and impaled the next. But soon, the defenses were eliminated. Resolve.

The Senate. He spout his lies to the Senate. The falsehood of the Jedi plot.

The Temple. The bodies strewn about, lying there. Youngling bodies. Even Yoda was choked up. Horror. Sorrow.

Mustafar. Now we felt as the Separatists did. Horror, confusion, Hysteria. They were all being slaughtered by the very one they thought was there to protect them. They were defenseless. No amount of begging, pleading, could save them. We saw his eyes. They burned with yellow fire.

The Senate. The First Galactic Empire was born. Dread. So this is how liberty dies. With thunderous applause.

The Jedi Temple. The transmission was successfully changed. Kenobi felt a need to see the security files. Despite Yoda's warning.

Heartbreak.

He could barely even speak the words. Killing younglings. The feeling of heartbreak from the machine persisted. Strengthened. Vetra had been holding me closer. And I her. There was the hint of disbelief from Padme, but wisely, Gil kept the feelings focused on Kenobi for the moment. Though, I suspect both felt heartbreak.

Kenobi suspected Anakin was the father of the child Padme was obviously pregnant with.

His sadness, his heartbreak, deepened.

Mustafar. Anakin waited. They were all dead. But he was kept on Mustafar. Perhaps drawn by the strong energy of the Dark Side present. And yet, he shed a tear. Sadness, regret, uncertainty. Soon, and with a Jedi stowaway, Padme arrived on Mustafar. The last shred of Anakin ran to greet her, and she him. He was not pleased with what Obi-Wan had told her. He did not believe it, but Padme tried to convince him one, that Obi-Wan cared. Two, that she didn't need him to do these things. Three, to just leave with her.

None worked. Her disbelief shattered. Her resolve, shattered. It wasn't lost on me that the others hadn't talked in a while. That's probably a good sign. Padme simply couldn't agree with what he's done. Kenobi revealed himself. His fury rose as high as the magma plumes. An invisible hand clenched around Padme's neck.

"No..." Jaal began murmuring again. More tears. Peebee was clearly unsettled. Drack, even. I wonder if he has stories about once close friends who just did something unacceptable. Kenobi demanded she be released. He did, but she lived.

We felt a mix of things. The feeling of knowing what must be done, but also the feeling of just
wishing, from the bottom of your heart, there was another way. And then knowing there was not one. Still, he tried, he so sorely tried to convince him.

The failure hurt him even further. No one even picked up on the 'Only a Sith deals in Absolutes,' hypocrisy.

Brother drew weapon on brother. Brother clashed sword against sword. Rapidly swinging back and forth, the trumpets conveying a message of just… something dark. An end. There was nothing triumphant about it as the two fought. Arguably, there was not even anything tense. It was… a sad finality.

Back on Coruscant, Yoda confronted the new Emperor. The head of the Sith order, against the head of the Jedi order. That conflict was much more… calm.

They were equally matched. Despite Vader pushing Kenobi back, each blow was blocked or deflected. A chokehold. Slowly pushing Kenobi's saber down towards his head. But still, the refusal to let the blow come to him. He broke free. The two-continued fighting against sparks. And broken machinery.

Coruscant. The acrobatics of Yoda and the now rising seat of the Chancellor was about to open quite the playing field to both parties. Each blow, blocked or deflected. Neither gaining the advantage.

Mustafar. Both pushed, right against each other. Straining to win out against the other. Neither succeeded. An explosion of force energy sent both flying back to the walls. Controls destroyed. The shields for the masts gathering thermal energy from the lava flow. They were vulnerable to the intense heat. Coincidentally, that's right when the fight was brought outside.

Duel of the fates.

Sidious sent many of the floating disks that were senate seats towards Master Yoda. None struck a decisive blow. Yoda countered one of the throws with his own, forcing the Emperor to move. Lightning. Yoda absorbed it in his palms. He brought his hands closer, but both parties were sent falling back. Sidious grabbed onto a senate seat, but Yoda fell down to the bottom. The fight was lost. Yoda resolved to escape.

Vader and Kenobi were not so fortunate. A balancing act on a support beam outside. The heat must have been blistering. They changed the playing field to one of the masts. They clashed just as a lava plume erupted beside them. Their silhouettes haunting almost against the glowing plume of molten rock. This was arguably the best saber fight in the franchise. The two taking cover from the elements of another lava plume, which then began to melt through the mast, causing it to fall to the lava flow below. Still, they had metal to cling to. Metal to fight from. Stress.

As Yoda finished his escape, we felt a flicker of shame. But we returned to Mustafar, just as a choir hit their peak. The remains of the mast were coming to a… lava fall. Using cables, the two began swinging, still taking the occasional blow at one another. Kenobi escaped to a shielded platform being moved around more safely. Vader used a droid collecting buckets of lava as his platform, dueling Kenobi from atop it. Neither could move their legs.

I have failed you… And a sense of failure was added atop the mountain of emotions the machine was influencing us with. I'm going to need to give Gil a medal for this. Jaal too.

Vader jumped over Kenobi's head, and now the two shared a platform too small for the both of them. They were still evenly matched, and were getting tired. One needed an advantage over the
other. Kenobi saw his. The shoreline.

*It's over Anakin. I have the high ground!* I've made that joke here so many times in Andromeda already, and yet, him saying that barely made me feel a thing. Instead, a different perspective from the machine. It was Kenobi's last-ditch effort. The last thing he could possibly think of to make his brother surrender.

*You underestimate my power.*

*Don't try it…* We felt the sincerity of that final plead. The final beg. He tried it. And got his legs sliced off. Even the arm that wasn't already cut off. The battle was over.

The shame. Such potent, deeply rooted shame and sorrow.

*You were the Chosen One! It was said that you would destroy the Sith not join them! Bring balance to the force, not leave it in darkness!* Obi-Wan cried. He took Anakin's lightsaber.

*I hate you!* I think that, final proclamation was what killed Obi-Wan Kenobi. When the last bit of him just crumpled. That's certainly what the machine helped us feel.

*You were my brother, Anakin. I loved you…* Jaal was crying. Suvi was crying, despite having seen it before. Peebee was… shaken. Drack, was somber. Quiet. That spoke volumes about him. I couldn't see Lexi or Kallo. Cora appeared… well, as somber as Drack. Vetra was just holding tight.

He caught fire. And Kenobi couldn't do anything, and left him there. As he said, he could not kill his brother.

---

Agony. Pain. Suffering. As the cybernetics were painfully grafted onto Vader's body. He screamed. His burns intense.


Coruscant. The mask was lowering. Finally encompassing Darth Vader within his dreaded and iconic visage. He was sealed, air tight within

His first mechanical breaths. Sent a chill down all our spines. Might have been because of the machine, might have been for another reason. But it did. Padme was dead, while Vader rose. Still strapped to his operating table, it turned itself, so it lifted Vader to his feet. The image of the dread, Dark Lord rising was… haunting, and badass all at the same time. The breathing continued.


*It seems, in your anger, you… killed her.*

*I… I couldn't have. She was alive! I felt it!* The room around Vader began to shake. Denial. We felt denial. A medical droid was crushed, it's vials of fluids bursting. Other droids were crushed, other metal constructs as he grunted, cried out. Above all other feelings, one resonated above all others. The feeling was intense.


*NNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO*
On Tantive 4. Bail offered to take Leia. Yoda suggested that Luke go to Tatooine, with what remains of his family. Ben Kenobi would undergo that task. But Yoda had one last lesson for him. The ability to return from death as a force ghost. He would learn from Qui-Gon.

Naboo held a very large gathering in the Capital City of Theed. A candlelit vigil to mourn the loss of their beloved Ambassador, former Queen, Padme Amidala. In her hands was the medallion given to her by Anakin.

A Venator, it's paint removed, refurbished, and new uniforms among the officers. The Emperor, with Grand Moff Tarkin beside him, were approached by Vader. They were observing the foundations of the first Death Star. I noticed that now, the machine was sending no feelings. Wait, no, numbness. It was trying to send numbness. Fucking hell Gil… that's probably more depression than a feeling of depression would give us.

Leia had just been brought to her new family on Alderaan. But now, watching a cloaked man ride up to a familiar homestead in the deserts of Tatooine at sunset. A baby wrapped in his arms, given to the woman, Beru. Luke. The moment Beru turned to look out at the dual sunset, Luke in her arms, the very same song reached our ears. But someone was already standing there. Lars, in the same exact pose Luke would take so many years later, before he set out on the path that would lead to the downfall of the Empire.

Ben took his leave. Hope, remained in the Galaxy.

Someday, the Jedi would return.

The credits rolled. I removed the electrode from the back of my head, stood, and began just clapping, looking right at Gil and Jaal. Liam and Suvi quickly followed. Then Cora, Vetra, Peebee, Lexi. Drack remained where he was. But he gave the two a nod of the head.

"You two made a fucking masterpiece tonight. Seriously. Grade fucking A job," I stated. "I'd give you all medals if I could." Gil eagerly stood and gave a bow, Jaal was more hesitant, reserved. He was still feeling it a bit I think.

"Truly, I was taken aback. I hadn't expected this with the last movie. Stars above…" Jaal managed a laugh.

"We need to spread this shit around the Initiative. All of our movies need this," Liam exclaimed.

"Think it could even make Phantom Menace good?" Suvi smirked.

"HA! Now that, would take a goddamn miracle."
"Pathfinder, the Nexus Science Team have news," SAM woke me after a good night's sleep. It was a long movie, after all.

"They finish the project already?" I asked, moving to get out of bed, rubbing my eyes. SAM quickly confirmed it. "Damn, that was fast," I murmured.

"With the aid of myself and the other SAMs, our combined processing power helped tremendously," SAM explained. I glanced at the empty space on the bed as I got up and chastised myself for forgetting to ask Vetra about sleeping arrangements after the movie. But, like I said, long movie, the emotion machine pulled the carpet out from under us, and we were tired.

And it has absolutely nothing to do with sex or anything! It's just… nice, very, very, very nice to go to sleep either in a woman you love's arms, or with said woman in your arms, and then wake up, they're still there.

"They request your presence as well as the other Pathfinders, so a quick installation can be made aboard the Tempest," SAM informed.

"Flight crew up?" I asked. SAM confirmed that too. "Then tell em to get us to the Nexus. What about everyone else?"

"Most are waking up themselves, or already about the Tempest. With the exception of Jaal and Peebee," SAM answered. Heh, figures.

"They don't give it a rest, do they?" I chuckled to myself. Can't exactly be critical of them, I'll admit. Not that I have the desire to be genuinely critical. I began getting dressed. Soon, SAM passed along Lexi's request that I join her and Drack in the med-bay. Odd. Hope there's not some sort of problem with the old geezer. I finished getting dressed, only stopping in the mess to quickly eat a snack bar, then entered the med-bay. Lexi had her back to the door, data pad in hand, as Drack sat on one of the medical beds. He quickly glanced up and nodded.

"Move your arm again," Lexi requested. He rolled his eyes, but still moved his right arm around. The same arm that I've always seen covered by armor. Now, though, the metal sleeve had been removed, showing a cybernetic arm up to the elbow. Older cybernetics too, the wear and tear of a Krogan lifestyle, but nevertheless well maintained.

"Readings won't change, doc," Drack remarked.

"Your prosthetics are syncing properly," Lexi ignored him. "Your neuropathy-induced pain levels are… consistent." Her pause hinted at concern, as did her features. Drack noticed it too, focusing on her, regarding her more softly than he did during the jab.

"Hey, I'm used to it. It's ok," he reassured. Neuropathy-induced pain levels? Is he… in constant pain? Why?

"No, it's NOT ok!" Lexi exclaimed, then stopped herself, sighing. "You keep fighting smart, you hear me?" she pleaded sadly. Drack continued looking at the doc for a moment, before silently looking back down. "You don't have much left in term of organ redundancies." I began stepping forward a bit more, joining them.
"It's fine. I don't mind," he responded.

"Everything ok, Drack?" I glanced at Lexi's data pad. Medical notes and results of Drack. A lot of numbers and a lot of categories. "This looks like... a lot." Drack opened his mouth to speak, but closed it, re-thinking whatever he was about to say.

"It IS a lot. Just nothing he didn't already know about," Lexi murmured. "He's fine, just... old. And missing too many parts. And too stubborn for his own good," Lexi then grumbled as she moved towards her desk.

There was a ghost of a smirk on Drack's face.

"You love me just the way I am, doc," he chuckled. Yeah, I bet she does. Wonder if he knows that. Something tells me he wouldn't act on it because of his age.

"Just don't get off that table until the scan is done." Lexi left the room I suppose some of the medical instruments in the room were actively scanning him. I wouldn't be able to see it anyway.

"Can I ask what happened?" I raised a brow, concerned. I hope this wasn't a result of the bar brawl. Drack began listing off, pointing to the exact parts of his body.

"Arm, side, hip, part of my leg. Strain balancing threading across my spine. It's all prosthetics and implants." He cracked his neck and stood, ignoring the doctor and standing at the med-bay window to the cargo hold.

"That is... a lot," I let out a whistle. Sounds like he's practically a cyborg.

"Made it through the Krogan rebellions, watched my culture disintegrate, survived centuries as a merc and all kinds of pirate shenanigans," he stated. He sounded tired. The weight of his life bearing down on him. I felt bad for him. Drack is a good friend, and sometimes I forget that my good friend has over a thousand years under his belt. Seen a lot of shit. "A thousand years of combat experience. All it took was one idiot with a pack of frag grenades..." I winced, surviving a pack of Frags detonating. Not fun.

"Couldn't have been easy," I murmured. He turned his head back slightly, his left reptilian eye looking at me. There was a sadness. He looked back out the window.

"Yeah. It got... pretty bad." He paused a moment. "I hit some dark moments. Implant rejection after implant rejection. Prosthetics not syncing properly. Everything hurt. All the time. No purpose to anything." Damn, hurting a lot by Krogan standards? Must have been excruciating.

"How'd you get through?" I asked.

"I didn't. I fell right into that pit. Almost," Drack turned and smiled. "But then, some Shaman shows up, drops the tiniest little baby girl in my lap. 'This one's dying,' he says. 'Not worth the trouble,' he says. 'Useless,' is what he meant. My brows lowered, and a frown formed.

"Can't believe anyone saying that about a baby..." The smile had faded from Drack as he told that part of the story.

"It's practical. Krogan," he shrugged. "But, it gave me a purpose again. It wasn't just about me anymore, so I got help. I learned how to take care of myself, take care of her. And she took care of me," his smile returned.

"Something to live for," I remarked.
"Something to die for. To suffer for. Anything for. It wasn't easy for either of us. I'm old. Stuck in my ways. Kesh? She's wanted to change everything since she could talk," he remembered fondly. "Raising Kesh taught me an important lesson."

"One you're gonna tell me all about?" I teased.

"Damn right I am," Drack smirked. "Parents aren't meant to be a finish line. We're the starting line. Where you go from there? It's all up to you. Parents job is to make it so that their kids end up at least as good as they did. Help them do better. Remember that, kid." At that moment, Lexi returned, obviously displeased Drack was off the bed. She stood in the doorway, hands on her hips, one leg out, foot tapping the floor, brow raised. Drack just chuckled and returned to his seat on the bed. The scans resumed.

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

The Ghost Storm tech hardware was currently being installed on my ship. It had already been installed on the ships of the other Pathfinders, who would just be using shuttles as that's the best we currently have to offer. I had just stepped into a meeting with the other Pathfinders, and the science team had stepped out, letting us have the space.

"Once the tech is installed, you ready, Scott?" Avitus began, asking me.

"My crew and I are ready to go. We have no pressing objectives and have even fulfilled a few small crew requests. We've just been waiting, now," I answered.

"Good. No distractions, full mission focus," Raeka nodded, "I've looked at Meridian's coordinates. Should take the rest of us about ten hours to get there. You'll be a bit faster, but we have to wait for the others who are waiting somewhere else in the system. And I wouldn't hope on the Kett falling for this twice."

"Well, unless any of us have any groundbreaking information to share, I suggest you get going," I stated.

"Agreed. May the Goddess watch over us all," Vederia prayed.

Avitus bumped his fist to his chest in a salute while Raeka stood straighter, hands behind her back. Vederia quickly noticed and joined with a salute of her own, which consisted of her right hand going across her chest, palm open beyond her left shoulder. I returned with the same salute drilled into me since boot camp. Legs and back straight, right hand sideways, slight diagonal, just in front of my forehead.

"Good luck to you all," I nodded as they left to their ships first. Me, on the other hand? I made my way towards the Hyperion med-bay. Like hell I was leaving without saying anything to her.

I arrived in the Med-bay, rather, the new ward she was in. She was now residing in an area shared with more patients. One where she was allowed to walk herself to the bathroom. Most of the time, the doctors were still adamant about her bedrest, though she was partaking in physical therapy to ensure her limbs were still fully functional. Which, they were, just experienced some minor muscle loss from lack of use. Nothing that can't be recovered easily enough.

Yes, I've been keeping in contact with her, and Doc Caryle. I entered the proper ward. Here, there were wounded Human militia, as this was the best place for wounded humans to get treatment. Also, some Human colonists fresh out of stasis that had minor medical complications with their
revival. Nothing to concern them, but something that keeps them bedridden a small-while. Obviously, Sara had her spot on a bed in one of the larger rooms. The doc quickly led me to her and then drew the privacy curtain around us. So long as we keep our voices a bit lower, should be completely private.

I hugged my sister, and she hugged me.

"Any idea when you'll be out?" I asked, question muffled a bit by the pillow this had left my face pressed against.

"Docs are thinking another day or two. Just to keep exercising and come in for some physical therapy every few days. Just making sure everything stays good right now," she answered excitedly.

"Really? Ask them if they'd be alright with Lexi handling that. I'd love to have you onboard, sis," I suggested.

"Then I'll ask the moment I see the doc again," Sara pulled away. "How's everything with you?"

There was still a lot I had to tell her. Little of it pretty. Exaltation, the Reapers, but… I couldn't. Not yet. Frankly, I've just spent so much time already keeping it down, I wasn't about to bring it back up. Besides, things like Mom, or some talks I've had with Vetra recently have just been making me feel… good.

"Things… are good," I smiled. "Wanted to come see you before we head out for Meridian." My voice a whisper. While I'm sure there aren't any Kett spies here, technically we are doing this illegally. Sara let out a whistle.

"Already, huh? What do you expect to find there?"

"Well, judging by a holo we saw on the Archon's ship, a Remnant space station. Hopefully activate some defenses, activate the vaults across the cluster," I explained.

"Sounds like a place I'll be wanting to spend a lot of time at when this is over," Sara remarked.

"I'll be sure to send you a copy of the armor cam footage," I reassured.

"That will either hold me over or make me even more eager to get out of here," she chuckled.

"Pathfinder, apologies to interrupt, but the installation has finished. Shall I recall the crew?" SAM questioned. I bit my lip. I didn't want to leave yet, but, we had to get this done. And the sooner the better.

"Go ahead, SAM. I'll start making my way back." I turned looked back at my sister, then hugged her again.

"Get outta here soon," I requested gently.

"And you stay safe," she made her own request.

"Count on it." I stood and opened the curtains back off. Doc Caryle gave me a farewell nod, and Sara, a wave, which I returned. I made my way back to my ship.

Just outside the ship's loading ramp, two familiar faces were waiting. One of them, I love deeply, and am going to be having a serious conversation with soon, in private. And then, so long as it goes
well, and judging from rather recent experience, I will then be in bed with. Beside her, a giddy Turian girl in spite of horrendous acts committed upon her. One I love like a sister.

As I approached, Sid quickly wrapped her arms around me in a hug, much to her sister's amusement. I returned the hug without hesitation.

"Good luck, Scott."

"Thanks, Sid. We'll keep in touch. We'll be fine," I reassured. Vetra stepped closer, hand on her sister's back.

"Come on. We need to get going. Don't want the others waiting on us," Vetra stated. Sid released me from the hug.

"Yeah, right," she began to turn towards the ramp back up to the commons area. But then she turned back, smirking.

"Try to make sure she can still walk when you're done," she snorted, and then ran off before Vetra could recover and potentially yell at her. I, however, despite having rosy cheeks, laughed. Vetra huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I need to stop telling her things…" she murmured.

"Wait, you-"

"I didn't give details," she cut me off. "And I didn't explicitly SAY we did anything…" she rubbed her arms awkwardly. We began walking up the cargo ramp.

"You at least tell her I did a good job? Least… I think I did…" it was now my turn to mutter.

"Scott, I collapsed on top of you after… spirits I forget how many rounds. I passed out for the night right there, just like that. Not to mention you did too, still inside me!" she laughed. "How much of an ego stroke would it be if I told you THAT hasn't happened to me before?" My cheeks became rosy again, and I felt very proud of myself.

"So much that I'm probably going to have a toast in my honor before long," I joked.

"Fuck it, I'll drink to that," Vetra chuckled. I told Vetra to just follow me up to the meeting room as I summoned the rest of the team. Vetra stood beside me as the rest gathered around the central table. Once everyone arrived, I began.

"The Nexus leaders think that our search for Meridian is, at worst, a waste of time, or massive risk. It is a risk. Though I understand we haven't gotten some back-channel aid that certainly doesn't originate from either Nexus engineering, which is under Kesh's supervision, or the Militia, led by Tiran Kandros," I 'subtly' implied that those leaders were in fact aiding us. And by subtle, I mean as subtle as an Elcor shart, "but we know they're wrong. Turning on vaults individually won't be enough without the heart of the system. Why turn on a fuck ton of vaults individually when you can turn them all on at one place, after all." I pulled up a hologram of Meridian. The same one we got from the Archon.

"Just to clarify," Cora spoke up, a slightly nervous look in her eyes, "You're defying a direct order?"

"No. I'm defying one of Tann's orders. As are the other Pathfinders, the science team, definitely not Kandros, definitely not Kesh, and, any of you who come with me. Anyone who doesn't want to be a part of this, you can go now, and still be welcome back on the ship afterwards," I offered. Several
glanced amongst each other, but no one moved. Couldn't help but smile a bit.

"I knew I signed on with a good crew," Drack smiled himself.

"What about the Kett?" Jaal questioned, arms over his chest.

"Newly developed Ghost Storm tech. It's what was being installed earlier. The other Pathfinders will meet us near Meridian in their own stealthed ships. Each of them also has Ghost Storm tech. From what I understand, it sends out a mass of decoy signatures. Won't mask our own signature, but, that's what our stealth drive is for. Why we don't just sneak in normally? Because those warships will get reports of us on the ground, and probably bomb us or drop an army on our heads," I explained. "So, instead, these untold masses of signatures will hopefully draw those warships away from Meridian, buying us time to find a control center. Activate defensive measures, the vaults, maybe one or the other." Vetra looked over the Hologram and the three warships.

"It won't be all of them," she shook her head. "But it'll be enough." She looked at me and then nodded.

"The Tempest is small and fast. I don't need a big window," Kallo added. "We can drop you off and make our exit before the Kett catch on. When ready for evac, we can stealth in and make pickup before escaping."

"We'll be taking the full ground team here. It's still small and can move fast. I don't suspect we can split up, as I'll likely be needed to give SAM access to Remnant systems, but, it WILL help us breeze through resistance.

"Are we expecting to take the entire station?" Drack questioned. He wasn't joking with it either.

"Even if we activate Remnant defenses, I would hesitate to call Meridian secured. We don't know if Kett roaming the station will be unharmed, maybe those Warships will eventually overpower the defenses. Or maybe the Remnant forces themselves will be too much for us to establish a foothold as it stands. Besides, the Initiative doesn't have the manpower to secure a space station of this size. With or without hostiles on the ground," I shook my head.

"If we come back with actuals on Meridian? The Nexus will sit up," Liam murmured. I raised a brow, as did several others, unsure of what exactly what he just said.

"Ok… whatever that means… If we get some good data here, that'll certainly make the Nexus happy," Peebee nodded.

"Isn't that what I just said?" Liam retorted, confused.

"Well, seems like the plan is settled. Kallo, get us to the Civiki system. SAM should have the coordinates uploaded. Should take us nine hours, give or take, to get there. Get rested, get fed, get ready. No empty stomachs, no drowsiness, no full bladders, and no full asses, and," I looked at Peebee and Jaal, "NO hard-ons," I warned everyone. The crew laughed or chuckled, with the exception of Lexi and Cora, who just smirked. "Dismissed." The crew began to scatter. Though Vetra remained.

"Should I consider that an order?" she teased.

"I… actually wanted to talk, first. And, you know that will never be an order," I quickly raised my hands, defensively and reassuringly.
"Relax," Vetra chuckled. "Something wrong?"

"Uh, no! No, not at all. Er… quarters?" I suggested. Vetra nodded and I led her along. Damn, is it too soon to ask this? Technically, we've only been in a relationship for about a week and a half. Sex since two days ago. Is it too fast? I mean… we told each other we love one another, and, it sure as hell ain't a word either of us take lightly. And, well, in hindsight, we've clearly been interested in each other closer to when we first met than when we started… being a couple. I shook my head clear. Having all these thoughts running through my head now wouldn't help. I sat down on the sofa, Vetra beside me, turning her body to face me.

"So…" she led me on. I coughed nervously.

"Right! Well… um… I was wondering, if… er… we could start considering my cabin to be… our… cabin… If you'd… move in here with me," I questioned. It took me much longer than it should have to get that sentence out. And it had a fair amount of awkward stuttering.

"You want me to stay in here from now on? Live here while we're on the Tempest?" Vetra clarified, and by the sound of it, both unsurprised and not nervous. I nodded. "I'll go get my stuff," she tapped her forehead to mine and quickly left the room before I could even respond. Well…

That went well. I twiddled my thumbs as I sat there, unsure if I should go help her or not when she arrived back with two boxes, a bag handing off her shoulder, and some clothes on hooks. All in all, not much, honestly. The boxes and bag weren't that big, and there weren't many clothes on the hooks.

"Room in your closet?" she nudged her head in that direction. I stood, getting out of the surprise to help.

"Er, yeah! Yeah, I hardly use the whole thing anyway," I answered, moving aside a bunch of shirts hanging up, emptying out two drawers and dumping them into another two. None had been completely full, just more specifically sorted. Now, more generally sorted. "Thanks." she set the boxes down as she hung up shirts, put pants away, and general undergarments. I caught a glimpse of that lingerie from our first night too. She must have seen me react to it. "You liked those, huh?" she giggled. "I'll be sure to keep that in mind." Eagerly, I changed the topic.

"So, what's in the boxes?" I asked.

"Hm? Oh, just a few other basics. Some of it re-applies my colony markings, some of it can buff my plates. Also got a few soaps and such," she explained. She quickly looked for a smaller drawer or cabinet, quickly finding one. "Mind helping me put some of it in there?" I, of course, moved to help, opening the boxes. Huh, that's odd. None of that one commodity I would have expected to see.

"You outta tampons? Or, just got em somewhere else?"

"...What?" she asked, visibly confused, looking back at me. In response, I looked at her confused. "Do… Do Turian women not get periods?"

"You know, I've heard some human friends mention that, but I never knew what it meant," she remarked. "I remember some girls asking me to get something that sounded like what you just asked if I had every once in a while."

"Well, I can promise you that you just earned permanent jealousy from my sister," I laughed.
" Seriously! What are you talking about?" Vetra chuckled, still confused.

"Well," I shook my head, chuckling. "When a Human woman is fertile, once a month, for about a week, their uterus sheds its lining, resulting in women bleeding from the vagina," I explained. Vetra stared at me, eyes wide.

"That's not true. That can't be true. Wouldn't that hurt like hell?" Vetra questioned.

"According to my sister, yes, very, very much. At its worst, very bad cramps. Nausea, shit like that."

"...You're trying to mess with me. There's no way in hell that's real," Vetra continued. "Why is it that Human women aren't just... out for a week?"

"I honestly don't know, because I haven't asked. You want actual details? Ask a human woman," I suggested. Vetra paused, then shook her head.

"SAM, is Scott telling the truth?"

"He is."

"WHAT THE FUCK?!?" Vetra exclaimed. I burst into laughter. "We fucking underestimated you at Shanxi..." I continued helping Vetra unpack, listening her mutter to herself about all the things she's planning to do for human friends now that she knows about this. When done, we returned to the couch for a moment, leaning against one another.

"So... guess that means we're living together now..." I remarked.

"I... guess it does. Doesn't feel like anything's changed, though," she murmured.

"I mean... I guess that's a good thing, wouldn't you say?"

"Probably," she shrugged. "Guess this means you can live in my apartment on the Nexus now," she chuckled.

"Come on, I'm sure I can score us a nice Pathfinder level suite or something there when this is said and done. And yes, Sid can have her own room. And our room will be sound proof and have both an electric and physical lock, with a master bathroom attached so we only ever need to leave for food," I laughed.

"Give me time to prepare and I'll stock up on food that doesn't need a fridge. We could just stay there for days," she suggested.

"Tempting. But whatever would we do to pass the time?" I remarked, wriggling a brow. Vetra smirked, looking up at me.

"Oh, I can think of a few things... in fact, why don't we go practice. In our bed?" Without hesitating, I stood, and grabbed hold of her. Her legs hooked over my arm and holding her back in my other arm. She cried out in surprise at first before settling in, laughing. I threw her onto the bed, she crawled back up on it, so her head was on the pillows. I quickly crawled down, grabbed hold of her pants, and pulled them off, undergarments with it. "Someone's eager," she purred. I didn't answer. Instead, I spread her legs apart, and dug right in.
I stood on the bridge, fully suited up aside from my helmet, which I was being held in my left arm by my hip. The others were all finishing their own preparations in the cargo bay. Helmets and all. Our long-range scans detected an artificial atmo bubble surrounding Meridian. Not sure how it works, so, weird ass Rem-tech. Our ship would be able to safely drop us off while still being within the atmo bubble, but better to be safe. And this is will still be a large combat op.

Currently, just waiting for the other Pathfinders to all be in position. We all agreed that it was more likely that the place we want to be is closer to the station's center. Specifically, an area with intense energy readings. Even if it's not there, it's not unlikely that we can figure out where it is through the station's systems and SAM's decryptions.

As for Meridian itself, it was indeed massive. Very massive. I can imagine it being a sprawling Remnant city once upon a time. Unfortunately, there was evident Scourge damage, tendrils scraping the central spire and practically crawling over one of the three sections.

"In position, Ryder," Raeka called out on the comms.

"Then that's everyone. Everyone, engage Ghost storm on my mark," I ordered. Kallo's finger hovered over the necessary button. "Three… two… one." The button was pressed, and we made our approach. A Kett warship was facing the side we were coming from. We were careful to avoid any prying eyes. One single visual could blow the whole thing under the water. So, we flew in underneath. Nothing so far.

"Enemy signature detected. Commence pursuit," A Kett ordered, SAM must have been close enough to hack into their comms.

"The warships' moving. Heading is away from Meridian. It's working," Suvi confirmed. The warship now passed over our heads much faster with its own engines propelling it away.

"Understood. Reading several Warships heading in our general directions. We'll let them get a bit closer and pull back. It's all on you now, Tempest," Raeka responded.

"Give em hell," Avitus called out. The comms went silent as we finished our approach. I started making my way towards the cargo hold. Now I had to communicate with the bridge via intercom.

"Ryder, flyby is definitely our only option. No suitable landing zones in the area," Kallo warned. "I'll get as low as possible, but you'll have to eject over the target."

"Well, I started this ride falling out of a ship. Why not do it again?" I remarked. "Should be fine. Jump-jets should negate the fall and we have three biotics." I slid down the ladder into the lower cargo bay, nodding at my crew, all ready to go. I put my helmet on myself.

"Airdrop?" Vetra asked for confirmation, suppose she didn't hear them.

"Airdrop. Check your jets, watch rate of descent. Maybe we biotics can help soften landings," I suggested. It would be tricky, would make the overall landing harder than just focusing on one person. But… we'll see. Don't even know the height yet. Hm, I remember being rather uncomfortable during the rock-climb with Vetra, but, well, now I feel in control of this situation. I expect it. I won't start falling with my back to the ground.

"So far so good. Kett haven't detected us," Suvi reassured.

"Just get in and out. Stealth system will keep them from ever seeing you on sensors, but all they need is one lucky visual," I cautioned. We all knew that we'd still be detected regardless. We'd fight Kett, and transmissions would get out. But we can't have them blasting the ship. I signaled for
everyone to line up at the cargo bay door. Just in case there was any vacuum to suck out air, it was evacuated, and then depressurized. Our suits had more than enough air to sustain us.

I didn't have any concerns about anyone on this jump. Vetra's an adrenaline junkie, probably skydived before. Peebee and Cora have biotics to make the fall much gentler. Jaal's a soldier, and I'm sure he's got more than a few of these under his belt. Same as Drack. And Liam seems like he enjoys a few thrills himself. We lined up at the door. Biotics at the front, give us a chance to get on the ground first to help the others down. The others would wait five seconds before making the jump themselves.

"Helljumper, Helljumper where have you been?" I called out the old marching song.

"Feet first into hell and back again!" Liam and Cora called back. I smirked, it was fitting. That's why I brought it here. The cargo bay doors opened, the ramp already extended. It was beautiful out there. A real, Remnant city. The ship came to a full stop as Kallo gave us the all clear. We three biotics ran forward, though I turned at the last second to give a mock salute. I hollered out, having fun as I did a backflip during the descent, righting myself out. Our landing zone was coming up.

"Jets!" I ordered. While our descent was not halted, it was slowed. "Biotics!" They glowed to life as we gently finished the last few feet of the drop. I looked up, already seeing the others on their way down. Vetra doing a few flips herself, laughing as the Tempest sped away. Their own jets activated, and we helped them land. It was a bit harder than our own, given it was three biotics working on three people AND a Krogan, but no one complained as everyone checked out fine and weapons were readied. It was then that I noticed something running down my visor. Water. I looked up and around. It was raining. On a space station.

"I am detecting active conduits nearby. Your scanner should be picking them up," SAM informed. I started to follow.

"Stars, this place is... beautiful," Jaal murmured as he looked at the design of the architecture, combined with the lights, combined with the light of a sun mixing with the thin clouds, Scourge, and stars.

"Why would they have it rain here?" Peebee questioned quietly. "I'm definitely coming back here someday."

"Aaaand a chasm. Great! Should have made the drop off point over there," I grumbled. I tried walking closer, maybe it was proximity activated. And it wasn't.

"Scott, console," Drack called out, jabbing his thumb behind him. I followed it, seeing the console just on the ledge behind us, expertly hidden from our LZ by a few crates. I quickly activated it, the bridge forming.

"Pathfinder, while interfacing with that console, I detected the presence of a complex network, connected via a central command hub," SAM informed.

"Sounds like the controls. Can you get us there, SAM?" Liam asked before I could.

"I can. However, the hub is dark. Deactivated," SAM answered.

"Then how do we reactivate it?" I questioned.

"Perhaps the conduits shall lead us to a solution," SAM suggested. Well, best we had for the moment.
We passed through the door at the end of the chasm. It was a dim hallway bathed in a low, orange light. Looked much like a Vault entrance, and the wall at the other end, and closed off grav well, reinforced that comparison. I interfaced with a console at the other end, but instead of the grav well opening, the wall did, but blocked by an energy field. A window, of sorts. There were large structures reaching out like skyscrapers across the station. But, directly in front of us, one that seemed like a more unique design. More like… a massive arrow

"This is the central hub I detected. As with the Monoliths and vaults, the hub is connected to the two neighboring towers," SAM explained. I looked at the two. Thinner, smaller.

"Least there's only two," Peebee remarked.

"Then let's get moving. Eggheads and militia can do real recon some other time," Vetra suggested.

"And the Kett?" Drack questioned.

"Activating the Vaults has also activated a purification field. Perhaps Meridian is similar," SAM answered.

"Yeah, just so long as we have a good window to get the hell out," I murmured. "Come on, let's get moving."

The gravity well had its activation… ball thing… ready, so, I activated it, and down we travelled, gently carried down. The whole way down we could still see out. With a kind of… thin layer of mist over everything, it gave off an air of… mystery. Mysticism. We reached the bottom, a large open room like so many times before. But empty.

"Pathfinder, I'm detecting radio interference. A Kett signal," SAM warned. We readied our weapons.

"Alert! The detected signal was a decoy. Khi Tasira has been infiltrated!" a Kett commander alerted the troops. Intercepted comms again. I cursed inwardly, that they figured it out before we made contact. "All teams focus on capturing the Pathfinder!" I led the others ahead in formation, weapons raised to the door. A Wraith, an Anointed at a barrier, a Chosen above. Didn't see other Kett at the moment, kept an eye out, but a tech attack from Jaal and I brought down the Anointed's shields, leaving him vulnerable to Vetra's onslaught of bullets, and Peebee put a bullet in the head of the Chosen. Drack handled the Wraith. Another Chosen appeared, likely a member of the same squad, just above, but presented no hassle.

"I wonder if there's a broken atmo processor causing the rain…" Peebee mused, ignoring the firefight as we moved on.

"Let's not get distracted trying to fix the weather," Vetra suggested. Earned a few chuckles. There were pockets of Scourge ahead. Still creepy to see in front of us.

"I wish the Moshae could see this," Jaal whispered. A Kett dropship descended and we scattered into cover. Four Chosen. Quickly neutralized. Probably just an attempt to better estimate our numbers.

Remnant joined the fray. Only two Observers, but gave us an idea of their own presence. Told us that the Kett haven't fully secured Meridian. A path forward was blocked by a crashed Remnant fighter, we had two routes. Took the left first. There was a thick storm cloud overhead and to the left, not directly over us or our path, which was pock-marked by Scourge and all kinds of debris. It was eerie walking right beside some of those tendrils, and their odd, purple light. No Kett tech
anywhere. We made our way up another ramp. Spoke too soon. Kett bodies and crumpled tech.

"Seems they haven't had much luck over here," Drack remarked.

Simply moving along, we came across three Observers attacking the last of the Kett squad we saw dead on the ground. A pair of laser beams immediately cut the Chosen into pieces. Our shields would keep us safe for a moment. Good for us though, tech attacks and a large mass of gunfire let us push right by them, sending those Observers crashing to the ground. I saw a console and immediately, without thinking, interfaced. An Observer formed. But, just as weapons were raised, SAM confirmed it was friendly. It followed us along. Down to an area absolutely wrecked by Scourge. It was massive damage. There was a kind of liquid in a crater in the metal that read as being both highly radioactive and highly electrically charged. Not something to step in.

"Looks like a bomb went off," Liam murmured.

"Scans indicate that the energy waves from these craters contributed to Scourge throughout Heleus," SAM informed.

"That's a helluva find. So, whatever happened here caused the Scourge all over the place?" I questioned.

"Yes, Pathfinder."

"Fucking A," I muttered. We moved forward.

"So, the Remnant builders did this?" Vetra continued.

"Or maybe they were attacked," Jaal suggested. Hm, seems plausible. And if the Remnant builders did make it, destruction like this suggests it was an accident. He then sighed. "It frustrates and angers me that this place was hidden from my people for so long." We came upon several crashed Kett ships, burning.

"Maybe that was for the best," Peebee whispered, likely imagining those as Angara ships instead. There was a turret. As we got close, several Remnant bots spawned.

"Shit, take out the bots I'll get the damn turret," I called out, activating my cloak.

I ran up the ramp to a console I suspected would be behind the turret. SAM re-wrote its protocols, and it helped mop up the remaining bots. With that taken care of, we passed through another door. A short hallway, another door at the end. A large open room. No bots yet.

"I wish we had time to really dive in," Jaal murmured.

"Detecting low levels of power, Pathfinder. A scan may help you identify conduits," SAM informed. As suggested, I started scanning. Conduits all over the floor. I studied a bit more, looked like a pattern…


"Look for more, see what you can find," I ordered. She nodded and raced around, scanning every little thing. I activated a console with a flashing red light up above all the others. The wires all led to it. It started to hum but died down. Just four small holograms with a glyph over each. As I looked over the rest of the room… Looks like each symbol represents another console.
"Damage is preventing start up," SAM informed. "Boosting trace signals to attempt to reroute power. You will need to activate consoles in the proper order. Directing…" SAM led me around the room in a clear pattern. Closest console to the right, then the one adjacent. Further right, further left.

As the last console was activated, the room lit up, some kind of partially glitched holographic display in the center. Couldn't make out what it was trying to show. But the main console would work now. We regrouped up there and stared out at the massive space before us. To both the right and left, dozens, if not hundreds of landing pads, all with Remnant fighters. Who knows what's deeper in? I activated the console.

"Provisional repairs are complete, Pathfinder." The console hummed even brighter to life, a full holographic display that I couldn't read. "Translating: Flight control systems online. Welcome Administrator."

"Oooh, admin privileges. Can I control the ships? Get them to fight off the Kett?" I questioned.

"I do not know. Restoring power here has also restored power to a large conduit that leads deeper. It appears to break off into smaller pieces, many, many times. Powering all of them," SAM answered. A beam of energy appeared in front of us as the entire hangar lit up in a low, light blue, the mist fading away, allowing us a clear view for what seems like miles down the rows of landing pads. Those Remnant ships were humming, glowing to life. Even going so far as to start hovering, ready for take-off. I didn't even notice new glyphs appear.

"Translating. Exploration vessels on standby. We have seen Remnant ships, but none in working condition." A red display appeared. "It says it cannot receive commands from the Meridian Engine."

"Then we need to start this place up! If we can command those ships… Scott! This is…” Peebee was extremely excited.

"Kett! We need to move!" Drack called out. I saw them. Destined by those landing pads.

"Oh, they won't be getting their hands on em. Come on, move, we need to get this place started, control em!" I ordered. I started to run back, but this room wasn't done with us yet, despite the several colorful phrases I used to curse this place out. Several Assemblers and a Destroyer.

I ordered everyone to split up. Take down the Assemblers, finish off the Destroyer. Had half a mind for Vetra to use one of those Cobra Missiles.

"Scott!" Suvi called out on comms. "I detected a surge of energy on the scans! The section you're in lit up like Mardi Gras!"

"Yeah well instead women flashing us for beads, we got a bunch of Remnant. Talk later!" I responded. Ugh, Nullifiers too. Grouped up around the Destroyer. Alright, fuck it. "Vetra, missile!" I ordered. No response. Only explosions. One tower down, one to go.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We entered the adjacent sector after crossing a Remnant bridge. It was bathed in a low orange light, and next to no Scourge visible. Even plant life. Lush plant life. And then Kett. A Destined and Chosen right there, both of which quickly put down. This entire sector seems to have been overtaken by flora. Roots breaking through floors, curling around columns, sprawling over walls.
We took down a trio of Breachers as we pushed left, then up another ramp. Up a few more, preferring the narrow-raised paths to the wider, yet lower paths. And it payed out. Came upon where the Kett were waiting and had a turret console beside us.

We took cover as I interfaced, and the Turret took their attention right away as a blast tore through a pair. With that sudden distraction, Kett fire being drawn, our own weapons joined the fight, mowing through them all. We made our way to the door, noticing the Kett had brute forced their way in. The console had been pulled up, wires pulled and spliced. Meant the door was unlocked though. An open chamber, Remnant turret offline in the center on a pillar in a small pool of fluid. Kett on the raised left and right. They opened fire, but I put up a barrier, only protecting us long enough to shout out an order.

"Split! Cora, Liam, Drack, left, others right!" The barrier collapsed, and we ran as needed. I charged up the ramp, ending up tacking a Destined who tried to cut us off.

Once on the floor Vetra ran to cover me from anything else, and my Omni-Blade sliced through the Destined's throat. Vetra put another Kett on the floor as she led the charge, the path too narrow to walk side by side. My eyes fell on a console, I didn't hesitate to activate it. Two shield bubbles formed over a Kett position, but they were not the kind to help. Instead, it fried their tech, forcing them into the open. Seeing my opportunity in the confusion, I launched myself skyward, and used the inactive turret as a platform from which to jump and activate another console. The turret was online. The tables had turned. The last of those bastards fell, and the shield domes fell. The door opened to another hallway, and THAT door opened to… a room with rows upon rows of pods? With the odd few other flora, mostly mushrooms.

"I recognize these. They're common on Havarl," Jaal remarked, clearly curious. It was dark in here, no one really seemed to like that. An energy barrier on the other side of the room and the right, blocking access. Perhaps this console could fix that. I activated it. Lights flickered far overhead. The barriers fell, and Jaal seemed to be stepping closer to a pod, trying to peer through. I followed, just as curious.


"Angara? The fuck?!" I exclaimed. I tried to interface, to open the Pod. It was an Angaran male, naked. His eyes open, but no sign of pain or torture or anything.


"They were doing… things to the Angara," Jaal growled. Goddamn, seems everyone in Andromeda likes using the Angara as genetic toys.

"SAM, can we get them out? Open the pods? Something?" I questioned. There were a lot of them...

"Jaal, Pathfinder. They cannot be saved," SAM revealed.

"What? Why not? I'll break them open if I have to!" Jaal argued.

"I have analyzed the glyphs. These are not the Angara we know. They are not even alive. They never WERE alive," SAM continued.

"What…" Jaal stepped closer to a pod, I could see the fluid inside, keeping the Angara floating there. "I don't understand… They look so…"

"The Remnant language refers to these bodies as genetic templates."
"Wait, a template? A blueprint? Like those plants outside?" Peebee then gasped. "Goddess…"
Well, come on Peebee, explain-oh. Holy shit.

"The Angara… we came from here? They… created us? Why?" Jaal questioned slowly, awestruck, perhaps a bit terrified. Understandable. He just learned that his entire species was engineered. That is an existential crisis right there. I put a hand on my friend's shoulder.

"Does it matter why? Where you came from doesn't change who you are," I reassured.

"True…" he answered quietly. "And we still face the same conflicts. I just… feel as though something has shifted. I… I need to think. I need to speak with the Moshae," Jaal began walking through the room, gazing at the numerous pods. Peebee gently followed right behind him, though not speaking, not yet. "Meridian creates life. And the Archon could use it to do the opposite. Destroy everything." He seems to have found more motivation as his gaze levelled, and he turned, a determined look on his face. A resolved look. He would contemplate this later. "It's up to us to make sure that doesn't happen." I nodded, Peebee gave him a quick hug.

"Search the rooms quickly, don't wanna leave any data behind, or anything else important," I ordered. We found nothing and returned to the room where we fought through the Kett. The fluids from before had all drained. New data panels were visible down in the middle. I signaled for Peebee to get some reads on them, SAM translating. She began reading them off

"Selected skill appears well suited to biology. The Chosen, heirs, generation, translation was iffy there, discovered multiple applications. A large percentage of them completely independently. Director considers this test a success."

"Sounds like the Angara were meant to inherit all this. Be their own people, but have the foundation of everything the Remnant built," I murmured.

"That is… good, at least. This place would be a gift to the Angara if we could eliminate the Kett. We could learn so much…" Jaal whispered.

One day, Jaal. One day.
Goddamn, been a while since I did another update on here. Sorry about that guys, been swamped between work and school, so swamped I had to reduce my regular schedule to every other week. At least here you'll be getting the remainder of the story set and done.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Kett REALLY aren't happy with us being here. Waiting just outside the doors, towards the second tower was a shuttle dropping off a large group of Kett. Including an Ascended that tagged along for the ride. Fortunately, because the turret outside was still active, as well as our own numbers, we managed to take them down. Hell, the moment we got the blast from the Remnant turret managed to both destroy the Ascended's orb, and then knock him down on his ass out of our line of fire. Another shot, and a bunch of green fleshy chunks rained down. Convenient.

We returned to the barrier that blocked the way to Meridian's controls. That barrier, was down. Before we could cross the bridge over, another shuttle descended, carrying an interesting payload. Strapped into a kind of harness on the underside was a Kett Fiend. No doubt a squad of Kett inside.

"Alright these fuckers do not get to benefit from our work," I growled. I focused my biotics and formed a quantum engine of absolute destruction, just under the fiend. It roared out in surprise before the shuttle released the Fiend, not yet knowing about the singularity. Obviously, the Fiend was consumed.

The shuttle lowered slowly, either to drop off its men or from the gravity, but, well, it came too far. The whole thing bent close to a ninety-degree angle from its center as it was devoured. I closed the singularity. "Fuck off," I murmured.

"It still amazes me you can do it that easily. I've been training my biotics the entire time we've been here, and still, I haven't been able to do that in the field," Cora remarked.


"It can't JUST be that, can it? It's also about the implant, which, we have the same one. Hm… I know Alec was a biotic, but, no one's ever inherited biotics, except Asari, I guess, but they all have that. Hm, I know Alec was a powerful biotic, maybe that part IS hereditary?" Cora mused.

"I dunno. Honestly might just be SAM. I could never do a reliable singularity before him, after all," I shrugged. Cora seemed to return to her thoughts, no reply, as we pushed on.

There was no resistance in this entryway, they must've all been in that shuttle. Well, I didn't say there wasn't any non-Kett resistance. A Destroyer moved into view at the top of a ramp ahead. "Split up! Divide its fire!" I ordered. Everyone followed said order, no pairs, no need for the mat the moment.

We formed a large semi-circle as the Destroyer made its way down to us, it's chain guns firing at
firing. As one person returned to cover, it focused on another. Who then returned to cover. And so on, so forth. Given that we prevented it from making any worthwhile moves, we broke through the shields of its turrets and brought them down quickly. True, we may have made it faster, but when it can only fire on one of us at any given time? And we have plenty of cover? Well that's some good odds. The shields went down, and soon, the Destroyer followed. We had a path deeper in.

Oddly enough, it was now that a handful of Assemblers attempted to engage us, rather than while the Destroyer was still functional. It wasn't exactly a concern, Assemblers are easy to deal with. Wonder if they were… proximity activated. And the Destroyer just had a larger range. There was now a ramp ahead leading to a door. Blocked by four Nullifiers already in their siege mode, shields up, and locking on.

"Just keep moving side to side or something, you'll be fine," Peebee reassured.

"Scott, that Dhan you picked up should melt right through their heads," Jaal suggested.

"Really? Well, that's good to know," I chuckled as I pulled the Dhan from my back, clipping my Sweeper to a different spot on my back. I got to the bottom of the ramp, still moving side to side, and fired. The ball of energy seemed to curve just a bit, making sure it hit just a bit below the center of the metal head. Very nice, very nice indeed. Some of the metal seemed to flat out evaporate, while plenty more was sizzling and dripping, melting. I fired another round, and its barrier died, and the Nullifier crumpled to the ground. I loaded a new power cell, smiling, and continued.

Soon, each of the Nullifiers had collapsed into a bubbling mess. The Dhan returned to my back, and my Sweeper, to my hands. Through the door they were guarding was a large, open chamber. The weird ball of blue, in addition to the room's layout, gave it away as a grav well. Peebee gasped and ran around and up towards a faint blue glow. Another data pattern.

"The Remnant language bares many striking similarities to Angaran," SAM informed. Several glances were thrown amongst the group.

"That… makes a lot of sense," I remarked.

"Reading it off!" Peebee called out. "Opposition's foe, or defiler. Next moves learned from secrets… intelligence? News? From Jheln. Looks like that's either a name or a place. Take action. Protect the work. Individual life is nothing: the machine of life is everything."

"So, they WERE attacked," I murmured.

"Those must be the assholes who dropped the Scourge all over," Liam growled.

"Let's move on. Maybe we'll get more answers once this place gets started again," I suggested.

Peebee rejoined us and we ascended in the gravity well. At the top, the floor once more closed beneath us. Weapons ready, we stepped through another door. This was also a large, open area. Outside. A spire of Meridian dominating the sky, reaching far, far above. There was a beam of energy under a raised platform ahead. The beam was very similar to that we've seen in vaults. This is it. Meridian's controls. Walls on either side pulsated with streams of either energy or lights as they curved towards the center, though never connected. My heart began racing. This is it. Our journey culminates here. Right now. We made our way up to the raised platform. A console. I took a deep breath, Vetra gently squeezed my shoulder reassuringly. I approached.

I interfaced. The machinery hummed to life, light blue holographic tendrils stretching out above us,
flowing like a thousand rivers before a hologram of Meridian appeared over the console. And then, it's outline flashed a bright red before returning to blue. Still, some holographic glyphs lingered, red. Many smaller lines connecting to parts of the station, like damage reports.

"Translating: Connection lost. Meridian Engine not found."

My heart sank.

"Damn it, no, no, no! This can't be it! We're so close!" I slammed my fist onto the console, a bit of pain swelled, but I ignored it. "There must be a way! Any ideas?" I turned to the others, almost begging that someone has something.

"I could shoot at it," Vetra answered. I bit my lip as I resisted the urge to laugh. Though I did turn and look at her in the silence. I couldn't see her face through her visor, but, I'd bet if I could I'd see her wink.

"A moment, Pathfinder. I have found something," SAM stated. A feminine alien voice filled our ears.

"Tavadon aviraa. An Solaraan asa valtov ganye. Berah iras-" SAM cut the audio file off. Everyone listened closely. We just heard the voice of a Remnant builder, heard their language, spoken. SAM was translating.

"Final administrator's log. The opposition's weapon may cause widespread damage. All our weapons, our ships, will not be able to protect us... protect my goal." A hologram of a ball appeared above the console. Could that sphere be the Meridian engine? A power source we need to find? At the bottom of the hologram, a model of this station descended, separating. It looked tiny compared to the ball. The voice returned.

"Ehsan davaar ferloss. Berah iras ongaan tavetlov. Hanela Jardaan." The hologram of the station remained, but the ball moved closer. And SAM translated.

"We need to disengage Meridian from Command core, which will remain here to draw fire." The ball continued moving over our heads. "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." The holographic ball disappeared. No... that wasn't just a ball or sphere. That was a bloody planet. THAT, was Meridian. "End of log." We still have a chance. I smiled as what appeared to be a star map appeared over our heads. The Remnant builders, the Jardaan, they left us with a chance.

"The Archon was wrong... This isn't Meridian. Meridian is gone," I murmured.

"How do we find it? No way in hell is it over yet," Peebee exclaimed. An explosion somewhere overhead. Instinctually, we ducked. Looking out, a Kett Warship was on approach, and firing on the station. To make it even worse, I saw thousands of smaller dots that could only be one thing. A swarm of Kett fighters.

"We need to get the fuck out of here!" Drack shouted. We took cover against the occasional round that seemed to impact down here or nearby. Not that it would matter if they got one shot on this platform.

"This seems perfectly in line with how everything was going," I muttered. "Meridian's gone, don't have time to look for a fucking map, and a goddamn Kett shit show! Can I please get a fucking break?"

"What's the plan?" Liam questioned.
"We're fucking fighting. Those ass-fucks are NOT taking us! Not today, not fucking ever!" I shouted.

"Pathfinder. The Remnant city is not without its defenses. This is its central command," SAM informed.

"Fuck yeah! Was hoping there'd be some!" I laughed. I looked back at the console and made a run for it, interfacing again. SAM handled the rest. A blue energy enveloped the area, and the sounds of machines humming to life echoed, almost deafening. In the distance, the entire city seemed to light up brighter and brighter, before beams of energy began impacting the Kett warship and its fighters. Some beams were bigger than the others, but they all caused explosions. Hull breaches. Drack began roaring and laughing as the Kett guns changed their targets to the guns, and the fighters scrambled to do the same. Explosions rocked the city, but explosions rocked the Warship, I could already see holes and smoke. Not to mention many dozens of other smaller explosions detailing the destruction of Kett fighters. Jaal then gave off his own little war cry, very pleased to see the Kett taking such losses.

"It's going down!" I shouted, laughing myself. The lights on the warship dimmed, and it descended, fast and hard. It crashed into buildings, causing explosions or buildings to shatter as it scrapped across the station, eventually coming to a stop. Vetra stepped forward and hugged me, chuckling. My eyes were still open, and I saw a group of Kett enter from the same spot we did. Weapons raised. I dove to the side with Vetra still in my arms. She cried out in surprise before we quickly got to our feet and the cover.

"The Archon wants THAT one. The human in dark armor. Destroy the rest," a Destined in red armor ordered the other Kett. Wait… is that the same damn Red destined from the Archon's ship?


"Then let's kill the fucker. Take out the other Kett first. Drack, you watch that smoke, make sure the bastard doesn't get close," I ordered. Drack nodded and clutched his Ruzad, watching the smoke or mist, whatever, as the Archon's sword cloaked itself. Given they had a narrow bridge to walk across first, we were able to mow down the Kett, though had no sign of the Archon's Sword. Well, except for the mist. He, she, it, whatever the fuck, was all alone now. I pulled out my Dhan. Moving with Drack. His eyes shot to the side and he fired a flak round. The cloak vanished as the Archon's sword jumped to the side, before cloaking again and retreating.

"More Kett on the bridge! Mowing them down!" Vetra called out. I got into a position to help them out, slowly returning to them. Hm, looks like they're sending Wraiths out. Still, the bodies continued to pile up on that narrow bridge.

"Woah, there you are fucker!" Drack roared out, and I ran to join him. He was attempting to wrestle the gun away from the Archon's Sword. Seemed evenly matched. I charged into the Kett with biotics, knocking him to the ground, straddling. As I moved to send my Omni-tool down into his throat, he managed to roll me off him and retreat again, snarling.

"Get back over here coward!" Drack shouted.

"Fiend!" Jaal cried out over the sound of gunfire. There were other Kett running out too.

"It's like the Archon sent all his goons after us. Just die for fucks sake!" I exclaimed as I pulled out my Black Widow to work on the Kett. "Jaal and I got the Fiend just kill the other fuckheads!" The combined fire of a Black Widow and a Kett sniper allowed us to break through the Fiend's armor
and kill it. The others had the Kett handled. Honestly, I'm tempted to just throw a singularity at the first puff of smoke I see. I'd have done it to the bridge the first go, but, was too far away to reliably place one.

"Oh no you don't!" Drack shouted. I ran to join, seeing that the Archon's Sword had tried to get a dagger around Drack and to his throat. But, the old man must have heard him or smelled him or... something, and had a firm hold of his arm, probably crushing it in a vice-like grip. The cry of pain and the sound of bone crunching helped that perception.

Drack reached with his other arm to his belt and pulled out his own knife. He stuck out the Kett's arm and cleaved right through at the elbow. Free from Drack's grip, disarmed, the Archon's Sword clutched the stump crying out in pain again as green blood spurted out. Drack then sent his knife right into the Kett's forehead. The Archon's Sword fell to its back, dead. Drack removed the blade, and then proceeded to chop off the head. He looked back at me, staring at him.

"Trophy," he remarked casually. Not the first one he's taken. Took the Ascended commander at the Voeld base.

"Ground team, is everything alright?" Kallo questioned over the comms. I quickly looked across the team. No casualties. Maybe some flesh wounds, but no casualties.

"Everyone accounted for," I answered.

"We saw everything from orbit. It was incredible. The entire city lit up... the scans went wild!" Suvi exclaimed eagerly.

"Scott, the Kett are retreating. Whatever you did... it worked," Kallo informed.

"Wait, as in, entirely? They're leaving the station? Ha! They got the ass kicking they needed! More than happy to give it to them!" I laughed happily. Drack rumbled with a low chuckle.

"Given your command over the Remnant's defenses, Pathfinder. I predict the Kett will not attempt to capture the city," SAM theorized.

"Hell yeah!" Vetra cheered.

"SAM, contact the Angara and Kandros. Give em these coordinates. Tell them what happened here, everything. We need science teams here to help us find the actual Meridian. There has to be something here," I ordered. The comms went silent and I returned to the console. There has to be SOMETHING on it.

"Contact with the Scourge will have altered Meridian's original path. It would take countless years to determine its current location," SAM stated.

"If it takes years it takes goddamn years," I stated firmly. "Everyone's counting on us. But there has to be SOMETHING."

"And people counting on us is EXACTLY why this can't take forever," Vetra added.

"I do not detect any immediately obvious data, Pathfinder. But, I will continue my search." I gazed upon the central tower and the Scourge tendrils surrounding it. I had a thought...

"If the Scourge is messing everything up... maybe that's where we should look," I suggested.

"Wait, what do you mean?" Peebee asked.
"Uh… I was actually hoping one of you might continue the thought. Maybe… I dunno, the Scourge could be a trail? Or… something?" I shrugged.

"At least we took this place back from the Kett. That's a helluva win. Seven people infiltrating a massive alien space station, heavily guarded by several alien warships, then taking the city and destroying a warship? Clan Nakmor will tell stories of this battle," Drack remarked, no doubt smiling a toothy grin.

"And we need to keep pushing before they recover. We need to find Meridian. The real one," I stated. I began walking with the others towards a new LZ that had been sent.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We were safely back on the Tempest, and I had just gotten back into regular clothes when SAM informed I had a call. From Tann. Such a shame, I was busy watching Vetra change. Helping out a bit… and my "help" may have been more of a hinderance. While normally I would have blown it off to potentially get blown, among other things, SAM insisted that I should speak with him, given that I completely disregarded Tann's orders and opened up an entire Remnant city for our scientists. What kept me from grumbling all the way to the comm room, was Vetra whispering in my ear that she has a few ideas to cheer me up after the meeting.

Finally reaching the comm room, I answered the vid-call. A hologram of the Director appeared on the other side of the table.

"Pathfinder. You seem well," he greeted. Would have been much better if this call waited an hour or so. Or never came at all, while I would be, several times.

"Let's just stop beating around the bush, Tann. Go ahead, rant at me for disobeying your orders," I crossed my arms over my chest. Tann stood straighter, hands behind his back.

"We know you disobeyed us," he began. Heh, 'us.' Guess that means he isn't aware of Kesh's and Kandros' aid. "You went for Meridian, in direct violation of Initiative orders. Even though our reasons were quite clear." And wrong. I was about to open my mouth to argue. When I heard something I NEVER thought I'd ever hear from this Salamander. "And you were correct. We should have trusted your instincts. You have proven time and again that you deserve the title of Pathfinder. I have never been so glad to be wrong."

Well, I'll fucking be. While I can't exactly say Tann has won me over or earned my respect, just for admitting he was wrong once. But he has earned a genuine, non-snarky reply.

"Thank you, Tann. I appreciate your candor," I nodded.

"I'm told there are still obstacles to reaching Meridian. The Initiative stands ready to provide whatever support you need," Tann informed.

"We'll put it to good use. Thanks." I ended the call. The intercom activated.

"Scott, have you finished the call?" Suvi asked.

"Yeah, Tann actually admitted we were right," I answered.

"That's… surprising. But I have more good news. I think I found a way for us to find Meridian!" Suvi stated excitedly. I immediately made my way to the bridge, sending Vetra a quick message that Suvi had an idea. Currently, we were on our way back to the Nexus. Restock, see Sara, little
" bit of time as we figured it would take some to find Meridian. I entered the bridge and Suvi waved me over. She pulled up a hologram, the same one the console showed us. Meridian.

"Meridian. Set on a path by its creators, disrupted by the Scourge... now lost. An unmanned ship at the mercy of ocean currents. Now, think of Meridian as the ship, and the Scourge as the ocean..." she began. Typing away at her console. "If we can somehow predict the currents and track them, we could figure out where the ocean has taken the ship." It clicked for me.

"Suvi that's genius!" I exclaimed. "So, now what?"

"It's not a precise analogy, of course, but it illustrates the point," she stated first.

"Dr. Anwar's suggestion may indeed be our best chance at finding Meridian," SAM supported. "The more we know about the Scourge, the better we can predict how it affects the things it comes in contact with."

"We need better data. Probes for the Scourge, Angaran star charts," Suvi listed off.

"What about the charts of Heleus from before we left? That would be a good baseline, right?" I suggested.

"You're right! Yes, I can compare that to Heleus at present. It'll give us numbers, but one set won't be enough," Suvi answered.

"So, what do we need now?" I questioned.

"Readings from the Scourge itself, collected by probes planted at key points, one of which, is nearby here in Civiki" SAM answered. "Once the data is collected, we will need Initiative resources for mining and analysis. Once that is done, I can build a predictive model that will recalculate Meridian's path."

"Sounds like a helluva plan," I nodded. "Let's give it a shot. Kallo, do a flyby of that location and send out the probe. SAM, coordinate with the science team. See if they can send ships out to some of those precise points for probes. We can help more after we hit the Nexus," I ordered.

"At once, Pathfinder," SAM answered. Now, I returned to the cabin. I had something in store.

"You know it's rude to keep a lady waiting," Vetra teased as the door opened. She was lying on the bed like a pin-up girl, on her side, hand running along her leg, another keeping her head up. And she was in her lingerie. "Tell me what SAM said so I know just how much I should do for you," she whispered as I got close, a broad smile on my face.

"Would telling you that he actually said I was right, he was wrong take away from the experience?" I asked. Her eyes went wide.

"Really? Well, then I suppose that just turns everything I had planned from conciliatory, to celebratory. Come 'ere." What a celebration it was.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We didn't celebrate the WHOLE way back to the Nexus. And we didn't sleep either. We were already rested before we got to... Fake Meridian... I had checked my messages. The investigation I helped Saelen Varn with was going well. Several arrests had already been made. Keri T'Vessa had also messaged, wanting to ask about the Remnant City, which, I'm surprised she knows about.
Even a message from Liam.

Summarizing, it was him musing and thinking about how the Jardaan MADE a people. While back home, we were on the cusp of stable clones for an entire person. And that's just cloning. Liam then went off thinking about how dad made a kind of life in SAM. Something he doesn't understand and yet there it is in my head. He ended the message saying, "Sometimes, you just write, right?" Hm, true enough.

Vetra had wanted to go do a bit of her own work, contacts and such, and I figured I could speak with crew. Especially Jaal. After his little bombshell. I checked with SAM, and Jaal was in his room. Peebee had been with him earlier but was in her own quarters. So, I went to Jaal's. He was standing there, back to the door, just staring out a viewport.

"Hello, Scott. Have you come to see if I'm finally broken?" he greeted solemnly, not even turning. Wait, what? He turned. "To see what discovering that my people were invented has done to me?"

"I don't even know how I'd feel in your shoes… but, well, I'm here to listen. If you need to talk," I answered.

"I've been staring out the window trying to figure that out."

"That's new."

"True. Angara are usually free with our feelings."

"Not talking about all Angara. Talking about you." Jaal then turned to face me fully. Thoughtfully.

"I'm… numb. I'm in awe. 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," he almost whispered. I really liked that part, about understanding. It's very true.

"Does it matter? Your people aren't shackled to this new discovery. The Angara are still the Angara."

"I agree. We don't owe anything to the Jardaan. Our destiny is our own," he stated proudly, confidently. "I'm not broken, Scott. 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 the Kett can do about it." Jaal smiled. "The future holds more for the Angara than a never-ending war on the Kett. Much more." Jaal seemed… ecstatic.

"Helluva time to be alive. For all of us. Amazing and crazy ass days," I remarked, Jaal's enthusiasm being contagious.

"Really crazy. Really amazing. 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 but ourselves. And that's… everything." I was really glad that Jaal was now taking this so well.

"Apologies, Scott. But I must write to the Moshae. Something more personal than whatever report SAM sent."

"Of course. I suspect she'll be on one of the first research teams to come here," I chuckled. Jaal did the same, and sat at his terminal, typing away. I let him be. Liam and Cora were standing around the holo table, talking.

"Listen, the Scourge is designed to isolate, right? And it lingers well after the war? I know exactly what that is, Cora. That's a goddamn minefield. I've seen too many of them to miss the signs. They
do more than just kill soldiers. They hobble the whole population. They make normal life impossible," Liam argued.

"But the Kett take people and change everything about who they are. And the Angara seem to be afraid of them too," Cora countered.

"Yeah, but the Kett didn't lay down a dark energy cloud that makes space travel dangerous and risky, cut off entire systems from one another, and screw over entire planets. Don't get me wrong. They Kett are BAD. But whoever deployed the Scourge? They're some motherfuckers."

"I'm gonna agree with Kosta here. You can fight the Kett. The Scourge? Just wait millennia until it all falls into the black hole," I shrugged.

"I guess you have a point. More used to focusing on the enemy in front of me rather than… an object, I guess," Cora conceded.

"So, how's Jaal?" Liam asked.

"He's actually doing well, it seems. He's gotten a kind of inspiration from the discovery. I'm not sure he's gonna always be fine and dandy about it, but, this isn't like after the Exaltation facility," I answered.

"Good to hear. Taking it a lot better than I would," Liam nodded.

"Made me wonder. Just what were the Jardaan planning? What if the Angara were just a foundation? What if they had bigger plans?" Cora mused.

"Kinda looking like it doesn't matter. Whoever this opponent was, maybe it wiped out the Jardaan," I theorized.

"You don't think it's Reapers, do you?" Cora murmured. That's a thought that hadn't occurred. But then I quickly pieced it together.

"No, no, I highly doubt that. If they were, why didn't the Milky Way ever have any Scourge? And again, no Mass Relays or Citadel around here," I countered.

"Good point. Suppose that's reassuring," Cora remarked.

"I'm gonna go see Lexi. Just thought of something I wanted to ask her about," I stated, and began making my way to a ladder down. I wanted to ask her about Sara. Not how she was doing, but how easy it would be and how soon we could get her on board. For her end, at least. I entered the med-bay, and Lexi was sat at her desk studying a data pad.

"I took the rest of the night off," she called out, not turning. That's fine, something I don't have a problem allowing. But something sounded off in the tone. And relative rudeness of it. Not that I care much.

"I don't remember approving that," I teased.

"I can break bones just as well as I can mend them, Scott," Lexi threatened jokingly.

"What are you reading?" Lexi now glanced back, with a nod of her head I could come closer. Lot of data on it I couldn't exactly understand.

"Harry's latest report on Sara. She's restless, but on the mend." Reading about my sister huh? What
"So, you're not really taking the night off," I smirked. Lexi chuckled at herself, shaking her head.

"Work-life balance has never been my strong suit."


"Tell that to my exes," Lexi retorted. "How do you do it? Be both Scott and the Pathfinder?" I resisted the urge to smirk devilishly, hiding the glint in my eyes. I can toy with her just a bit before a genuine answer.

"Want to know my secret eh?" I leaned closer. "I'm just that good," I whispered.

"Get out," Lexi smirked, standing to push me to the door as I laughed.

"Hold on, hold on, Lexi. Sorry, was just too good," she paused, raising a brow. "Honest answer, absolutely no jokes, whatsoever. Pathfinder's honor," I held a hand over my heart and the other in the air by my hand. Lexi stopped trying to push me, though crossed her arms over her chest.

"Tell me, Lexi. How much do you see me change? I'm the snarky, sarcastic, jackass with a soft side and a hopeless romantic ninety percent of the time. The remaining ten percent? Some mix between a pissed off Scott, serious Scott, and then combat Scott. It's just… who I am, I suppose. I only ever THINK about being Pathfinder when I try to make speeches for the public. The rest of the time I'm just me. Being Pathfinder is the very last thing on my mind when it comes to friends, family-"

"Vetra?" Lexi cut me off with a smirk.

"Especially her," I smiled. A broad, just… happy smile. "Sure, I have a responsibility to my friends, family, her. But I don't think I've ever let it define me. And sure as hell never let it define us." Lexi smiled and nodded as I finished.

"Sometimes, just SOMETIMES… real wisdom comes out of that thick skull of yours."


"Always."

"It's a good thing I like you, doc," I chuckled, shaking my head. "So, believe it or not, there WAS a reason I came down here in the first place. And-No, Lexi, stop. I see you going business and serious mode. Let's practice. Stay Lexi, not Dr. T'Perro," I encouraged. Lexi bit her lip and rolled her eyes, struggling to contain a smile.

"Yes?" she shook her head.

"I wanted to know if you had any ideas on when Sara can finally join us on the ship. I hope the moment Harry is willing to release her, but… I dunno. I just want her on board," I questioned.

"I've already asked him for you. I already suspected that the situation for both of you would vastly improve being near together and working together again. Harry wants to keep her a little longer and then we can take her. Alright?" she answered. "Though I can't imagine the nightmare of working alongside two Ryders. One is bad enough."
"Ha! Thanks Lexi. Good to hear. Suppose you deserve to know that Mom often thought I was the mild one," I smirked.

"That's a lie."

"You're right, it is. Individually, we're just as bad as each other," I laughed. "Oh, but together? When we're together, take how bad we are individually, triple that, and then add the two new values together."

"Maybe I should ask Harry to come aboard and help out," Lexi murmured.

"I promise, and this promise extends to my sister, that the two of us will go easy on you."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Chuckling, I left the med-bay. My Omni-tool beeped with a message. Gil, asking to talk. Engine room. Which, is where I set off for. When I got there, he was clearly distracted, and eager for my arrival.

"So, my buddy Jil," he began immediately. No wasting time here, eh? "Who can't stop singing your praises, well, she wants to have a baby. And, uh, not sure you've heard this one before… she asked me if I'd father it." Oh. Well, that explains his extreme nerves.

"Well… that's big," I replied, voice low.

"Right?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I'm still in the freaking out phase. Would it be totally crazy if I said yes?" Well, sounds like he's already decided what he wants.

"If you want to, which, it already sounds like you do, it's not crazy at all."

"I mean we're already family. I get her, she gets me. And we support each other unconditionally." Yeah, I think this confirms my theory that while Jil respects Gil's orientation, she wouldn't complain in the slightest if he was interested in women. But hey, kudos to her for still being able to keep a strong friendship.

"Sounds like you love her, Gil. Not THAT way, but, wanting to give someone the most they want in the world? That's what it is."

"I hear you," Gil nodded. "And I've been thinking about it. Becoming a dad. I don't want to just be a donor. Bringing a kid into the world wouldn't be enough for me. I'd want to raise the child with Jill."

"Then go ahead and do it!" I laughed, encouraging my friend.

"Yeah… it's funny. You can think until you're blue in the face. Sometimes you just gotta trust your gut."

"I'm happy for you Gil. Both of you," I patted him on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Scott. Or… Should I say, Uncle Scott?"

"Only if you're willing for the kid to become just as sarcastic and snarky as I am. Smartass who finds all manner of loopholes that leaves you smiling and chuckling at their ingenuity, yet you try to be annoyed because of the loophole," I warned.
"You do know that I'd be its father, right?"

"Good point." I let Gil be, now. Meandering back towards the front of the ship, waving at Vetra who was down below working on a terminal, managing supplies, plenty other things. Peebee was walking across the glass bridge thing towards the… bridge. Yeah.

"Is he alright?" she asked.

"Yeah. Took it as inspiration," I reassured.

"Good, good. That's… good," She breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm still trying to make sense of everything we learned at the Remnant city. I still can't believe the Angara are… designed. What are the implications?"

"That we know next to jack-shit. Kinda humbling."

"Well, I came here for mysteries, right? Heleus is more and more interesting. Every minute…"

"That it is. Now, go see your boyfriend and probably make it even more interesting," I teased. Peebee giggled, gave me the middle finger, and brushed by, heading straight to Jaal's room.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Back on the Nexus. Safe and sound for now. The scientists had already sent out a few shuttles to pockets of Scourge energy suitable for scanning that had been detected before, but never given much attention. I began by making my way towards where Keri would be waiting. Just another interview. She was up on the second level of the commons, by the science lab, looking out over the rest of the commons and the ship. She waved me over. Greeting me.

"Good to see you out of the cell, Keri."

"My arrest came up as a 'critical error.' Translation: 'Our heroic Pathfinder took an interest, and now you're bad PR.' Truth… hurts. A Pathfinder can handle the dangers out there. For us ordinary people, it's too much. I want to finish the documentary. Take a stand for what matters. But what is that? What's best for the Initiative?" she questioned. Hm, guessing having a bit of a crisis of… well let's call it faith. Not in religion, but rather journalism. Truth.

"The truth. They deserve it now, they deserve it a thousand years from now. Give it to em."

"Alright, you're right. If your SAM can give me everything it recorded in that Remnant city, least, what isn't classified, I'll get it out. Uncompromising, raw footage. Every challenge we need to overcome. Thanks, Ryder. For everything," Keri smiled proudly

"Just be sure to include footage of the Kett Warship being taken down. That was goddamn beautiful," I requested, chuckling.

"A Warship came down? You're right, I will have to include that! As thanks, I'll save the interview of your love life for another day," Keri then winked and left before I could say anything. Which would have mostly consisted if asking if Sid blabbed. Or, hell, Sara's awake, she could definitely have blabbed too.

Speaking of my sister, that was my next destination. We wouldn't be on the Nexus long. The crew all knew that. This was a quick resupply drop before we head back out to help the scientists scan the Scourge. I found her in the med-bay, but the docs had to direct me to somewhere other than her
bed. Apparently, she was moving around. And annoyed by still being confined. I found her in a room with Harry and another Doctor, likely the physical therapist. Sara was wearing loose, baggy clothing, walking by using some metal guide rails that went up to her waist.

"Damn, I can't believe I missed my little sister's first steps!" I cooed teasingly.

"I'm happy you're back but at the same time, fuck you," Sara laughed as she turned, left the rails despite some minor protesting from the docs. She barely even hobbled over and hugged me, I felt her use me to help herself stand. Well, I guess a month in a bed does give her an excuse. "How'd Meridian go? Guess you already got all the vaults online and saved the cluster?"

"Not quite. Turns out, we got bamboozled. That Meridian wasn't actually Meridian. It's… weird. But we have a lead to the actual Meridian, involves scanning some Scourge, and a bunch of math that I'll have absolutely no part in," I chuckled.

"You always were ass at math. That's why I worked at a dig site and you didn't," Sara teased, pinching and tugging my cheek.

"And yet, Mr. Bad at Math is the one who brought all those alien vaults online, not Ms. Dig site. You were too busy sleeping," I retorted.

"I hate you."

"I love you too. Wish I could stay longer, but we can't exactly waste much time here. We need to go help narrow Meridian down."

"Just be sure to take me away from here next time, alright? I'm bored to death."

"I promise." I hugged my sister again and let her get back to it.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

"Scott, I got some great news!" Jaal exclaimed, bursting into my quarters, which, fortunately, I was the only occupant of at the time. We were off to go scan a more distant Scourge cluster. Other ships were still gathering data from closer ones.

"Must be good to have you riled like this. So?"

"I've been offered an advancement in the Resistance and my own command." Oh… I remember he said he was unsatisfied with his place in the Resistance. Now he's got that goal. I hope at least that he stays for the rest of the journey.

"That's great. I'm… happy for you," I struggled to show as much joy for him.

"But you don't sound… is that another idiom?"

"Uh… kinda? Sorta? So, when did this happen?"

"I got the message very recently. You know I wasn't satisfied in my position in the Resistance. I suppose my experience and aid here, as well as the Heskaarl status, has had an impact."

"And I remember you weren't satisfied with your position in life."

"True. Very true… yes…" Jaal sighed.
"After my successes with you, they see me with new eyes. But more importantly, so do I." Well, that's good to hear for him at least.

"Glad to hear that. So, your own command?"

"A covert squad. Tech ops. Command a small group of elite specialists that infiltrate advanced Kett sites. High danger, high reward."

"Well… We're gonna be sad to see you go, Jaal. You're a helluvan asset," I patted him on the shoulder.

"What?" Jaal laughed. "I'm not taking the position!"


"What I wanted?" Jaal laughed again. "Yes, it was. But it wasn't what I needed. Not what I need. With your help, I broke free of expectation. I found my better self."

"That is one of the nicest things anyone has said to me. And, you bastard, could have told me sooner that you weren't accepting the damn position! Gave me a scare!" I wrapped by buddy in a hug. "Glad you'll be staying round, Jaal."

"You know, I think you've changed too, I think. More open, like a true Angara," Jaal mused. "This is evidence. So, you're stuck with me now."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."
Payback

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Data. We're still just… gathering data. Well, gathering data from the probes the scientist ships have sent out, and we're almost at the one we're heading to. I was just on the bridge. Bored. Watching the black void of FTL.

"You should see some of the messages I'm getting about the Remnant city. The science team is absolutely blown away. It's a tremendous find. They're asking me to pass on their thanks," Suvi remarked, breaking the boredom.

"As Pathfinder I was happy to serve," I smirked. "Interested to see what they find. Add in that programming core Peebee found, well, I'm curious."

"Hm. You know… The discovery of the Angaran origins have made me think hard about creation. If the Jardaan are capable of creating life, then what does that say about God?" Suvi questioned. I tilted my head to the side for a moment, then understood what she meant.

"You're thinking he could just be a scientist?"

"Yes. What if our creator is like the Jardaan? Advanced, but mortal, fallible."

"Uh… well… I don't know. I don't really think many things are exactly perfectly made in the first place. Honestly, Suvi, I think I'm the wrong person to ask about this. Rather, a priest, or… something," I shrugged.

"That's part of why I'm asking someone who's not a priest. I want more than 'have faith.' Besides, you know I don't exactly believe what the priests preach." I rubbed my chin thoughtfully, trying to think of a good answer for Suvi.

"Well… you believe he made… everything, right?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose I'd say you don't have much to worry about in this sense. The Jardaan probably didn't just make a species out of thin air. Rather than taking some pre-existing species, or, hell, even their own gametes, and then heavily modified their genetics. They didn't make black holes, or galaxies, or planets, even. So, I suppose you could take it as your God made this artwork that is the universe but wanted his creations to have the capability of expanding upon it."

"That… helps. I still have questions, but… that's a good way to think about it." Suvi took a deep breath to calm herself. "Thanks, Scott."

"Sure thing, Suvi. So, ETA to the Scourge thing?"

"Should be… another hour. It's the furthest one out and most of the other scientist ships are already returning to the Nexus. Once we have this piece, the science team will begin compiling it all."

"Sounds good then. I'll be in my quarters, I think." I nodded, leaving the bridge crew be. Upon my return to my quarters, I was pleasantly surprised to find Vetter sitting on the couch, nursing a drink. I smiled, and her own mandibles gave a small flair for a smile of her own.
"What are we going to do if Meridian isn't what we expect?" Vetra questioned, genuinely appearing troubled.

"How so?"

"What if it isn't where it's supposed to be, or it doesn't work the way we think it does?"

"Come on, that would be... hm... the fourth time now? That things have gone that wrong? Our luck can't be that bad," I remarked. Vetra rolled her eyes with the hint of a grin that faded again.

"It's just that this Remnant shit is a wildcard. I've been going back and forth. Glee one second, worry the next. If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is. Learned that the hard way..." I frowned, upset that's a lesson she had to learn. Let alone the hard way. Story of betrayal behind that lesson, sounds like. Or just being let down. I moved and sat down beside her, putting an arm around her.

"We still have to try. Have to hope," I rubbed her forearm gently.

"You always know the right thing to say," Vetra hummed, leaning against me. "No matter what happens, at least we won't be alone." Vetra then turned and kissed me lightly, lovingly.

"Damn right," I whispered. "I love you."

"I love you too." Vetra leaned further on me, I took her weight without complaint, finding comfort in such close presence. I continued rubbing her side, just listening to her breathing. Content. I just lost track of the time, sitting there with Vetra lying on me. Eventually, there was a knock on the door. Vetra grumbled but sat up. She gave me a nod.

"Come in," I called out. It was Liam. He glanced at Vetra but proceeded to stop noticing her.

"Think we'd be able to have another movie night tonight? Found a gem I forgot about on my Omni-tool."

"What movie?"

"Last of the Legion. You know, that terrible Turian military film? But this is the uncut version. Director's cut, all that. Doesn't even have the crappy extras added in for the Hanar."

"Wait, if it's a terrible movie, why watch it?" I questioned.

"The fact that it's terrible is exactly why we should watch it. We've watched good movies, but you noticed no one could really talk about them much later on. This? It's for the experience. No one cares if we skip a part, no one cares if we talk over it, it's something for us to just have fun with how bad it is," Liam defended.

"Alright, fuck it," I shrugged. "So long as the scientists still need time calculating the data after we've got it, sure thing." Apparently, Vetra and I must have been sitting here for over the hour Suvi said it would take to get here. As she just called down to say the probe was sent, and the Scientists, with SAM's help, were compiling the data, doing the math, so on, so forth. "Kallo, just go ahead and have us orbit one of the planets in the system. We'll hang here a while. Shit, Liam, just go ahead and gather the others."

"Want Jaal to bring the feeling thing?"

"Honestly? If this is a bad movie that we'll probably just spend more time either cringing or
"Laughing? No."

"Eh, yeah, you're probably right. I'll get the snacks and gather the others," Liam stated, then left.

"Alright," I groaned as I sat up. "Let's move the couch, grab the drinks."

"You know, I was just starting to fall asleep there. Guess it can wait," Vetra remarked, still standing to help.

"Given the sound of your breathing, I'm not surprised. After, promise."

"I'll hold you to that," Vetra chuckled as we lifted the couch, a task made easier by my biotics making it lighter. We gathered the drinks. Our own picks were already in the mini-fridge, and by now we knew what to nab for the others. Soon enough, everyone was gathered, in their usual spots.

"Liam brief you all on it?" I asked the others. Didn't get a single person that said no, "Then let's just get it started, eh?"

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

"They need you, Joraz! I know you left the Legion-" another character I hadn't bothered to keep track of the name of went on another stereotypical, cheesy spiel to get roguish and disgruntled protagonist #358 to fight.

"I never left the Legion. It left me. But I know my duty…" Alright, add on edgy to his character description. The, 'Nothing personal, kid,' kind of guy that you see all the time. The overly dramatic music only helped my perception. Liam was right, this is a shitty movie, but, at least, we've already laughed at some of the shittiness already. The protagonist, Jorax stood and turned, looking overly solemn as he moved to prepare.

"Alright folks," Liam interrupted. "We can sit through a training montage, with what many critics describe as excessive Turian flexing…"

"No such thing!" Vetra called out, now starting to pay close attention to the protagonist lifting rather large weight sets and pulling concrete slabs behind him on chains.

"What about *my* flexing?" I 'whined.' Making it more than obvious that the offense was mock. And yet, I still flexed my arm that was against Vetra. Who, made a show of feeling it.

"Hmmmm, I suppose it's alright," she hummed teasingly.

"There really is such thing as excessive Turian flexing. And, there's also an excessive amount of PDA," Kallo grumbled. Several others chuckled as, well, he did call us out.

"Or… we can fast forward to a ship crashing into an asteroid crashing into a moon," Liam continued.

"What, is it also crashing into a planet? Crashing into a sun? Crashing into a relay? Crashing into a black hole?" Peebee joked.

"Fast forward to the crash!" Jaal voted.

"Nah, montage, don't cut shit out," Drack threw in his two-cents.

"I'd go for the crash," Cora called out, not paying much attention to the workout regimen, where
the protagonist was very obviously catching the eye of Turian women and other men making a show of feeling inadequate.

"Forwarding to the action scene, going once, going twice..." Liam counted down.

"Yeah, go ahead and skip to the good stuff," I remarked.

"Boooooooo," Vetra fake grumbled. Liam keyed his Omni-tool, and there was an explosion.

"If we hadn't already watched all those 'Star Wars' movies, I'd complain about the ship explosion not being silent in a vacuum," Kallo murmured.

"I hope that's not the voice of experience talking," Gil smirked.

"Guess they wanted their money's worth. They actually blew up a derelict for that shot," Liam informed. I let out a whistle.

"Guess they only got one take with that one, huh?" I remarked.

"Too bad the script wasn't caught in the blast," Lexi joked. The doc earned a few good laughs from that. The protagonist returned to the screen, rather dramatically arguing with another man.

"My strike team will hit the enemy cruiser, General. Force is the only thing fanatics understand!"

"Why a strike team? Torpedo the cruiser!" Cora exclaimed.

"That's overkill. Get one engineer on board, cut life support and engines-problem solved," Gil countered.

"And leave them stuck on a hostile ship? One torpedo, over by lunch," Cora argued.

"I think a charm offensive might be more... rewarding," I suggested jokingly. Vetra gave me a look with an eye roll, but not without a smirk.

"Mmm... yes," Jaal nodded.

"Classic irresistible hero," Liam chuckled. "Pretend to be captured..."

"Beat up armor, enticing scars, soulful eyes," Jaal listed off.

"Yeah, yeah, the old 'dinner and drinks to show off my villainy.' They get cozy..." Liam continued.

"And then STRIKE!" Jaal shouted, guess he was excited. "Or not. Why spoil the evening?"


"Wait! Listen!" Suvi pleaded as there was yet another firefight. Between the 'good guys,' and some Human 'bad guys.' One of the good guy's friends then got shot in the gut, falling to the ground, going limp. Dead that quick, huh?

"Teranus? Teranus! Noooooooooooooo!" the main character cried out dramatically. Sad music as he threw his head back.

"Ugh, he was a sidekick. They die like goldfish!" Liam groaned.
"No acting like overacting. Even Scott could do better," Cora chuckled.

"If I wanted to," The others all leaned forward, giving me a look, smirking.

"Now you have to do it," Vetra teased.

"Come on! Show us! I'll be dead for you!" Kallo encouraged, the movie paused, stepping to the front of the room. He was giddy.

"Alright, alright," I chuckled. Standing and walking over. Kallo got onto the ground, one arm keeping him up while he put on an overly dramatic dying face, an arm vainly reaching out to nothing. I took a knee, one hand holding him up, the other around his side, and his hand grabbed my arm. I looked down upon my "dying" friend.

"It… It isn't fair!" I began, a similarly dramatic voice. "He was so young and… and Salarian! He had so much to give!" I faked crying.

"I… I can't feel my… I can't feel my gallbladder…” Kallo panted. The gall bladder eh?

"They had the GALL to shoot you in your gallbladder! They- wait, do you even have a gallbladder?" I whispered the question, struggling to keep the grin off my face.

"Oh no! It's worse than I thought!" Kallo exclaimed, fake painful voice. After pretending to choke and struggle to breath for… about a minute, his head fell to the floor, in a last breath.

"No! Damn you! Damn you all!" I shouted, head high to the sky. There was laughter and clapping. As we got back up.

"Let's stick with the over acting Turian," Lexi smiled.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The movie was close to over now. Protagonist #358 has survived the conflict as a big-ol hero and fallen for female companion #237 that had first appeared during the training montage, catching the protagonists eye. The two who, were getting married. Or, bonded, as they put it. Vetra had shifted so that now her head was resting against mine, despite the cheese.

"I swear to love you, a thousand times a thousand stars…” The protagonist still kept his slightly edgy and strong man attitude. His damn wedding tux didn't even have sleeves! The ultimate Chad!

"Oh Jorax," the woman on the screen cooed. "So many years lost… We were so foolish. Our hearts are one. No enemy fleet, no sea of stars can ever separate us again." They tapped their foreheads together. The cheesy moment was broken by a rather obnoxious snore from Drack, who had fallen asleep. We laughed as the credits rolled. The others helped clean up, and then, soon enough, it was just Vetra and I in the room again.

"Why is it that even cheesy as hell romance still makes me want to hug you?" Vetra questioned, chuckling.

"It probably means that we're just so in love," I joked, purposely saying something even cheesier. Vetra groaned, hand on her forehead, and yet, still chuckling.

"I believe you made me a promise?"

"Just lay down already," Vetra urged. I tossed off the light shirt I had been wearing and placed myself in the center of the bed, on my back. Vetra then tossed off her own shirt, which, I thought might have meant we'd be doing more than sleeping, but instead, she just huddled up beside me like she's done before. One leg crossed over my own, her head resting in the crook of my neck, and a hand resting over my heart. I remember lightly rubbing her back as she fell asleep, listening to her breathing, and eventually, her light snores. It made me smile. I could do this forever. Grow old this way. It would be a happy life. I fell asleep. My dreams were of the future. A future with her.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Seems this morning, SAM isn't content to just let us wake up on our own time. There was a soft ding, as if the intercom was going off, before he spoke.

"Pathfinder, the data has been compiled. I suggest gathering the crew in the meeting room." I sat up, Vetra doing the same, surprisingly, not grumbling.

"Guess that's not really something that can wait, huh?" she remarked.

"No, no I wouldn't say so," I murmured, getting out of bed to get dressed. With that complete, I went ahead of Vetra to the meeting room, calling for the others to all join. Didn't take long, though it appeared a few of them, I had woken up.

"I've been told we have information on Meridian. Who's gonna start?" I began, glancing at Suvi. I'd glance at SAM too, if I could.

"Between the Remnant city, Meridian, and however the Scourge fits in… pardon my Martian, but it's weird as shite. But we got something. The key to it all, in here." Suvi keyed her Omni-tool and uploaded a file to my own. A nav aid. "Take that back to the Remnant city, find an override, and their ships will fly the same vector as Meridian."

"We're going to fly Remnant ships?!" Peebee squealed.

"I don't think so, Peebee. Sorry. Those Remnant ships should have an autopilot. This will tell the autopilot where to go," Suvi answered. Peebee didn't seem too disappointed.

"With correction from the Scourge, you'll have an exact location," SAM reinforced.

"Kallo, how far are we to the Remnant city?" I questioned.

"Not far at all. I can get us there in an hour."

"Good. Let's get going then. This is it, people! Showtime."

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

It was… weird… coming back. The Kett ships were gone, and the Remnant city was glowing light green all over. SAM had given us an LZ that should have an override nearby, and messages had been sent back to the Resistance and to the Initiative of what we were about to do. Just in case. The Tempest had landed just outside the structure. We were suited up though without helmets, armed, though not expecting resistance. The whole ground team was heading with me, just to be there. The
sunlight washing over the station through the Scourge was beautiful.

"Everything looks right, Scott. Find the override, apply the program, and the Remnant ships will find us Meridian," Suvi reminded.

"And maybe we get lucky. For once. Ready?" Drack looked at me, stopping. I took a deep breath.

"I was born ready. It's been a long time coming, but it's here now. Let's get to it."

"This is for us. For everyone. Come on," Vetra grinned.

"Tempest, we're going in." I led the others through the doors and into the Remnant structure. Through the hallway, a large, open, quiet room.


"Orbital scans identified a separate energy grid within the tower," SAM informed.

"And that means?" Jaal questioned.

"Defenses may not be on our side," Peebee warned, unholstering her pistol. The others and I followed suit. We passed through another set of doors. A lower level and an upper level, with a group of pillars in the center, surrounded by the catwalks of the second level. That's the direction I took the others.

"Remnant. Tech attacks," I ordered calmly. Gunfire roared out, as well as the sound of Observer beams or the occasional Assembler shot. The electric hum of electricity filled our ears as the energy was drained from the hostile machines. A Nullifier crawled up to engage us, but an Incinerate round alongside some gunfire put it down. I didn't even need to verbalize any commands. We just worked in tandem with one another, carving a path through the bots. Before we even knew it, the room was clear.

"Good work, keep moving," I urged the others onward. Another set of doors, and on the other side? A relatively small chamber. One lone console at the other end. I felt my heart race as I approached, though didn't let anything show on my face.

"Projections suggest multiple launch bays, and possible links to Meridian deployment," SAM informed.

"Goddamn," Liam murmured, excitedly. I was standing at the console, and yet, I hesitated. Nerves, not much else, just… nerves. Vetra stood by my side. Wordlessly, she helped lift my arm, and place it above the console. SAM began the interface.

"Let's… find a path," I released another deep breath. Holograms of dark and orange tendrils appeared overhead, the Scourge, like it's a map through. I could only describe the noises the console made as "positive."

"Remnant ships are lifting off. Some are following the override vector," SAM stated. The hologram must be in real time, as I could see the Remnant starships moving through the clouds.

"Woah, the Scourge is moving, following them. But… they're getting through to… something…" Peebee observed. There was a gap in the Scourge, some Remnant fighters zoomed through. A large, black ball.
Meridian. A model of it appeared.

"Looks strange," Drack grumbled.

"Data's strange. It's saying it's… hollow. Covered in metal, but hollow."

"Fucking A, Meridian's not just a planet, it's a goddamn Dyson Sphere! Shield World! Whatever the hell you want to call it, that's amazing!" I exclaimed. Essentially, a Dyson Sphere is an artificial construct that completely envelopes a star, absolutely capturing all the energy it puts off. In some works of fiction, such as the old Halo Franchise, those came in the form of Forerunner Shield Worlds. Where an entire world that looked just like a natural world lay beneath its shell. Although an even more impressive example of a Dyson Sphere in Halo was Onyx. Or, Trevalyan. Where space itself was bent, an entire solar system's worth fitting within the weird quantum state of the one shield world.

"Correct. A self-contained seed world that is the heart of the Vault network. Once reactivated, every connected planet will be affected. It is the means to make Heleus a home, Pathfinder," SAM confirmed. I beamed.

"This is it! This is fucking it! The day everyone in Heleus has worked for, hoped for! Ever since we left home! We've fucking done it!" I exclaimed

"Congratulations, Pathfinder," A deep voice stated. My face fell. I spun with my pistol out, but, only the rest of the squad was there. They turned but were confused to find nothing.

"How the hell you get in our comms?" I shouted.

"What? Who are you talking about?" Vetra questioned. My eyes widened, and my face fell further. Oh no… Oh-fucking no…

"This is a great day for us all." The Archon repeated. Everything felt… woozy… I staggered, trying to get to the console so we could get out of here, but… my brain felt like it was on fire. I winced in pain, a hand lifted to the side of my head.

"SAM, Tempest, what's going on?!" I shouted. I think… I think I could faintly hear my name being called. Three fingered hands trying to hold me up. Shake me. I fell to my knees as a piercing ringing filled my ears. I shouted in pain, struggling to my feet again, staggering to the console.

"I believed you a fitting rival, but you are a false thing. A lie," the Archon growled.

"G-Get back… to-to the Tempest!" I ordered the others. I could barely hear myself. I think I heard the others shouting. Vetra… she seemed panicked. They carried me along. The door shut. "The console!" They led me there.

"Once I saw what made you special- your connection- I knew how, and when to take it from you." A blinding flash filled my eyes, nothing but white. I cried out in pain again. "I let you find Meridian. And now I'll use your SAM to weaponize it." Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. "All Heleus will be exalted or, one by one, your worlds will die. Starting with Eos." Another blinding flash. I fell to my knees, despite the support. "All I need to start is an implant like yours. And thanks to your memories, I know who else has one…" NO! NOOOOOOO! That shot me back to my feet, despite the pain, I struggled to lift my hand to interface with the console. "Another reason to take the Hyperion." I couldn't. I fell to the floor. Everything went black.

"Fall to darkness, Pathfinder. You were almost worthy."
Alarms were going off. I managed to convince Harry that I was well enough to go help out. I could move fine on my own, he was just too careful. It felt good to be getting suited up, the tug and weight of the armor being familiar. The weight of an Avenger in my hands comforting, as was the Carnifex at my thigh.

"Keep going! The med bay is still secure!" I shouted to some more evacuees. That's what my job had been so far, helping others get to a safe place. With whatever the hell was going on.


"SAM? How are you… What's happening out there? I'm seeing people with bullet wounds," I questioned.

"Kett forces are sweeping the ship. They're looking for you." Wait, those hostile aliens out here? How'd they find us? Why are they looking for me? "Sara, Scott needs your help."

"This is crazy. Why does he need my help? He's closing in on Meridian!" I exclaimed.

"The Archon has severed my link to your brother's implant. If my basic connection isn't restored to his body soon, he will die." I froze.

"Sara, please. Do you have weapons secured?"

"Y-yes, I do. How much time do I have?"

"Hopefully, enough. The lack of my presence does not immediately shut down his systems. However, I am required to maintain them."

"Goddamnit," I murmured, starting to run for a path to SAM node. "Context, SAM. Come on!"

"The Archon isn't stealing the Hyperion. He wants you and I. Your implant is the same as the Pathfinder's. He'll use us to control Meridian, and your brother will die." Damn it SAM, can you please stop saying that? Only getting me more stressed! I grabbed a grenade belt from a nearby weapons locker, flared my biotics to ensure they were working, and checked my Omni-tool. All offensive programs ready and proceeded in the opposite direction of people fleeing the Kett.

"I am sorry I can't help you fight. I took over too much of your brother's implant and losing me will kill him. A door ahead opened, Kett in a firefight with security. I took cover.

"So, when the comms dropped… he did too?" I began opening fire. Given I was to their side, and a surprise, I managed to put bursts into two bony and green armored aliens that had to be Kett. Both fell dead.

"Hurry, Sara." Holding back tears, I ran around the corner, and my used my biotics to lift the last Kett into the air and slam him against the wall. Enough force to kill him and dent the wall. I ran up another level, down another corridor lit only by the red emergency lights. It was the tram corridors, but no trams at the door. Rather a human woman fighting off two Kett on the maintenance walkways between here and the other side. The woman noticed me, immediately recognizing me.

"Look out! Sara, shoot them!" she ordered. I think I remembered who she was now, Captain Dunn. I put a burst into the head of one of the Kett and sent an Incinerate charge into the other, another burst to finish him off.
"Sara, SAM said you're fighting to the comm override? You can't!" she exclaimed.

"If I don't, Scott dies! Either help me or get the hell out of my way!" I growled not hesitating in moving ahead.

"I meant take the access route! You'll bypass most of the fighting," she explained. I didn't lose the angry look, but I nodded a quick thanks and apology as I followed her. "If the Pathfinder's in trouble, that's all we need to hear. Keep pushing. We'll barricade at the maintenance access!" I ran through another set of doors and down, Kett ships had docked on the hull, and we were drifting away from the Nexus. I ran down yet another red hallway, towards a broader one. I think this may have been a living area, but Humans were in cover, fighting off Kett on the other end of the area. Including two big Kett with some kind of energy chain gun. I didn't stop to fight, Dunn ordering the Humans to cover me as I ran to the maintenance access at the other wall. I got in quickly, running through the mass of pipes.

"SAM, Dunn won't last long, what's the plan?"

"Manually send a reboot signal. It will reset your brother's implant," the AI answered.

"Like a factory reset?" I passed into another regular hallway, just outside the comms.

"To restore the functions I shouldn't have taken. With luck, his heart will not have stopped... again..." Right... he did tell me SAM stopped his heart before... I shook that out of my head as I ran for the console. "One pulse, Sara. That's all the Pathfinder needs." Doors opened, more civilians running by. Gunfire too.

"It'll probably alert that Archon fucker, but, how do I do it?" Two Kett aliens entered, they looked different than both types I've seen before, some kind of horns on their boneheads. And they were holding their weapons at me. No gunfire. I frowned as the button was highlighted.

"Niad Shurid!" Probably Kett for 'Put your weapons down.' I pressed the button and dropped my gun.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I gasped. "HOLY MOTHER OF FUCK-NUGGETS CHRIST! CAN THAT PLEASE STOP FUCKING HAPPENING?!" I shouted. As my eyes took in their surroundings again, I saw Vetra, a tear stained face staring into my own before her head crashing into my chest as she sobbed, crying in relief. Drack and several of the others had been beating on the closed Remnant door. I looked down, my chest piece had been removed, the under suit torn open. Suppose some CPR, or defibrillator. I simply wrapped my arms back around Vetra as I steadied myself.

"I'm here, I'm alive, I'm ok," I reassured, hushing her gently. My eyes fell upon the console. We had to get moving. Gently, I took Vetra's head in my hands, moving it in front of mine. Her tears had run down her face, ruining the face-paint on them.

"We need to move," I whispered. Vetra nodded and helped me up.

"You were dead... heart stopped..." Vetra sniffled.

"I'm sorry..." I stated as she helped me limp forward and to the console. "The... The Hyperion's dark. SAM with it. Sara with it. We need to get it back." It still felt like there was a missing presence in my head.
"But the door is Remnant! Don't you need SAM?" Peebee questioned. I gave Peebee a look. A look that said it wouldn't stop me.

"We need to get back." With Vetra's help, I reached my hand over the console. The console began to react, but I felt a burning in my head again. My legs got wobbly. I groaned in pain and my hand fell.

"Scott-" Vetra began.

"No… No… I need… to power through." Drack stepped closer. He helped the hand. Helped me stand.

"That's it… slow and steady. You got it, kid. You can do this," he encouraged gently, quietly. The door almost opened this time, but I staggered again. I stared at the console firmly. "One more time. You got this kid. You got this." I forced my hand to remain. Forced myself to resist the burning in my head. The door opened and thanks to Vetra and Drack, I didn't fall to my knees.

"Alright, that's it. Come on everyone," Liam urged, stepping in front of Vetra and Drack. He squat down and grabbed my legs, lifting them over my head. Jaal came and grabbed the other leg. Cora and Peebee used their biotics to lessen my weight. The sensation was odd, but not unfamiliar. And without walking myself, it helped the burning and weakness subside quicker. Despite the pain, despite Hyperion being stolen, I smiled at what my crew was doing for me. They carried me out towards the ship.

"I love you. I love you so much, please, stay with me. Stay strong," Vetra repeated, whispering it in my ear.

"You did good, kid. You did damn good," Drack murmured in my other.

"Try it now," a familiar voice stated over static in the comms. Gil.

"Pathfinder? Come on!" Kallo exclaimed, equally static comms.

"We're here, Tempest," I replied.

"I got him! I got… hey!"

"Pathfinder! Kett took down the comms and hijacked the Hyperion!" Suvi stated.

"I know. The Archon's been planning this shit since his flagship. He fucking used me!" I growled. "He took down my SAM connection. Not even sure how I'm still here."


"Shite. SHITE!" Suvi responded, panicked herself.

"We're getting reports from… everywhere. All remaining Kett ships are on the move," Kallo informed.

"It's all the fucking Archon. If he takes Meridian, he'll destroy worlds. Starting with Eos," I replied. Telling them parts of the mockery that fuck-wad gave me. "He thinks he's won." Like fuck I'll let him think that for much longer. He has my fucking sister. My fucking mother.

"Pathfinder? It kind of feels like he has…" Suvi murmured. I felt my eyes glint with fire.

"Not yet," I snarled. The others managed to carry me outside, and I noticed with some relief that
Cora was holding the chest piece of my armor. Good, I think I'm going to need that. Lexi was already off the ramp of the ship. She began running over. "Set me down, I can walk," I told the others. Reluctantly, they let me get to my feet. I hobbled for a moment, but I could stand. I could walk.

"Scott! There you are! You… need to stop doing this!" Lexi exclaimed.

"Yeah I got the memo. Nice to see you too." I stopped myself, Lexi seemed completely unfazed by my blatantly rude comment. "Sorry, just-

"Don't bother apologizing, I know it's stress. Let me run my scan."

"News on the Ark?" I questioned.

"Still heading to Meridian with a small Kett flotilla. You got the last signal before the Archon locked it down," Kallo answered.

"We are NOT letting that stand. Let's move!" Liam shouted, moving to the ship.

"Wait! We need a plan!" Cora halted him by grabbing his forearm. Liam looked as if he was about to punch Cora for stopping him.

"Stop ship, kill motherfucker," Peebee countered.

"With what?" Cora exclaimed. My eyes went wide as I remembered something.

"Oh, I know with what. We may be outgunned, but there's a way. There's always a way." I moved towards a Remnant console out here. I didn't care if it will hurt like hell to use, despite Vetra trying to stop me.

"He's got Hyperion. How many hostages is that?" Cora questioned.

"How many worlds does he destroy if we don't move?" Drack countered.

"And how many do we save if we get ourselves killed?" Cora retorted.

"Well we have to do something! Right?" Peebee exclaimed. Without SAM, I couldn't read the holographic display on this console. But… it should work...

"I know! But the Tempest is one ship, and she isn't even armed!" Cora shouted. Wincing at the pain, I activated the console, a low thundering sound booming and echoing all around. The sound of thrusters. A large chunk of metal began to ascend in front of us, over the edge. A Remnant starship, with squadrons of Remnant fighters circling it. And that wasn't the only Starship to have risen. Several others rose up in the distance, but still visible. I smiled. The others began walking over.

"You… you did something impossible…" Peebee beamed in amazement.

"Can you keep that up? Have them fight for us?" Cora questioned. As my head pounded, I felt something drip down over my lips. "Uh…” Cora gestured to her lip. I wiped away the blood. A damn nosebleed.

"I can do it."

"Kett are tough, but Remnant hit hard," Drack nodded.
“The promise of that could inspire others to join in. Across the cluster,” Jaal stated enthusiastically, hopeful.

"We have a FOR REAL shot at this!” Liam exclaimed.

"Rally the troops for a last stand,” Drack nodded again.

"A last stand? A last stand?! Ha! I just pulled a motherfucking FLEET out of my ass!” I spread my arms wide. "This, with all of our allies supporting that? The Resistance, the Initiative, the Krogan, even the goddamn Collective? No, we can BEAT this motherfucker!” The others shifted, standing a bit taller.

"We have to try…” Cora murmured. I smiled.

"Is this the part where I give a speech? Where I ask you to die for me? Fuck that.” I scoffed. "I say, we shove these fucking Remnant down the Archon's throat. Buy us a chance. All of us a chance. And hey, the Archon has pushed this cluster around for too fucking long. Spread the word. EVERYONE in Heleus has earned some fucking payback.”
We had been following the Remnant fleet along the way to Meridian, and Lexi had me on a cocktail of meds to deal with the headache, keep me at my peak. Well, as close to it I can get to it without SAM boosting me. We had been able to send messages out before moving through the Scourge clouds, so others knew what was coming. What they were called for. Drack had confirmed that the Krogan of New Tuchanka were ready and more than eager for the coming battle. Liam had gotten word back from the Outposts. All of them. That means word has reached the Militia, Resistance, and even Collective. Cora had confirmed that Asari Huntresses from both the Militia and Ark were volunteering, even those who had at first decided to not join the Militia were joining up now. And Jaal had revealed something… extraordinary. In his own words:

"All the Angara, all the families, are offering everything we have." That's… holy shit, if I wasn't distracted with what lay ahead and already happened? Well… I'm floored.

We were slowed to the pace of the other ships, but it seemed like we would get bouts of FTL travel. When slower than light, the Scourge eerily followed the Remnant starships, but didn't catch up with them. Least that should give everyone else time to catch up. As for me? Well, after getting Lexi's meds in my system, this dose, at least, I had returned to my quarters with Vetra, who helped me take off the rest of my armor and put on a replacement under suit. Putting the armor back on would wait until we were ready. Everyone else, I trusted to help coordinate the others until then. But Vetra? I needed her here, with me. Just… to be there. She hadn't let me out of her sight yet. And, given that this time, she had lain down first, almost dragging me to rest beside and practically on her? I wasn't eager to leave. I had spent the time studying her. She had been trying to keep some of the worry hidden, bottled down.

"I can't wait to see the Archon's face when he sees you didn't go down as easily as expected," she remarked, masking it further. "People are standing by. I managed to get a few messages out. Sid's actually coordinating them."

"Already been giving her some lessons?"

"A few. Some she seemed to know already."

"Vetra…" I trailed off gently, showing her I didn't buy her act. She sighed.

"That's the second time you died on me. And you already died once on Habitat 7, before we even met. For the love of the spirits, don't do it again…" I felt a tear fall from her to my cheek. I reached a hand up and gently caressed her cheek.

"I promise, on everything, that I won't. Never again…" I whispered. Vetra sniffled, then shook her head clear.

"I should be asking about you. I need to know that you're holding up ok," she murmured. I let out a sigh.

"They have Sara. Feels the same as it did when those Exiles on that asteroid had Sid. To make it worse? Well, same day I learned of the Reapers, I learned that my Mom was alive, in stasis on the Hyperion. They have her too…" That surprised Vetra, the flash of it showing, but she saved that for another time. Questions would wait for later.
"Spirits, Scott. I-"

"Don't, Vetra. No need. You help just by being here. That's all I need." I sat myself up so my head was level with hers, and I caressed her cheek as she smiled. "God, I love you…"

"I love you too…" First, our foreheads met, followed by our lips, followed by our tongues. Though we may have wanted to go farther, we knew we couldn't. Not when the call could come at any moment. Not with all the meds in my system. Thing was? We didn't need to go further. We were happy and content, in our own little private world, just the two of us. And, with any luck, it won't be the last time.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

My fleet and the Tempest came out of FTL. Over a dozen Remnant Starships and all the fighters within them, and the Remnant City. I stood on the bridge, hands behind my back, armored with all but my helmet. Ahead, over Meridian's surface, Ark Hyperion pointed down to the surface, and a Kett fleet waiting. Forming a defensive line. Some of our allies had already joined us, some were still en-route. Most composed of Militia forces, but a few Angara were counted among us. The job of our fleet was to punch a hole. While our allies would be bringing more fighters and armed shuttles themselves, nothing with the capability to attack Kett Warships.

"We're being hailed by… Ark Hyperion?" Kallo informed, surprised by the source. I wasn't.

"Put the fucker on screen," I ordered. The Archon, looking both pleased with himself and rather smug appeared on the vidscreen.

"You continue to defy your limitations. Impressive." He wasn't alone. Behind him I could see Sara and Captain Dunn strapped to chairs.

"Sara, you ok?" I questioned, ignoring the Archon. The Archon appeared annoyed at being ignored.

"He's crazy. Says that if we don't submit he'll use Meridian to kill everyone," Sara answered, nervous. But, at the same time, anything but submissive. "That's why he took SAM and I."

"You say that as though I should feel guilty," The Archon turned back. "Exaltation is a gift. Those who can't see that deserve to die. You still command Remnant, but that began with the SAM and the implant. Now I have both. I no longer need you, Pathfinder. But since you insist on interfering…" He grinned. "I'll give you my full attention." The Kett fleet began moving to engage, launching missiles as its fighters swarmed towards us. Our ship was stealthed, that would prevent lock on. If a fighter started chasing us, it would have to be a manual shot from the pilot, which would be more difficult. Further, enough to get through our shields before they began to recharge. With the command I had over the Remnant, and the same program that was used to find Meridian in the first place, I fought through the headache with the help of the meds to order my fleet forward. To avoid fire, and fire themselves. A squadron of fighters however, would remain at our flanks to protect us, compensate for our own lack of weapons.

"That's more than we thought…" Suvi murmured, looking at the Kett fleet. True, it was a lot of ships.

"We got this," I encouraged.

"We need cover! Hug the Remnant!" A human squadron commander ordered his men. Given our
tactical command, orders still came through our ship, so we could belay them if needed.

"Rock and a hard place! Ryder? Ryder!" An Angaran woman shouted for orders. Damn, the Starships weren't firing weapons. They were taking punishment and apparently shrugging it off, but they must not have external weapons. Still, the fighters seemed to be dealt with well enough. Er, well, being dealt with. As I looked across the fight, time seemed to slow as a voice echoed in my head. Familiar, welcome.

"When your backs against the wall…" I finished Dad's sentence alongside him. "If you can't run from it, use it."

"Kallo, how close can you edge the Scourge?" I questioned the pilot.

"Too close? Why?" He questioned, perplexed.

"Dad just gave me an idea. The Remnant are pulling our best chance at winning this right behind them! Just get us in close and trust me!" Kallo nodded in response and worked the ship's controls. The Remnant starships took a more direct route straight towards the Kett warships, the Scourge trailing along. Then, they and us began going upwards, forming a wall of the Scourge in front of the Kett warships. Now, flying the ships forward again, we began boxing them in between the Scourge and Meridian. Some ships were skirting the edges around the Kett fleet, boxing them in further. If the Kett ships moved forward, they'd hit Scourge. If they moved up, they'd hit Scourge. Soon, if they moved back, they'd hit Scourge. If they moved down? I could order ships to go below them too. Or, they'll just hit Meridian. The plan was working, the gunfire was stopping and there were reports of Kett fighters dissipating as they kept impacting the Scourge trying to chase us down.

"I've never been so glad to see that stuff!" a pilot exclaimed as Kallo laughed.

"Get the Hyperion," I ordered with a smug grin. The Archon appeared again, growling.

"Archon! Don't blame your people. This clusterfuck is all you," I mocked. "I'm not playing your games anymore."

"You wish to force my hand. So be it," he snarled. He turned to Sara. Shit, too aggressive for my own good with this fuck-wit. "Unlike you and the Pathfinder, I do not require an implant… I have yours." This… Kett device sent out a kind of Red beam, looked like a scanner at Sara. She cried out in pain, breathing hard. "You've made this much more difficult, Pathfinder. But not for me." I gripped the railing tighter, my knuckles probably going white. The surface of Meridian beneath Hyperion rippled. And opened. A beam of light, a large one, allowing the Ark access. I sent off the Remnant ships, and the Tempest was the first to follow them in.

It was… disorienting. We were going straight down, yet, the ground was now below us. A lush, vibrant green landscape with vast, Remnant structures dotting the landscape.

"It's a wonder…" Suvi murmured. The engines went dead just momentarily as Kallo righted ourselves. Gravity had been inverted. We ended up low by the surface. Monoliths dotted the landscape, and several Architects were slowly flying through the skies. "Can't see the Hyperion. Extrapolating from last known position," Suvi stated.

"It wasn't built for landing. We'll beat it down," Kallo reassured.

"Wherever the Archon goes to ground, that's where we're heading," I ordered, heading back towards the Cargo bay and the Nomad. "Get a hot drop ready. Vetra, Jaal, and Peebee. Everyone
else will join as soon as they can transfer to a shuttle." By the time I got to the cargo bay, helmet on, Gil had gotten the Nomad ready, and evacuated of everyone except those already in. I got in the driver's seat. Gil began the count-down, Vetra silently grabbing my hand. We dropped down towards a valley, landing with a thud and bounce, but we were alive, and the Nomad intact. I opened the door and peered out. Seeing the Hyperion fly past a fucking SUN that was in this place

"Pathfinder, I've arranged a… distraction while I find Meridian control," the Archon spoke. I peered closer, squinting, the visor magnifier to help me see a Kett shuttle flanked by two fighters departing the Hyperion. The Archon, and my sister. I got back in the Nomad and followed best I could through the landscape. The moment my foot hit the petal, which hit the metal, Suvi got back on the comms.

"Scott, it's nav-dead. That's why we lost it! Looks like maneuvering thrusters only!"

"Shit, the Archon's betting we won't chase him with the Ark at risk!" I exclaimed, slamming my fist against the dash.

"We'll guard the Hyperion, you get the Archon," Kandros stated, patched into our comms.

"Good to see you here, Kandros. Who'd you bring?" I questioned.

"The whole damn cavalry. You know I can't resist a party, Ryder." Another familiar voice. One that still made me uncomfortable, but hey, if Reyes is here, that means we have the Collective. I can accept that. Initiative fighters and shuttles, even Collective and Resistance shuttles swarmed overhead. Some likely to engage Kett forces, some to help the Ark.

"We hold the Kett, you secure Meridian!" Evfra added in. I couldn't help the smile, and Drack couldn't hide the chuckle. They were all here to kick that bony motherfucker's ass.

"Let's fucking go, people!" I shouted as I launched the Nomad off a cliff edge into the wider valley below. Remnant architecture was genuinely everywhere, and yet, it seemed to naturally blend in with both the plant life and the landscape. Hell, it would remind me a lot of Earth if not for the Alien Architecture. And the fact we can see a ceiling in the sky. And the Architects flying, still ignoring the battle raging. I used the thrusters to soften the landing as an Initiative fighter flew low overhead through an arch in a pair of trees just yards ahead, a squadron of other fighters followed, though only close, and not along the exact same route. As the fighters passed, so too did more shuttles from our allies. Our comms were hailed again, debris starting to fall in the distance. All Kett, I hope.

"Pathfinder? He's taken them," Dunn groaned.

"Dunn?" I questioned.

"The core is lit up like Christmas, but SAM isn't talking. The Archon… shit. I don't know what he did but he has Sara." The Hyperion was leading a line of smoke, and slowly, starting to descend. "Whatever Meridian can do… he'll try to take it."

"Just focus on flying, Dunn. I'll find them!" We continued driving, petal never leaving the metal. Jaal murmured several times about the beauty of this place, but I couldn't appreciate it right now. Not until Sara was safe. A Kett shuttle crashed into the ground ahead of us, exploding in a fireball as more Initiative fighters passed overhead. We passed through into another portion of the Valley, and a Kett ship flew overhead, moving to engage… something. My omni-tool beeped. A message. It's text to speech program read it aloud.
Your arrogant posturing shall not secure you my coordination again. Your victory here today shall not aid you in the future. This is the last we shall ever communicate. -P

The message contained a code. I held my arm out to the side and told Vetra to send that code to the Kett ship. The lights on the ship dimmed, though it remained in the air.

"Reading failures in the weapon systems of that ship. The hell?" Kandros exclaimed.

"Some Kett aren't too happy with the Archon. Guess they see this as their chance," I answered.

"Understood. Take out any shuttles that leave it, see if we can't take the thing down." Kett ships flew overhead and this time, it was an Initiative shuttle that crashed. I cursed inwardly, but it was impossible that we wouldn't take losses. A ridge ahead was smoking, burning. Must have been something that crashed.

"Debris incoming!" Kallo warned, I swerved the Nomad to avoid falling metal.

"Sorry for the mess," Reyes chuckled.

"Structures ahead, Pathfinder, and major energy signals. I'm no SAM, but that's got to be some kind of control," Suvi pointed out, inputting a marker on my HUD.

"Thanks, that's our entrance then." I turned back to the others in the Nomad. "Lock and load." We crested another hill, a small cliff, and landed at the bottom of a hill, dotted with Remnant architecture, as an explosion went off.

An EMP.

The controls were fried, confirmed by my desperate movements being met with nothing. "Fight through on foot!" We quickly got out of the Nomad, running for cover.

We had an uphill battle here, so it wouldn't be easy. But we could do it. An Anointed was giving us suppressive fire from a ridge nearby. Most of his rounds spread, meaning they were unlikely to hit at this range, but that doesn't mean we could stop keeping our heads down. I ordered Peebee and Vetra to keep us covered from any others as Jaal and I carefully yet quickly aimed our Snipers at the big fucker and brought him down with two simultaneous shots.

"Fight through, left side, more cover!" I ordered. We shot down a pair of Chosen that had been moving close and ran along. Another Anointed appeared on another ridge above, but given he was our only target in sight, the four of us quickly brought him down, Peebee using her biotics to keep him in place when he tried to roll as his shields collapsed. We continued our push, another enforced area. With a Kett dropship. And me without the ability to use a singularity. At least, safely. "Kett drops ship on sight!" I called out.

"Your own reinforcements have arrived, Pathfinder!" Kandros called out as a pair of shuttles, one Initiative, one Angaran descended.

"The Resistance is with you!" Their doors opened, and two squads descended, one from each. They came down just behind us, while the Kett came down ahead at their own position. The Initiative group was led by a Turian, with a group of APEX, as signified by the emblem on their shoulder. While the Angaran group was led by a familiar, and almost unexpected face.

"Kandros! Evfra! Glad to have your help here!" I exclaimed.

"They took an Ark right out from under us. We intend to help correct that," Kandros remarked.
"And a chance to lead an assault on the Archon himself? There was nothing my advisors could say to keep me back on Aya," Evfra chuckled.

"Hey! Don't forget about me!" Reyes chuckled on the comms, another shuttle descended, Collective. "Always up for the adventure. Or whatever this is!" Out of that shuttle was Reyes himself, wearing a light armor with several Collective troops beside him.

"Fancy meeting you here, Pathfinder," one of them remarked smugly. Human, female. Why am I not surprised? She removed her helmet, Crux. Our Red-headed liaison.

"Well ain't this a reunion," I remarked. "Let's show those fuckers who they're dealing with." I led the others in a charge forward. The Kett were unprepared for a force this size. They were prepared to deal with my squad and I, not all these squads. Needless to say, it was a slaughter. Only Kett bodies littered the ground. Though not all of our teams would be so lucky by the end of this. We gathered outside the entrance to the structure.

"Go!" Kandros bellowed, gesturing for the door. I nodded my thanks and made a run for it, Jaal only staying a moment to salute the Angara. I heard a humming behind us, seeing a squadron of Kett fighters inbound. Kandros, Evfra, Reyes, and their troops took cover quickly, avoiding their fire. One too a shot from the side and crashed into the Remnant structure. An Initiative shuttle flew by, door open. What I saw made me just… feel good. Raeka was standing there, weapon in hand. Beside her, the Moshae, using her bioelectricity to charge her weapons, perhaps enhance its tracking capabilities. Raeka gave a wave, the Moshae a nod as Raeka took aim again, and fired, taking down another fighter as the shuttle flew off. Reports of Initiative shuttles coming under fire came through the comms, before Avitus hollered out in laughter as he gave them the all clear. He must be flying a fighter Apparently, he was taking down full squadrons, hitting them by surprise.

I heard Vederia order some shuttles in position as she casted a barrier, using it to surprise the fighters, causing them to crash into the barrier, and explode.

"Take the fight inside, Ryder. We'll protect the Hyperion, but none of this matters unless you get the Archon!" Raeka stated.

"Understood, Pathfinder." We ran inside. It was dark, though faintly lit by some ambient Remnant lights. A console, when activated, activated the grav well. Now just to key the grav well. I let out a deep breath to help lessen the headache. Soon, my suit would inject the next dose of meds. We descended.

"Energy spike! The Archon is doing something in there!" Suvi called out. Shit.

"Standing by at a moment's notice," Lexi reassured. We ran forward, through another hall, lights forming to meet us through the moss-covered rooms. We came across another Kett squad, though put them down quickly. They weren't expecting us to appear so suddenly.

"Our settlers are fighting like it's home, Pathfinder," a commander called out into the comms.

"Good, because home is what's at stake," I reminded. We entered a larger chamber, a door at the far side.

"It's like a dream… All of us, together," Jaal murmured.

"It won't matter if the Archon gets control," Peebee worried.

"Don't remind me," Vetra muttered. Turned out that door at the far side wasn't our destination. This chamber was much larger than I thought. A ramp descended just a few meters where Kett were
engaged with another group, Angara. It was a fight we joined, splitting the Kett between two foes,
carving through them.

"Kett are on a rally! Call out! Can we hold them?" Kandros questioned.

"The Resistance is with you!" An Angaran Commander-no, that was Commander Heckt that called
out! Damn all the guys I've fought with, coming back.

"You ready?" A woman asked, Human.

"You know it," A Turian man chuckled. My HUD then identified them as Westie and Kuriada.
Both helped us with Verand and those Angaran pirates.

"Here to fight by our cousin!" An Angara stated proudly as we continued fighting the Kett.

"Together!" An Angaran woman added.

"Lathoul! Teviint! You're here!" Jaal laughed happily.

"Wouldn't miss it, Jaal," Lathoul's remarked.

"Let them breathe through this!" Vorn joined the comms, likely using all manner of biological
warfare to assault the Kett senses. Drack would be proud.

"Too lean for this, Pathfinder. We risk being more distraction than help!" Kandros chucked. Guess
that means they'll hold just fine. Just the enemy force isn't enough so that it'll put as much as a dent
as it should.

"Dropships inbound!" Reyes called out.

"So are we! Do we have the ability to assist?" Evfra asked.

"We live through this, all debts are paid," An Asari I was... less pleased to hear remarked. Peebee
sighed, shaking her head. Kalinda would never change THAT much, I guess.

"I've run this simulation. Target as directed," A Scottish man chuckled. HUD identified him as
Hawkins MacIntyre. He leads the Initiative Scientists at Daar Pelaav.

"New Tuchanka representing! Let's go!" Kariste Archana, leader of the Initiative there called out.

"Numbers say fire! Target the dropship!" Evfra ordered. As the last of the Kett on this platform
were neutralized, we caught the orders of an Ascended.

"Our future ends today! Thanks to the Archon! Fight on!" the Kett ordered. I glanced among the
others, that hardly sounds like a battle cry. Must be some weird societal difference. We regrouped
with the Angara here as more Kett shuttles dropped off Kett. We were ready, and opened fire.
Anointed, Destined, Chosen, they all fell. Whether through biotics, tech attacks, or plain ol gunfire
or explosives was irrelevant. They died.

"Remnant from the data spires!" The Kett commander called out. Ah, a bit of unintentional aid for
us, then? "I'll send the update. The Archon will instruct our defense!" What? Remnant appeared up
here, but they still fought the Kett. We'd have to put them down too, but, it splits Kett fire. "We're
flanked! Tell the Archon that numbers are the only answer!" Once more, this platform was cleared.
Seconds later, our comms lit up again.

"We're clear, but we need to regroup," Kandros ordered.
"Keep going, Pathfinder. We'll shore up the rear," Evfra added. A path opened for us, bridge and all connecting to the lower platform.

"They're flanking!" A man called out.

"Weak, that side. Can you assist?" Kandros questioned the man.

"I'm an assistant! I don't… I got their attention! Oh shit!" he shouted.

"On it. We've got an opening to assist," Kariste stated.

"I'll fight for you too! I owe you for my cousin!" Another Angara added.

"Baranjj!" Jaal exclaimed. Gunfire on the comms as we moved on.

"I'm alive! Holy hell, we'll do this yet!" The man laughed.

"You tell em, Ben," Vetra chuckled.

"You know em?" I asked, raising a brow, though I couldn't see.

"Yeah, Ben. Remember Addison's assistant that came with the red tape when we first met? That's him. I make it a point to remember every face I meet," Vetra answered. Huh. Good memory there.

Our path lay forward, though we had to divert to the side, a console giving us another bridge. There was gunfire and explosions in the further reaches of this area. Nothing we could help with, though. So, we pushed on. Another platformed area, just like where we had just fought. An Ascended was up there at the uppermost level, waiting, two Chosen at his side. Obviously, that meant other Kett would be all over the platform.

"The Pathfinder comes! For the future of the Kett, we top them here!" the Ascended shouted.

"Invictor! There is no doubt!" Kett thumped their chest. Wait, that fucker on Eos was Invictor. Guess they got a new one. We moved to the side as I wondered how to best fight through.

"Pathfinder! We have a debt to pay! Drack's scouts are at your side!" A Krogan stated as a shuttle descended, one on each side. Each dropped off three Krogan, who charged into the fray, catching Kett by surprise. Flamethrowers burned, flak rounds bursted, shotguns fired, and grenades flew. I led my squad to join the battle, as the gunfire was no longer keeping us static.

As more gunfire fell upon the Krogan, they only fought with greater ferocity. I wondered if their blood rage would leave them to fall dead later, as they ignored fatal wounds, but that was a concern for later. There was almost a beauty to how the Krogan fought through the Kett.

"Invictor! The Initiative Species are too strong!" A Kett cried out before being burned alive by a Krogan's flamethrower, its owner laughing maniacally.

"You are the gifted! The exalted! You will prevail!" Invictor retorted.

"WE! ARE! KROGAN!" Birtak shouted, countering Invictor's claim, intimidating the already shaken Kett.

"You won't win! Kill us all, the Archon will exalt anew!" Invictor stated defiantly.

"Not when I kill him too!" I growled.
With the rest of the Kett dead, a Krogan charged Invictor, grappling its orb, trying to crush it in his grip. Invictor fired, blasting through the Krogan's head. Birtak roared, and the Krogan fired upon the orb from a distance, with our help. The moment it fell however, the Krogan charged.

And tore him limb from limb. We moved on.

"Scott, multiple system failures on the Hyperion!" Suvi alerted through the comms. Shit.

"Damn it! Dunn, anything you can do?" I questioned.

"Stay out of our way," She stated solemnly.

"There's no pulling up. This is the captain. I need everyone to cryo. Go! Go! Go! I'm rerouting power to all med bay inertials! I can give us one shot." Damn, Dunn was sacrificing herself.

"Get me close enough and I'll biotically shield the bridge!" Vederia ordered her shuttles.

"The sleepers take priority," Dunn argued. "All hands brace! And it's been an honor to ser-" Her comms went silent.

"Dunn? Dunn!" I called into the comms. A moment of silence passed.

"Still here, Ryder. Cryo pods… intact." I breathed a sigh of relief. "Give the Pathfinders my thanks. And the Archon the tip of your boot."

"Oh, I'll give him more than that," I growled. I spoke into general comms. All our troops would hear. "Everyone listening? That landing means Humanity's staying long term. This just became a fight on the Homefront." Of course, there'd be no problem with others living here, but this is a time for them to figure that themselves, not for me to go into a long, diplomatic spiel about everyone being welcome.

"No argument, Ryder," Kandros stated.

"You have our support," the Moshae… supported.

"Ryder, it's your honor to take that response to the Archon. We'll hold the line," Raeka added.

"Kett are heading to the Hyperion. Make them pay!" Birtak ordered his troops.

"Make it hurt," Vetra requested. Growling a bit herself. I gotta admit, her growl is a bit sexy. I should tell her that later. Shaking those thoughts out of my head, we pushed on.

"Your vessel is grounded, Pathfinder! Collection and exaltation is now that much easier!" A Kett mocked on open comms. "But not you! You'll never have our gift! The Archon demands you die here!"

"Not a-fucking-gain," Vetra snarled. We passed through another door, as we got a notification that Kesh was transferring to the Ark to safeguard its systems. That should help keep them out. But Kett were in the next room, waiting. Two Chosen, left and right. Both quickly went down before they could fire. Blue mist began to seep throughout as Destined activated their cloaks. We didn't have time for this. A biotic shockwave from Peebee and I sent the mist away, revealing the Kett. A grenade from Jaal put down a small group. Blowing limbs out and about. A Fiend roared out and came on approach. Fuck it. I pulled out my Dhan and unloaded, each round impacting its head. The balls of Plasma melted right through, gruesomely turning its head and bone to liquid. I slapped in a new power cell. Whatever works. Ugh, come the fuck on, a Destroyer too?
"Vetra!" I shouted, that being all the order I needed.

"Good thing I re-stocked," She remarked, as she let the Cobra missile fly, destroying the damn machine.

"Shoring up defenses, Ryder. You okay up there?" Reyes asked.

"Kicked their teeth in! If they have them," Birtak laughed.

"Secured like we're staying. Pushing further in," I responded. At the second highest platform of this room, was the entrance to another gravity well. Not sure why, but... I felt an air of finality. I activated it, and we began our descent.

"How far can you go, in the shell of a hollow world?" Jaal mused.

"I dunno. But I think I'll be coming here more often than the Remnant city," Peebee remarked. Our descent was rapid. And then... Shit. A massive, open cavern, like what we saw inside the Eos vault. At the same time, however, it was much, much different. Just as vast, though Remnant pillars, likely massive when one was close, were tiny as we continued our descent. And at the center of this cavern, another large structure that connected with a mirror structure at the ceiling through a bright blue energy beam. That must be where the fucker is.

"Do it! Secure the adaption matrix!" The Archon ordered. On open comms?

"Does he know he's broadcasting?" Vetra questioned.

"No... no that's not it. He's in Sara's head. We're... connected," I murmured. I felt his presence there. It was... gnawing, greedy, in a way. Like it was trying to grab everything and make it his. We reached the bottom of the gravity well. We slowed, as our path was lined with Observers... individual... observers... lining up... Wait a second...

They're showing us the path. Sara's controlling them to guide us without the Archon knowing!

"Follow the Observers! Go!" I ordered. The others tried to question but stopped when they saw that they were ignoring me. To further confirm, a door in the opposite direction of where an Observer was facing closed with a red light, while the other remained open with a green.

"Prepare to repeat the cortical stimulus," the Archon ordered.

"Get out of my head!" Sara demanded.

"You are irrelevant. I will use your connection." Sara screamed again, I winced at hearing her in pain. And ran faster all at the same time. Using Remnant hurts me without SAM. For her? Jesus.

We reached a grav well, but one of the horizontal ones. The others seemed to hesitate, but I didn't, already activating it when they ran forward to not be left behind. At another time, I would have appreciated the majesty of this place we were soaring through. But I couldn't. Not now.

"It feels... familiar. Somehow. Should it? That unnerves me," Jaal murmured. The beam above the central structure was growing brighter. Or perhaps that's just us being closer. We came to a stop at a... landing pad connected with the central structure.

"Everything we've gone through..." Vetra took hold of my hand as we moved. "Worth it for this view."
"I'll agree when we leave here with my sister and the Archon's head," I murmured. It was a long walk to the open door ahead, leading to the decisive battle. So, we ran instead. Pillars rose to greet us, but they were ignored. Observers stood watch over our passing, they were acknowledged, but ignored. We came to a stop outside the door, catching our breath, just a moment.

"Ready?" Vetra asked me.

"More than you know…" I answered.

"Yes… I feel it," Jaal took a deep breath, eagerly.

"Let's do it," Peebee nodded.

"Tempest, ETA on the rest of the ground team?" I asked.

"Inbound. Go get started, we'll join the party soon enough," Drack chuckled. I looked at the others and nodded. As did they. We stepped through the door. We strode across a bridge, weapons raised. Off the bridge, clouds with red energy coursing through them. It's as if Meridian knows the Archon's touch is bad. Yet, it obeys nonetheless. We strode forward, a platform looking out and up towards where the Archon stood and Kett standing at his defense. With my sister strapped to a chair.

"It arrives. This attempt to rival me is no longer amusing, Pathfinder," The Archon snarled.

"Hey Scott. Get my clues?" Sara struggled a smile.

"It was a pretty clear path, Sara," I struggled my own smirk. This is just… how we are with each other.

"He was distracted. Like the sound of his own voice," she breathed. The Archon turned, stepping towards her.

"So determined, but so pointless. Your connection serves ME." He waved his hand and moved away, stepping in front of a collection of wires that had descended. Chosen moved behind him, checking the wires. "I know how it works. The mind is trained to think like the Remnant creators. In this case, painfully." The Kett strapped the wires to his back as Sara winced in pain. "But I'm content to let her bear that burden." A snarl began to crease my lips. Not that any could see under my helmet. "Whatever gives me Meridian. I will transcend what you pretend to be."

"I've matched you every step," I growled. "You failed, Archon. And you had to let US solve the puzzle for you. You're the pretender."

"You learn by accident! I am the inheritor of a thousand species!" the Archon growled as the wires glowed with electricity.

"You're a thief of a thousand species! All you are, all the Kett are, are petty thieves!" I countered. The Archon grimaced, and then the wires lifted him into the air.

"No more mercy. Kill them all!" The air ahead surged with electrical power. Platforms shifted. Kett opened fire on us from behind. Including an Ascendant. It drew our fire. We avoided him for now by running to the left side, carving a ruthless path through Kett who didn't expect this, and had little to no cover.

"I can't keep this up! Stop him!" Sara cried out. There was less than a handful, and from a distance, we took down those on the right. With the Ascended as all that was left, I pulled out my Dhan and
charged, not caring to be careful, just goddamn furious. I had my Dhan out, and one single shot obliterated the Ascended's orb. And another carved a hole right through his chest. A third to his head for good measure.

"Insignificant!" The Archon snarled.

"Oh no, no, no, no! He's... shit, he has access!" Sara shouted. Fuck!

"I can see the network... They were architects of life... You command nothing!" the Archon murmured. "You lead your people to their deaths." The Archon surged with power, I was surprised it wasn't killing him. To make it worse, an Architect shot up ahead, each leg planting itself firmly to the ground. Then one tendril smashed the platform we were on, just behind us, causing it, and us, to tumble forward to a lower level. Least it still had cover.

"Scott! The Archon's pulling too much power! It's all going straight through him! Shutdown the interfaces! He'll have nothing to draw on!" Sara stated. Good, we have a means to finish him. "You'll take Meridian out from under him!"

"We have to play this smart," I sighed. "Sara, I know it hurts, but you have to call out where to interface! Give me targets!"

"Got it," Sara groaned. "To your right, a console at the back of the area to your right. One of the main power draws! I'll expose it when you're there, hurry!" I quickly led the others, though were quickly met with Remnant resistance.

"Tech attacks! Disruptor fire! Now!" I shouted. The squad followed suit, unleashing the technical onslaught, frying out circuits as fast as we could. All the while avoiding fire from the Architect. It wasn't easy, but the speed at which we put the other machines down helped.

"I've had enough of this! This ends now!" The Archon snarled. The area seemed clear, but then more bots formed further in, closer to the console. "I've already surpassed you! You're pathetic!"

"Either put a bullet in your head or shut the fuck up already!" I growled as we continued our electrical onslaught, with the occasional bout of gunfire thrown in. Nullifiers only served to delay us a moment, as Incinerate rounds or the Dhan put them down quickly.

"This is just the start, Pathfinder! Everything you love will burn." Guess he'll be doing neither... Sara pulled up the console, starting to expose it as we avoided more fire from the Architect. Curiously, it had only been using its main charged shot. We took position by the console, wiping out the relatively minor Remnant resistance that moved to fight us this time. As if Sara's interference weakened how much he could control.

"The Archon's fighting me... I don't have your practice!" Sara groaned.

"Assisting," A very familiar, and MORE than welcome voice added.

"SAM?!" I exclaimed, taking down another Assembler.

"I'm still restricted, but the more Remnant you destroy, the more fractured the Archon's attention," he explained.

"Hell yeah, little guy!" Peebee cheered. Well, surprising, but not unwelcome from her. I smiled.

"You heard him, break them!"
"SAM? Weakness?" Sara questioned.


"Shields open, fucker!" Sara growled.

"Head's open! Shoot it! Shoot it!" I ordered the others. We fired everything at it. Vetra even overriding armor safeties again. A shuttle came down.

"You didn't think I'd miss this, did you?" Drack roared in laughter. "Everybody's joining in!" The shuttle door opened and Drack was the first to drop, roaring as he dropped to a knee, a huge toothy grin. The others came down as well, though used their jump jets to actually lessen the fall.

"I'll crush you with your own-" the Archon began.

"Shut the fuck up!" Drack roared out, firing point blank into the back of a Nullifier that had formed. Others continued putting bullets into the Architect's head before it reeled back.

"Hell fucking yeah!" I hollered. The Architect wouldn't be done yet, though we did damage.

"Interface is exposed! Take it down!" Sara called out. I immediately did as told.

"Done! Get me another target!" I answered.

"Other side! Same spot, other side!" Sara panted, fighting off more pain.

"Go!" I ordered. "Shit!" Our path back was blocked by a raised current of liquid. Probably the ferrofluid that's highly electric. I needed a console… there! I ran over and interfaced. Pillars raised, and I led the others in a jump across the river. We ran, and ran, all seven of us stopping for nothing. Remnant tried to fight us off halfway but were shredded by the mass of gunfire. The Archon kept bitching, ordering his bots around verbally, but we just ignored him. He was getting damn annoying. Least it also showed how desperate he was. He wasn't pulling out the same numbers when he first got his connection. We got to the other side, but there was a gap. No river, nothing. Just a chasm.

"Another gap! No interface!" I called out.

"Hold there! I'll work on it," Sara answered. "Ugh, head's open again, by the way." More Remnant had formed in addition to the Architect.

"I got the bots, take out the big guy," Drack called out. We let him have his fun, running around, smashing the bots to pieces or blowing them the hell up as we fired and fired on the Architect's head conduits. Not even Nullifiers stopped him as the Archon continued to threaten us. Soon, the Architect's head reeled back, and we helped Drack with more of the bots. Finally, the platforms to the other side were raised, and I led the others across. Sara groaned in more pain.

"You need to hurry, Pathfinder. We're all straining," SAM stated. As if I needed more encouragement. Remnant bots formed around the console to try and stop us, but once all of us had landed, we carved through them too.

"In range!" I called out.

"Trying… AAAAGH," Sara cried out again. The Architect's head conduits opened yet again as more Remnant were formed.
"Same deal as before!" Drack called out.

"Just hold on, Sara!" I exclaimed.

"I'm not done yet, just hold!" Sara stated, recovering, if just for a moment. Another shuttle came down.

"Thought you could use some reinforcements, Ryder!" Kandros called out. He descended as the doors opened, along with two APEX troops, as did Evfra with two Resistance at his flank.

"Hell yeah! You can't take us all down, you Sonuvabitch!" I shouted into the comms. This time, the Archon ignored me as the Architect reeled back again. The bots were only causing us issues in that they just kept coming, now. We dealt with them easily enough, it was just the endlessness of it.

"Exposed!" Sara informed. I turned and interfaced without hesitation.

"Down! What next?"

"One more…" Sara breathed. "Just… one?" That doesn't sound good,

"Sara? SARA!"

"We're out of time, Pathfinder. Hurry," SAM urged.

"Urragh! Fucking cover me! I'm ending this!" I shouted.

Biotically, I charged a Nullifier on the other side of the chasm. I didn't strike it, however. I immediately rolled to the side and kept running past. I kept running. More Remnant formed, but I kept running past them before I could act. The last console was the center. The one we started at once the Architect had knocked us down. I reached the console, and interfaced, keying a partial dose of the meds to push me through the headache. Electricity surged around my palm. I looked up, seeing the Archon. He cried out in pain as he yanked a wire free of his back, sparks flying out. Followed by another, and another. He was descending. I held my interface. He kept pulling wires. I had to groan through the pain, before a mass gently appeared behind me, long, slender arms reaching around, three fingered hands supporting my own to stay where it was, to keep the interface. Vetra's presence helped keep me going.

Then it was over. I felt it, somehow, even though the Archon was still plugged in, he was done. As sparks fell from the area he still hung from three last cables. The Architect behind us, which had ignored me, roared out, and then collapsed. The cables still plugged into the Archon released him, and his limp body fell to the ground, and the drone that had linked him to Sara's implant and the network fell too, destroyed. As I got back to my feet, I hurried up towards my sister. Vetra helping me along.

"Pathfinder, Meridian is… online," SAM stated. The machinery hummed to life, and the center controls glowed blue again. A surge of energy through the metal. It was much calmer than the Archon's force. The entire room was lighting up. In the back of my mind, I could only imagine what the other worlds were seeing. How drastically their environments were changing for the better. But, I could only focus on my sister, strapped to that chair. She was awake. And awake, means alive. I let out a breath of relief, not even noticing the Archon's corpse. I quickly got her out of the restraints and hugged her.

"Are you alright?" I questioned quietly.
"Yeah… I'm… alright. Worst headache of my life, but… ok," she breathed heavily.

"Thank god," I felt a tear streak down my face. I glanced back to see the others, all of them, had gathered. No casualties. Not even from Kandros' or Evfra's men. I glanced to see Evfra and Jaal both standing over the Archon's corpse. Before Drack bent down and cleaved right through his neck, pulling up the dripping head, holding it by the hoop. Evfra glanced at Jaal, who just chuckled. Drack gazed at the head, smiling. Before tossing it to Evfra, who still caught it.

"You deserve it," Drack let out a low rumble of laughter.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I shook my head. Vetra tried to hook herself under one of my arms. "I'm fine, I can walk," I reassured. "Help her out," I requested. Vetra nodded, and instead took Sara's other arm over her shoulders. With the help of shuttles to bypass most of the journey, we came back to the doors we entered the complex from in the first place. The Tempest crew, the other Pathfinders, and Reyes were all waiting out there. I smiled broadly, none of our helmets on any more as we stepped out into the light of day. It seemed… brighter here, somehow. Lexi ran over to Cora with a wheelchair handy.

"I got her, I'll take her to the med-bay straight away," Lexi stated. Vetra and I helped her sit down.

"Go on, stay, let me get better. That's a command from your… your little sister," Sara admitted, not without a grumble. I smiled and hugged her again.

"I'll see you once we're done." Lexi pulled her away. The Tempest ground team gathered behind me, though Vetra never left my side, while Kandros, Evfra, and their troops mixed back with the others in front. Evfra still holding the Archon's head.

"This victory is being broadcast out to everyone. Angara. Milky Way. Everyone," Vetra stated, must have seen that as she checked her Omni-tool on one of the shuttles.

"I don't think I could have done this without you," I smiled, gazing into her eyes. Remembering… everything. Every way, shape, and form she had supported me. Kept me strong. Especially at the end. She was with me at the very end, keeping me going to send that motherfucker to hell. Vetra's mandibles flared wide in a smile.

"Sure you could've. I just shoot at things…"

"And yet, you do it so well," I wiggled a brow.

"Wanna ditch these losers?" Vetra suggested…suggestively. I stood a bit straighter at that. Earning a few chuckles from onlookers.

"Yeah! That is… yup," I nodded, almost incoherently. Reyes patted me on the back, chuckling as we passed by. Still made me a bit uncomfortable…

"I suppose I do owe you a drink, Pathfinder," Evfra smirked.

"Drinking buddies at last eh?" I chuckled as we passed. He just shook his head, keeping the smirk.

"Damn kids. Can never keep them clothed for more than a few hours," Drack grumbled, though still gave me a wink. As I was… kinda being dragged by Vetra up to where the ship had parked on a ridge above. While I'm sure they continued making comments, well, I wasn't exactly paying much attention.

"We made it," I spoke softly, mostly to myself, in just… pure relief.
A Good Day

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The Tempest had remained docked at Hyperion's crash at Meridian for about a week. We were taking some much-needed R&R. Eos was starting to bloom. Not a garden world yet, though the soil could support our plants, and it rained often. Parts of Voeld were starting to thaw, though the oceans may remain frozen for a while yet. Kadara's water had stopped tasting like piss, and Elaaden had gotten cooler, with both more fertile soil, and it was raining every few days. Not everything was fine and dandy, unfortunately. The Kett still maintained their presence in the cluster, and they were pulling away from any fortifications at Remnant structures, unless they had strategic importance. They were on the defensive, for now, at least, but they were clearly focused on us. Unfortunately for them, given we're not so concerned with just setting up and then maintaining outposts and Colonies anymore, we'll soon be able to begin production of our own combat vessels. The Angara too.

Sara was alright but was comatose for just a bit longer as she recovered from the strain. It was medically induced, which helped. I was more than fine, with all the time spent alone with Vetra. Leadership had gathered here, on Meridian. Discussing plans. Meridian would be one of our colonies, though Angara were more than welcome as well. That was agreed, as our Ark had crashed here. Second wave colonists had even begun to be woken up.

And today, was the day that the first "Landing day" was going to be celebrated. Next year, it would be a bit earlier, to be accurate, but why not celebrate it this year too? I was sat in dad's old office, sipping a beer, and Sara still asleep on the bed behind. I had been watching her, when not held up by Vetra. The drink finished, I began to walk out to join the others. Ah, but someone was stirring. I smiled as she sat up.

"Hey Sara," I smiled.

"I'm getting too used to this," she chuckled. "How long?"

"A week. Don't worry, you haven't missed much," I reassured.

"The Ark and the sleepers? They're safe?"

"Yeah. You better like where we parked, this is home now. They wake to a helluva view." Sara looked down and smiled.

"We did it, dad… What about your implant? SAM?"

"I am once again helping the Pathfinder activate Remnant. Our connection has been restored to normal," SAM answered.

"Normal." Sara grimaced. "You need him again?"

"I need SAM to make it easier. I was adapting, but damage was being done," I explained. "We need to be careful."

"The Nexus leaders are waiting, Pathfinder," SAM stated.

"It never ends," I chuckled. "Hey, after the meeting there should be a bit of a party. New holiday, calling it 'Landing day.' Want me to come back and nab you?"

"Partying… doesn't feel like a great idea right now. I refuse to go back to sleep, but I think I'll just relax here, get my bearings."

"Whatever you want. We'll transfer you over to the Tempest when it settles down."

"Now that sounds good. Can't wait to finally get out there…" Sara hummed.

"Heh, you know what? Neither can I, Sara." I patted her on the shoulder and exited Hyperion's Pathfinder's Quarters. Ugh, figures. Kandros, Addison, Kesh, and Tann were standing in a circle. Bickering. Again.

"The decision isn't yours," Addison crossed her arms over her chest.

"Neither is it yours. That's the point, isn't it?" Tann argued. "Pathfinder. You're late." He noticed me approach. My brows furrowed.

"Save the cluster, straight back to work, I get it," I rolled my eyes.

"None of this would have been possible without you," Kesh reminded, taking a gentler, more complimentary approach than Tann.

"As Outposts become Colonies, the cluster needs its own voice. A true Council," Addison returned to the original discussion.

"And while I maintain that it is premature, we must nominate an interim ambassador to represent concerns outside the Nexus," Tann retorted. "Or rather, you must nominate someone," Tann turned to me. Huh. Go figure.

"Hold on, Interim Ambassador?" I questioned.

"An Ambassador to the Nexus. The eventual goal was always a Galactic council. But Meridian has… accelerated concerns," Tann answered.

"An Ark has landed. The vaults may make outposts self-sufficient. And we can't claim to represent a sovereign Angara," Addison added. "An interim Ambassador would represent concerns outside the Nexus. Until elections, when we can all step aside."

"At the appropriate time," Tann mused. My brows furrowed again.

"I suppose a vote for this is out of the question?"

"Can't impose a vote on the Angara. Or Kadara. Or Elaaden," Kandros shrugged.

"But you've acted for everyone. If you endorse a name, some may disagree, but they'll trust it as a starting point," Kesh continued.

"I put forward Pathfinder Raeka," Tann stated confidently. Heh, he thinks he can manipulate her, doesn't he?

"No. She's a Pathfinder, and in the time, I've grown to know her, a politician is the last thing she wants to be. Here's what I say. I act for everyone? Then no, no interim Ambassador. Interim Ambassadors. Plural. These first ones get appointed, the next round gets elected. We get the outpost leader from each of our colonies. Plus, Morda and a proportionate number of Krogan
diplomats. We get the Angara, the Moshae, if she's willing, as well as a proportional number of diplomats. So, including Meridian, that's five Initiative Ambassadors, so, five Krogan Ambassadors, and five Angaran ambassadors."

"But-" Tann began to argue.

"That could work," Kesh nodded.

"I'll accept it, though I'd like to draft up a document for more specific rules," Addison nodded.

"Sounds like it'll keep order and keep people happy. Fine by me," Kandros shrugged.

"This is-" Tann began again. I gave him a look.

"Tann. Shut. The Fuck. Up. It's Four on One. Heh, or should I say, Four on Number Eight?" I smirked. Tann fumed, and stormed off. Kesh watched, a grin forming as the Salarian left.

"And that's why I like you, Scott," she chuckled.

"I'll call our Outposts later and speak with Paraan Shie. I believe we can come to an agreement soon," Addison stated.

"Then I should go see scout reports of the Kett positions. Pick out squads who can take protection duty of the Ambassadors," Kandros mused.

"Sounds like a plan. I'll see you all around, then," I nodded, and the other leaders and I gave farewells. Addison lingered a moment.

"Sara is feeling better?"

"Yeah, she got up just as I was first going to see you."

"Good. This decision? The policy and protocol? That's not what your victory was about. There's more to life than this," she remarked, taking her leave. I made my way towards the habitation deck, that general area is where most of the celebrations would be taking place. On Meridian, at least. As I stepped out, a trio of Humans came to greet me. It was something I was getting used to. Two women and a man.

"Up straight everyone. This is the guest of honor," A dark skinned and bald woman told her friends with a French accent.

"Like you have to tell anyone that," the man remarked, blond hair, and a very thick Australian accent. Half expect him to shout "CROIKEY" at any moment. Or just call me a wanker, twat, or cunt.

"Hunter, this is our opening. Let there be some sense of ceremony," the other woman, olive skin, black hair parted to one side, chastised.

"Hunter Kerry. Reconstruction," the Aussie finished.
"Glad to meet you all. So, what exactly ARE your jobs? Titles alone are a bit unclear for me," I asked.

"Yeah, well, guess they aren't all as simple as Pathfinder eh?" Hunter chuckled.

"As Chief of Operations, I oversee the operations and establishment of our Port here on Meridian. However, I am not in charge of Meridian itself. The exploration of this Dyson Sphere will be handled by Initiative R&D teams," Iora explained.

"And as Placements Officer, as our developments in the cluster grow more sophisticated, proper matching of sleeper assignment will be vital. My mission is to ensure compatibility and fulfillment," Darla answered.

"When are you changing your name to 'vas Meridian?" Hunter asked her curiously.

"I keep 'vas Hyperion' To honor the ship that brought us here, as my godparents would want," Darla responded.

"And Reconstruction is a bit simpler. Turn this once-proud vessel into the future-proud Human capital," Hunter nodded.

"It's more complicated than that," Iora reminded him.

"Oh, it's a structural and organizational nightmare," Hunter chuckled. "Which is job security. That's perfect. Come back in a year, and this will be a galactic hub. You won't know where the Hyperion ends, and Meridian begins."

"Sounds like Meridian is in some very capable hands," I complimented.

"I can only read the reports of how you brought us this opportunity, but rest assured, we will not waste it," Iora stated proudly. Darla and Hunter both gave their own thanks as well.

"Good to hear. So, Darla, I'm sorry, but I need to ask. Why the Quarian crew title?"

"It's fine, a common question," Darla smiled. "When I was young, my parents founded the Alliance Embassy on the Migrant fleet, on one of their live ships. I grew up there, always in an environment suit, aside from our private sealed room. A commodity normally only available for Captains and Admirals. When word reached the Quarians of the Initiative, I volunteered alongside the others who did."

"Then I promise to let you know if I find any leads on their ark, assuming they've arrived, or will arrive soon," I nodded.

"That would be much appreciated, Pathfinder." I gave them my farewells and went to go find the others. I passed by a holographic memorial of Hyperion, for those who died during the battle. The hologram, was obviously, Hyperion before it crashed. Cora was the first of the others I bumped into, talking with a few colonists. Guess people she met during our week here. She waved me down and her friends backed away, letting us talk for a moment.

"Hey, Scott. How's Sara?"

"Doing better. Woke up earlier, but just wants to relax for a while longer," I answered.

"Good to hear. Sounds like they'll be two Ryders hanging around soon. Imagine that," she joked.
"Oh, I can. So, what have you been up to?"

"The Hyperion has been forming scientific teams. Gotta start studying what we have, after all. I helped organize."

"You never did like being unproductive," I chuckled. "Meridian won't know what hit it."

"Thanks. And we should think about what's next. This is a new cradle for Humanity. That's... a big idea. Bigger than I'd imagine. Gotta start with the small steps to understand all this. Until we top the mountain."

"And see the next horizon, right?"

"Can't deny it. I'm game for more. Much more," Cora grinned. "With so much power in our hands... you think it'll be ok?"

"Cora, sometimes you just have to jump and see what happens," I chuckled. "Just, not off a perfectly good bridge, or something."

"Never change," Cora laughed. "Seriously, great job, Pathfinder."

"Alright, come on," I smirked, spreading my arms wide as I got closer.

"Scott-" Cora began.

"Just accept the hug, damnit," I shook my head, and she grudgingly accepted it. "Go on back to your friends. I'll keep mingling." Cora's friends returned as I parted.

"Am I included in that mingling?" a Hispanic voice remarked getting near. Stomach dropped again, still felt uncomfortable around him, watched every word he said. It's a shame, given I considered him friends before the reveal. "Well, if it isn't the hero of the hour."

"Bit surprised you're still here, Reyes," I answered, turning to face him, a bottle in his hand.

"Like I'd miss the party!" he laughed. "Guess you'll be heading out soon?"

"Well, would probably help to go find all the worlds Meridian has actually fixed. Or is fixing."

"True, but you deserve to celebrate after all this. While I..." he shook his bottle. It was empty. "Deserve another drink."

"Pathfinder," the Moshae smiled, greeting me. "I'm told that I'm going to be busy for a while."

"Which, given your health, is unwise," Evfra grumbled.

"We all gave of ourselves, Evfra, it was time. And as one of the 'Ambassadors,' I will continue to do so," the Moshae retorted.

"I'm glad you accepted, Moshae. Your voice will be a highly valuable one to the whole group, whatever it's going to be called. And if anyone was going to be the Angara's voice, you'd be the greatest to deliver it."

"We've always had a voice, all of our people. But including us just means that your leaders have decided to listen," the Moshae chuckled. "But, don't assume my name brings universal approval. You know how varied our opinions can be. I can't speak for all my people, but I will gladly help
create the system that does. Ansala venjyuri, Pathfinder. There is much yet to learn." Evfra then looked up, noticing something behind me.

"Ah, Jaal, there you are. Any chance you'll reconsider?" Evfra questioned. I turned to see Jaal grinning, not wearing his visor.

"Apologies, Evfra, but I'm quite happy where I am."

"The offer shall be there nonetheless." Jaal nodded thanks to Evfra. I started to walk with him. "Is this how you all party? Pretty tame, but don't tell the host I said that. Meridian is amazing though. Peebee's been taking me exploring through the jungles and caverns. But you? You accomplished the inconceivable. I'm grateful to be a part of it."

"No, Jaal. I'm grateful. I couldn't have asked for a better team. All of this, we created together," I argued, grinning.

"And, exactly what it is, what it may become, I can't even imagine…" Jaal chuckled. "To think that when we met, the Angara and your Initiative struggled to find trust."

"Can you blame them? We arrived on Aya a bit over the top. Uninvited, on fire," I listed off, smirking.

"Agreed," Jaal shook his head, chuckling. "Scott, the Angara will never forget how you saved the Moshae. Saved our people. But more than that. We'll never forget how you fought the Kett beside us. How we destroyed the Archon. Meridian is a new beginning for your people and mine. Together."

"It's like a fairy tale ending," I joked. "You have those? Where at the end, the good guys all walk off into the sunset, holding hands."

"At a time like this, I find it strange that you can't resist making a joke," Jaal remarked, teasing me.

"I can!" I cleared my throat. "Jaal, our people…" I couldn't keep the straight face. "Ok, fine. No, I can't."

"Actually, I kind of like it," Jaal smirked.

"Good! Cause I think it's too late to change it," I laughed.

"For the better, I believe," Jaal patted me on the back. "Now, I have someone to look for…" Jaal made his own way, and as I turned the corner, I saw two people I was happy to see. The sisters Nyx. I made a beeline for them, smiling. They were talking amongst each other. Neither saw me yet.

"So, Tann says he's gonna let me stick around and help with the-" Sid continued her conversation, back still turned to me. Vetra peeked over, seeing me.

"Hey Scott," she called out. Sid turned, saw me, and her mandibles flared in a broad smile. She quickly wrapped me in a hug, then released me.

"Maybe I should leave you two alone, huh?" she teased.

"No need, we've already had plenty of alone time. Only gonna get more when we leave Meridian," Vetra smirked, then gave me a wink. I controlled the blush. Sid just giggled.
"I can imagine. So, I haven't had much chance to see what's been going on people wise. What have you made out?"

"Ryder saves the day, Pathfinder of the century. You know, the usual," Sid chuckled.

"Still?" I suppressed a groan.

"Get used to it. They'll be naming things after you before too long," Vetra remarked. "Heading out again soon?"

"Awww, she's all grown up, leaving home. Doesn't need me anymore," Sid teased.

"That'll be the day. Who'll handle my deals on this end while I'm gone?" Vetra retorted.

"Seeing you two working together like this brings a tear to my eye," I joked, pretending to wipe a tear away.

"You know this is your fault, right?" Vetra smiled, crossing her arms over her chest. "Helping us along? Heleus has really turned into the fresh start I wanted. In so many ways. Now with Meridian, we're really gonna make this place ours. I can't wait."

"Can't wait to do that with you at my side," I replied. Vetra's smile grew wider, while Sid just pretended to gag.

"You go ahead, see the others. I have a sister who needs to learn some manners." Chuckling, I let the two of them be for now. I saw Liam sitting on a bench nearby, people watching with a drink. He waved me down and patted the seat.

"Scott! Kept a seat for you! On your planet. That's not getting less weird," he muttered. "Bout time this place had a grand opening. We all need this. How's Sara?"

"Well, she'd probably be angry if I said anything other than 'great.' So, that means, great," I smirked.

"Stubborn as hell, eh? I hear it runs in the family," Liam teased. His eyes widened in a flash. "Hey, know who I just talked to? A second wave technician. Fresh out of cryo. Just had his first sunrise in Andromeda. He couldn't stop crying."

"Just him?" I gave a knowing look to Liam. He is emotional, after all.

"Must be something going around," Liam gave a small laugh. "Maybe you're the carrier. It's really feeling like home, you know? Finally. What about you? Has it sunk in yet?"

"I've been smiling a lot, lately. Catch myself staring out the window thinking 'we did it.' Still hard to believe…"

"I know what you mean. Ground under our feet, knowing it's ours? I can't wait for more to wake up. Enjoy it. I suspect tomorrow, we're back on the job."

"Yeah, true enough. I'm gonna go see the others, alright?" Liam nodded, and off I went. Next, I found Drack talking with Kesh. Big surprise there.

"Hey kid," he greeted.

"Old man," I replied. Drack just smiled, looking out of the windows above, the wonderful sunlight beating down. He let out a low laugh.
"This place is something else…"

"Ah it's just another starting line, gramps. Where we go from here is on us."

"Well shit! You were listening to me after all!" Drack exclaimed.

"First one to ever do that," Kesh teased under her breath.

"And through all the creaking of your old bones," I added. Drack laughed again.

"I've sent Nakmor scouts around Meridian. They nearly drowned me in reports, so I pointed them at Tann. Told 'em to be extra wordy, just for him."

"Oh, he'll love that," I smirked.

"He wanted the job, he can have the reports. It's not over, you know," Drack warned. "More Kett, whatever else is waiting out there…"

"I know, right? It'll be fun," I joked.

"Crazy kid," Drack chuckled. "Fighting for all the right reasons. Damn right it'll be fun."

"Please, don't encourage him," Kesh groaned.

"You know I'll never change, Ru'shan," Drack retorted, causing her to grumble under her breath again. Next, I found both Kallo and Suvi. They both greeted me at the same time.

"Surprised to see you off the ship, Kallo," I remarked.

"The Tempest is undergoing some much-needed repairs. And seeing Meridian outside of a cockpit? I'm starting to understand why you do this," Kallo mused.

"You're not thinking of turning in your pilots seat for some muddy boots, are you?" I questioned rhetorically.

"Never!" Kallo laughed, Suvi giggled. "But the appreciation has been gained."

"And I'm still amazed every day when I wake up," Suvi grinned. "It's wonderful seeing us put down roots. I've been helping the Science team work with the Angara to set up a joint research body."

"Sounds exciting, Suvi," I nodded.

"I know! I can't wait!" she nearly squealed. "Us helping them, them helping us. Can you imagine what we could accomplish? I'm getting misty just thinking about it."

"Join research body, cooperation with the Angara… you're planning a party, right?" I joked.

"Of course! Nothing builds a team like a good whiskey and a laugh. You'd better show up, Scott… We wouldn't be here if not for you," Suvi poked my chest, likely a bit of alcoholic influence.

"Wouldn't miss it, Suvi," I chuckled.

"Heeeeeeeeyyyyyyyyyyy Scott!" A very clearly drunk Peebee hobbled over, leaving Suvi giggling. "Now that you're here, the festivities can FINALLY begin. Hey, when are we-when are we heading out? Meridian is… a blast but, been there, done that," she hiccupped.
"Right now, you're not going anywhere, Peebee," I chuckled. "I'd encourage you to enjoy the accomplishment, but, you seem to already be doing that."

"Damn-" she hiccupped. "Right I am! I'm proud as FUCK! Just-Just wanna get out there, ya know?" she rested an arm on my shoulder casually, trying to make it look like I wasn't her only means from falling to the floor. "Oh, you know, funny story! I was out-out with Jaal, taking an expere-" she hiccupped. "Expedition around Meridian. Right as it was turning into a SEXPEDITION!" she cheered. Suvi's cheeks went red and she giggled more as Peebee continued. "I got a message from Kalinda! Trying to get an invitation! Whether the invitation was to my… my Azure," Peebee snorted and laughed. "Or the party, I don't know. But, denied!"

"You are a mess and I should get you to Jaal before you fall over," I laughed. Peebee pouted. "Daaawwww, we're here to celebrate! Remember?"

"Says the woman who was just asking when we were leaving!" I retorted.

"Fiine, where is he anyway, I wanna… I want-" Peebee hiccupped and staggered off. "I wanna fuck him!" I turned back to Kallo and Suvi.

"I'm not sure if I want to get her drunk more often, or never let her drink again," I muttered.

"In the opinion of the doctor, I'd say never again," Lexi remarked, joining us. "Glad to see you still standing, Scott. Means I did my job. Somehow. Suppose I don't need to say more than that."

"And I will remember that the next time you chew me out for getting hurt," I teased.

"So will I, Scott. So will I," Lexi smiled. "You may want to see Gil. He's been over by the trams. Something has left him shocked. Not in a bad way, I think. But check on him, if you will." I followed her advice, found him sitting on the stairs, looking through the viewport to the sky.

"You alright Gil?" I asked, taking a seat beside him.

"Oh, hey Scott," he murmured. "Jill's walking the walk. The procedure took. I'm… gonna be a dad!" I noticed a tear streak down his face as he smiled wide.

"Congratulations buddy!" I put an arm around him in a half hug, patting his back.

"I'm thinking Meri if it's a boy. Dian if a boy. Meri. Dian. Meridian! Pretty cool, right?" Gil asked. He seemed a bit serious with that name selection.

"Jill might have something to say about that," I reminded. His eyes widened.

"Oh! Right! Note to self: Bounce names off Jill. So, this is a celebration, right? You getting used to any of this yet? Meridian? The dream becoming a reality?"

"It's a lot to take in, still. Still in the pinching phase," I joked. I then, felt myself, get pinched on the arm. Walked into that one. "Hey!"

"What? Just helping!" Gil laughed. "I'm sure everyone here would be happy to line up and give you a pinch. But, just so you know, the Tempest is topped off and ready. The moment you wanna go, just say the word," he whispered. "Kallo's out there somewhere, tying one on. If we're REALLY sneaky, he won't even notice we're gone."

"Are you volunteering to fly, Gil?" I asked rhetorically.
"Why the hell not? I'm a quick study. How hard can it be?" I then burst into laughter.

"You better get that shit out of your system in the next nine months, you know."

"Little Meri's gonna have a fun dad," Gil retorted.

"Now Jill's gonna have two kids to deal with," I teased.

"Um… Pathfinder? Do you have a moment? This is really important," A small woman meekly approached.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Uh, back here, please," she requested, nervously leading me up the rest of the stairs and towards the hall to the trams. She took out a data pad. "Listen to this." She keyed the data pad. It was static.

"Uh… white noise?" I raised a brow. The woman looked back up, a bit embarrassed.

"Sorry. SAM? Active filtering. Initiative protocol Alpha-Alpha, to the screen." I raised a brow further, unsure what that protocol was. SAM began processing, and a moment later, the signal played again.

"Repeating: This is the Ark Keelah Si'yah. The situation is not under control. Note and avoid until further updates. Repeating…" A Quarian woman's voice came through. My eyes widened.

"The Quarian Ark?!"

"Yes! Them, the Elcor, Drell, Volus, Hanar. They're still out there! The Keelah Si'yah wasn't destroyed!"

"That's fucking fantastic!" They escaped the Reapers! They managed to get out before the Reapers! "We need to report this right away, and I need to get to my ship!"

"Wait, Pathfinder. It's good news but bounced too many times to trace. We know they're out there, but don't have a single lead as to WHERE. And…" I began to think more clearly. They weren't requesting assistance. It was a warning.

"They were warning others to keep away from… wherever…" I murmured, disappointed.

"Whatever's happening, they don't want to be found yet. We have to trust their Pathfinder."

"And all we can do is wait," I sighed. "Damn." I typed on my Omni-tool. "Here's my contact info. Keep me updated. The very moment something changes, I want to know. Alright?"

"Understood. I'll keep track of the signature at all times," the woman saluted.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Oh! Specialist Rynn Gee! Apologies."

"Good to meet you, Rynn. And good luck," I nodded, and left to the rest of the habitation deck. Looking around, the crew had gathered and started talking amongst themselves. I couldn't help but smile a bit. I started to consider just going back to the Pathfinder's quarters. Hiding away there a bit longer. But a throat was cleared behind me. Raeka, with both Vederia and Avitus.

"Leaving already?" Raeka grinned.
"Seeing everyone celebrating? Figured I'd leave before I teared up. No one needs to see that," I joked.

"I think that might be exactly what they want to see. Know you're not so different," Raeka remarked. The voice of experience talking, I'd bet. Raeka looked behind me. My crew had noticed and were walking over themselves. I smiled again. No, that's not my crew. That's my family. My brothers and sisters, Grandpa, and of course, my lover. They stood in a circle in front of me, though Vetra, at my side.

"I've been a Pathfinder for some time. But the training never covers how to honor your peers. That's something you learn along the way. Your father invented this role, Scott. But you defined it," Raeka typed at her Omni-tool. I looked back upon… my family, still smiling. As were they all, even Peebee as she drunkenly steadied herself on Jaal. Damn I think I genuinely may cry now.

"Well shit guys. You're making me cry," I chuckled, feeling mist forming in my eyes. "Alright, I fucking love you all. You're family. Each and every one of you. It's been a hell of a journey, and I hope to see you all stick with me. You want me to stay out with the rest of you? I'll stay out with the rest of you." The others raised drinks in the air, cheering, Vetra just nuzzled her cheek against me, lowering herself to do so. A drink was thrust into my hands and while the group did stay together, there were minor smaller groups, given some could just fall into conversations that others couldn't follow. Vetra and I just listened, at first.

"You know, I just realized. We haven't decided where we're going to live," Vetra stated quietly. As if the impact just hit her. In fact, it hit me too.

"You're right!" I exclaimed, wide-eyed. "How are we supposed to pick?" I just felt an onslaught of the possibilities. So many potential spots. "Where are we allowed to settle?"

"You do remember who you are, right? They'll put you in a floating castle somewhere, if you really wanted," Vetra chuckled.

"Floating castle? Wait, does this mean I can fulfill my dream of being a space princess?" I joked. Vetra burst into laughter. The others caught notice but had no idea what we were talking about. They probably just assumed it was something dirty.

"Anything you want," she stifled her laughter. "Because in the end, that's what I want. That's what all this was for. So we could build a home. Together." I smiled and leaned up to give her a quick kiss. Our hands interlocked, holding one another tight. Trying to get back into the general conversation, I heard something from Jaal.

"I noticed a man earlier, selling 'Iced cream.'" he remarked casually.

"Woah there Jaal, WHERE?! We're going right now. All of us," I exclaimed.

"Well, it seems to have a lot to live up to. To be honest, I'm a little frightened now," he murmured. "Alright, this way." He led us along, the other humans excited themselves. We found a man with two carts. Beside one of the carts, sitting on the floor? Her face covered in ice cream, and utter bliss in her eyes?

Sid.

"Please try to save some of the dextro ice-cream for the others… I underestimated this one…" the man requested.

"Best… thing… ever…" Sid sighed happily.
"Alright, alright. Only one scoop for everyone. Gotta spread some of the happiness around," I remarked. Liam, Suvi, and Gil complained at first but still followed through. The humans immediately devoured the sweet, while the aliens tried their bits experimentally. Jaal, Peebee, and Kallo took quite an immediate liking.

"Should try and get this Pyjak flavored," Drack murmured to himself. Vetra was still chuckling at Sid on the floor as she was handed her dextro cone. Hesitantly she eyed it. Not sure she wanted to end up like her sister. But she moved to try it.

By trying to take a bite.

"Vetra wait," I chuckled. She stopped and looked with a brow plate raised. "You lick it. Don't bite it."

"Oh..." she murmured, and then proceeded to do just that. "Oh." She continued. Guess she liked it. As I finished my scoop, I saw someone I wanted to check in on. I just gave a quick word of it to Vetra, and she nodded as I headed off.

"Captain Dunn! Good to see you! Healing well?"

"Yes, thank you. Pathfinder Vederia came as a great help," she moved to meet me halfway. She still walked with a limp, but she walked.

"Suppose I shouldn't be surprised you're staying here."

"Course not. I'll be the last one 'off.' They can call it a building now, but it's still my ship until everyone is clear. A good ride. Sorry to see it end."

"A very respectable attitude, Dunn. And plenty of places left for you to fly," I reminded.

"True. But it's nice to have a place to range out of. Something stable. Got a friend working on that. We'll see where it goes, but I like the sound of it. A nice little homestead. With fences, so you know what's yours."

"Then I wish you luck Dunn. You did a helluva thing with the Ark. I-" I was cut off.

"Pathfinder! Do you have a moment?" Well, figures Keri would be here. And itching for an interview. Chuckling with Dunn, I turned to see the Asari reporter run over. "I'll give you my ENTIRE chocolate ration for an interview on Meridian!"

"Well, that's a helluva offer. Lucky for you, I don't like chocolate, and will happily give you an interview," I stated.

"Really? Thank you! So," she fiddled with her tech. "Meridian's real. A promised land. You did it. This could give us the golden worlds everyone was waiting for, and Humanity has first claim."

"Technically, maybe. But we sure as hell are more than willing to share," I stated.

"It's good to have that on the record," Keri smiled. "Tomorrow I'm going out to document it all. A lifetime's work even for an Asari. Meridian. Now that's history in the making," she turned off her camera, and then hugged me. "Thank you, Pathfinder!" She then ran off, probably to prepare more. I shook my head, chuckling, and returned to the crew.
Hey, so few things with this chapter. First, the dinner bit was a request from a reader turned friend. Following that part up is a bit of smut. But just before the smut actually begins, with some wholesomeness, is actually some commissioned artwork created by Palavenmoons. Hope you like it! I certainly do.
Also, sorry, I kinda had an urgent matter come up.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Life was good. The morning after the Landing Day celebration, Sara was transferred to Lexi's care, and Sid came with us on the Tempest, as we were leisurely making our way back to the Nexus. Partially to drop Sid off, partially to just lengthen our R&R a bit longer. Partially because Drack says there's a surprise. I had managed to sneak away from Vetra for a bit. I wanted to ask Sid something. Something to surprise Vetra with. I found her lounging in the crew quarters, legs kicked up at one of the desks, watching the monitor.

"Hey, Sid, got a minute?" she turned, chewing on what looked like some Graxen, and paused her show.

"Sure, what for?" she asked, swallowing and throwing in more Graxen.

"So, you remember how Vetra tried to cook me that steak?"

"Yeah, she told me a bit about that. It was adorable," she cooed.

"I wanna do something like that for her. Any idea what I should try and cook?"

"Awwwww, that's so sweeeeeeet," Sid squealed. She then began rubbing her chin. "See if you can get some Louza, it's poultry. It's easy, and Vetra likes it."

"Louza. Alright, and is there any chance you know how to cook it?"


"Suppose I better get reading then," I muttered.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Alright, Drack's getting the surprise ready, and Vetra is talking with a few contacts before that's good to go. Further, to make it a bit extra special, I might have pulled a favor from Kesh. Asking if I could have a larger apartment to use whenever I was here, and if she could have someone freshen it up. Light some candles and what-not. She agreed and gave me it's address. You could see the building it was in from the Tempest landing pad, a penthouse in one of the apartment complexes that are no longer vacant. I thanked her profusely. Further, I was damn relieved to find a Turian merchant selling some Louza, and I didn't even pay attention to the price. I ran to the penthouse, not allowing myself to stop by being impressed, and left it in the fridge. I was now rushing ahead
to meet both Vetra and Drack by Kesh's apartment. If only I had time to set things up romantically like Vetra did. Maybe I could just lie to myself and say it'll be ok because I manage to successfully cook the Louza.

But I know I won't. Wait. WAIT A BLOODY SECOND!

"SAM, can you help me cook the Louza? Make it perfect?" I quickly questioned the AI.

"Yes. Would you like my assistance in cooking the meal for Vetra tonight?"

"Yes! I would very much like your help! Best wingman ever!" I exclaimed. I wiped the smile off my face as I was now approaching Kesh's apartment. Vetra was waiting outside.

"Hey you," she greeted, bending down to give me a quick kiss.

"Hey yourself. So, any idea what it is?"

"Not at all. Drack just told me to wait out here till you showed up," Vetra shrugged. Brow raised, I opened the door. I saw the backs of Drack, beside Kesh, and Harry, standing over a large glass box that stretched across the entire wall. Heat lamps at the top. Yet, I couldn't exactly tell what anything inside was.

"Everything's reading normal. They're snug as-oh, Ryder, Vetra. Good to see you both," Harry greeted, turning, as did the Krogan. Drack was smiling, and Kesh? Beaming.

"Hey, Harry. So, what's this?" I asked.

"You're telling them?" the doc's eyes widened before he smiled. "Aw, can I watch? Please?"

"Of course," Kesh answered.

"Got something to show you." Drack waved us over.

"Surprises are nice," Vetra remarked, and we stood between Kesh and Harry, looking into the glass box. They looked like weird rocks. Wait… Vetra and I clasped our hands together.

"Are those…" I murmured.

"Kesh…" Vetra grinned. If a Krogan could cry, I bet Kesh would be doing that right now.

"Krogan children. My children. Live in the egg. Every last one of them." Holy shit, that's… amazing. She returned to staring at her eggs.

"Nobody else knows," Drack warned. "We'd tell Sid, but you know how much she talks. We're keeping this quiet after what happened with the Human baby. I don't know what's in store for me, but…" Drack smiled wider, looking back at the eggs. "However this turns out, I'll be a part of our future. And so will you."

"You… you want our help? We're their… godparents?" I questioned, happy for Drack, happy for Kesh, just happy.

"Don't let it get to your head," Kesh chuckled. "We're going to need a few more."

"Jaal and Peebee?" Vetra suggested.

About what we used to be, and what we are now."

"Just like he taught me," Kesh grinned.

"Thanks kids. Really. Look, I'm sorry to have to kick you out, but, Vorn's on his way. And I think there needs to be a good, honest chat. Private."

"By all means, Drack. Whatever you need," I nodded. Hand in hand, Vetra and I left the apartment.

"That's really… touching, of the two of them," Vetra murmured. "Well, anything you want to do?"

"I want to meet you someplace else in a little over an hour or so," I stated, not revealing anything.

"Oh? Can I get some details?"

"Nope. Not at all. You must be left with the antici…" I paused for five seconds. "Pation."

"I hate you," Vetra laughed.

"Love you too," I chuckled.

"Alright, I'll let you have your alone time. See you then," Vetra shook her head, and boarded a different tram to a different part of the station. While I returned to the penthouse, and actually got to take it in, this time. The entranceway was linked with a large and open living room. A large vid-screen on the wall too. Down a path to the right, looked like a bathroom and a guest bedroom. Blocked off from the rest by a wall. The rest, being a kitchen and dining room. The dining room had a vase with a flower, and a silk cloth lain across, candlesticks too. Thank you, Kesh. The entire left wall was a window, looking out across the Nexus and the park outside this complex. Great view. I travelled up the stairs to the second floor. First came upon the master bedroom. Heh, those bastards had sprinkled rose petals across the large and very comfortable looking bed. The master bedroom also had a walk-in closet and master bathroom attached. With a fucking hot tub. Hell yeah. Up here was another sitting area, and guest bedroom with its own bathroom.

"It's free real estate," I murmured to myself, chuckling. Alright. Showtime. I returned to the kitchen.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Alright, it's almost done, and I sent Vetra a message to come join me, and directions to where. The Louza was in the oven. The meat had looked a light blue when I got it out of the package, but as I peeked in, it was darkening. SAM affirmed that was a good sign. I was also lucky in that the Fridge had been stocked with some wine. Dextro and Levo. I'm not much for wine, but hey, it's fancy. Pinky up.

"The Lazou has finished cooking, Pathfinder," SAM stated. I hurried back to the oven and opened it, using my biotics to pull the stone wear holding the Louza out of the oven and onto the stove. It smelled… weird. Not bad, just weird. I got out a plate, and left the meat on it, then brought it to the table. The moment it was set down, the silverware in place, the doorbell rang. I ran over and opened the door.

"Scott, what is this place?" Vetra asked, chuckling.

"Our new apartment. Called in a favor from Kesh on our way here. I didn't expect a fucking penthouse," I answered.
"This is great!" she smiled, exploring, mostly gazing out the window at the view. "Can Sid stay here?"

"By all means! There's two spare bedrooms, one with its own bathroom." Vetra just began laughing.

"This is better than any place I've lived before. Remind me to thank Kesh. Wait…" Vetra sniffed the air. "Is that…" Her eyes widened.

"Louza. Sid told me, SAM helped me cook," I walked up to her, taking her hand and leading her to the kitchen.

"It smells… good. Very good," Vetra licked her lips.

"Good to hear," I chuckled. "Fridge is stocked with wine too. Want some?"

"Definitely." Vetra turned from the table and browsed the selection, before selecting a bottle and removing the cork, pouring the beverage into a glass. We returned to the table.

"This kinda one-ups my own try," she meekly chuckled as she gazed at the food.

"Please," I scoffed. "I cheated. I got SAM to help me. Besides, nothing could beat that dinner."

"Because of the sex?" Vetra raised a brow plate.

"Nope! Because that was when you told me you loved me," I smiled. Vetra's eyes widened again and she froze. Before giggling. Yes, giggling.

"Spirits, that is so incredibly cheesy, but at the same time, my heart stopped, and I just feel… I feel…"

"Happy?" Vetra stopped and smiled.

"More than you know."

"Go on, eat. I didn't cook it so it could get cold," I chuckled. Vetra's grin failed to shrink as she began cutting a piece off, then used a fork to pop it into her mouth. She moaned happily at the taste.

"Thank you SAM."

"You are welcome, Vetra," the AI responded. I sat there, watching her dig in. I had already eaten, so wasn't concerned for myself. Soon, she finished, and leaned back, happily sipping the wine. She patted her stomach.

"That settles it. You cook."

"You mean, SAM cooks, he just uses my body to do that," I chuckled. Heh, it was like having a damn Rat hidden in my hat, pulling my hair to guide me. Vetra chuckled, and took a sip of her wine, setting it down, and giving me that look.

"So… if this is going to be our apartment… wanna show me the bedroom?"

"Why, I'd be happy to. You'll love what the bathroom has."

"Why would I care much about the bathroom?" Vetra raised a brow, no longer using that voice.
"You'll see. And you won't be disappointed." I stood and made my way to her seat, dramatically taking her hand to help her stand, earning a few more chuckles. I took her by the hand up the stairs, straight to the master bedroom.

"What's with all the… things?" Vetra questioned.

"Some of Kesh's people setting the place up left them without me knowing. It's supposed to be romantic," I answered. Vetra just shrugged, so I showed her just what was waiting in the bathroom. "Ta da!" I gestured at the hot tub.

"...What is it?" I just laughed, leading to Vetra pouting.

"It's a hot tub, Vetra. Water for us to just soak and relax in. Nice, hot water. Why don't we try it out?" I suggested. Vetra raised a brow plate again, but her eyes looked… hungry.

"Alright. Just, hold on," Vetra slowly walked towards the bedroom door, swaying her hips. She closed the door, and activated its electronic lock, before walking back. She started to remove clothes. I just watched. Lost in her, as I stood there. Finally, she was naked, hand on her hip, as I just continued to stare.

"Well, don't tell me you were going to get all those clothes wet," she gestured with a smirk. My eyes widened, and I mumbled a response as I immediately began getting off all my own clothes, leaving them in a pile. When I was ready, Vetra and I stepped down and in together. We took seats opposite of one another.

"Hold on, only kept it a bit on warm. I'll turn it up to where it needs to be." I began dialing at its controls. Making the hot tub actually hot, starting the bubble jets.

"Woah!" Vetra exclaimed as the jet behind her seat started impacting the back of her carapace. But she quickly settled into it, enjoying it. I was fond of the little back massage myself. The water started heating up, not scalding, but getting warmer and warmer. Soon, feeling like a hot shower as the water bubbled in the center of the hot tub. Vetra sank a bit deeper and moaned. "This feels good…" I sank a bit deeper too, our legs bumping against one another, we started unconsciously messing with one another's feet.

"That it does," I grinned, eyes closed, just enjoying it.

"Sid definitely needs to try this out. Guess there's some reason to actually buy Turian swimwear."

"Turians don't do a lot of swimming?"

"Ha, no," Vetra laughed. "We have metal in our carapace after all. A swimming Turian would just involve them flailing around until they drown."

"Hm, pity. Suppose a swimming pool for our future house wherever it is, is out of the question?" I remarked. Vetra paused. I opened my eyes to find her staring at me, mandibles flared in a smile.

"It still doesn't feel real, hearing you say that. OUR future house…"

"Better believe it. After all this, I want a nice, big house somewhere. Would be a shame not to share it. And I can only think of one woman I want to share it with. Maybe…" I coughed awkwardly "Maybe even adopt, someday…" Vetra got quiet again. I felt concerned, inwardly. She was in some deep thought, a bit of… uncertainty, in her eyes.

"All these years, and I've never allowed myself to think that far… Let alone an actual… home…"
she murmured. "I… I'm not sure if I want them, I'm not sure they'd want ME, I just… I don't know…"

"Whatever you want, Vetra, that's all that matters. And for what it's worth, those kids would be lucky to call you mom. After all, you raised Sid, didn't you?" I reminded. Vetra allowed herself to grin.

"Thanks, Scott. Either way, definitely not now. I just… I need to think."

"By all means. Starting to think we may have all the time in the galaxy…"

"Where would you want to live anyway? I'm not exactly feeling pulled to any particular place." I began rubbing my chin thoughtfully.

"Well, Meridian is beautiful, and its weather is perfect. That's an option. I'm not sure what Eos is really like since Meridian came online, so, check there again, I suppose. If Elaaden wasn't so much desert, I'd consider there, but Kadara is a no, for now, at least. Hell, we could just stay here," I shrugged.

"Maybe. And I agree about Kadara and Elaaden, not exactly feeling either of those," Vetra mused.

"Guess it's just another thing to think about. All the time in the world, after all."

"So… what about your mother? She's alive, and you're waiting for some kind of cure. How's she going to feel about… us?" My first response, was to smile.

"Vetra, she'd be ecstatic. I was in a bad place for a while. Mom was afraid I'd never come out, and doing what she could to help her baby boy move on. When she meets you, she'll burst into tears and kiss your cheek for days, hug you just as long."

"That's…" Vetra let out a deep breath. "Good. That's… good." She relaxed again, letting the water come back up to her neck, leaning her head back. I did the same.

"Scott?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."
"I'll never get tired of hearing that," I smiled. "I love you too." Vetra returned the smile, before she started to crawl through the water towards me. The look had returned to her eyes. She climbed onto my lap, her once submerged parts of her body dripping water as I placed my hands on her hips, and hers were on my shoulders. She leaned down, and we shared a deep kiss. Vetra started to rock her hips as I got... physically excited. We refused to break the kiss. Air rushed out of our noses, our tongues danced, and there was the occasional moan into one another's mouth. I may or may not have reached down and squeezed her rear a few times. Nice, firm handfuls. Eventually, I had had enough, and stood, causing Vetra to give a short cry of surprise, without parting, as her legs quickly wrapped around my waist. I turned, and then lay her down on the floor just outside the hot tub. I pulled her legs off me and spread them, parted her folds, and then inserted my tongue, causing her to moan loudly.

Her legs immediately, and instinctually, began to squeeze my head, but I wrapped my arms around her legs and pulled them away, both relieving some pressure, and teasing her further. I ravished her, and we both loved it. Eventually, I replaced my tongue with two fingers, immediately going for
that special spot, as my mouth instead attacked her clit. Vetra's moans got louder, more rapid. She was cursing up a storm. So, I pumped my fingers harder, I licked harder. Faster, everything. Her breathing was rapid and faint. I glanced up to see her trying to keep her head up to stare at me, but her eyes were rolling to the back of her head.

And then she clenched and screamed. Her stomach shooting high into the air as her head came back to the floor, and she writhed. Yet, I didn't stop. Not yet. Eventually, her breathing recovered, and she stopped twitching. She finally, was able to beg me to stop. As I backed away, she lay there, breathing heavily as I licked my lips. She still tasted… amazing. And now, after all this time together, I didn't have to worry about anything. The first time, I got a minor stomach cramp, but I didn't really care much. Now? Nothing. Vetra began to stir.

"Spirits you're good at that…" she panted. I smiled, unable to contain my pride as I dramatically bowed. "Now, scoot." I let her slide herself back into the hot tub. She shuddered again, her head lulled to the side. And then, she turned, facing me, hunger in her eyes again. "Sit up on the edge." I lifted myself up, ignoring the feeling of a cool, wet floor on my bare ass. Vetra grinned as she saw just how excited I was and placed herself closer. She had placed her knees on where I had been sitting, her face was level with my waist. She raised her head higher so that… I rested on her face, over her left eye. She giggled at the look on my face as she stuck her tongue out and licked my family jewels. Her hot breath tickled me, as she moved her head back, running her tongue along my length, flicking it off the head. She began to stroke me, and I controlled my breathing, and also tried NOT to look into her eyes. If I looked into her eyes, and saw everything they conveyed while she did this? Well, then this would be over pretty quick.

I muttered a curse as she wrapped her tongue around the tip. She managed a chuckle, having heard me, and continued. This is- I didn't see it, but Vetra opened her mouth wide and I heard her gag as she took me all the way in. I moaned and was VERY pleasantly surprised to not find teeth scraping or biting my man-hood. She must have maneuvered it right. My hand immediately went to the back of her head, holding her there, but then I felt her resist, going for air, which I obviously allowed.

"Surprised ya, didn't I?" Vetra teased, after I slid out of her mouth with a pop, and she gently began tapping her cheek with my tip.

"A bit," Was the only reply I managed.

"Lucky for you, there's a spot without teeth big enough. Not like our mouths are completely lined with em, anyway." She took me back inside, her head bobbing up and down as her tongue ran along me, the water splashing a bit with her movements. This is… really goddamn good. My hand remained on the back of her head until I felt that familiar feeling build up. A moan she gave off only made it worse. Not sure if that's to tease me, and she knows, or if that's the hand that she had dropped below the water to her waist.

"Vetra…" I warned. I felt myself pop out of her mouth as she stroked faster, her tongue resting just against the bottom of the tip. I looked down, her eyes already gazing at mine. Well, if she wants it… I released, cursing again as it shot out over her face. Some went past, landing somewhere back in the hot tub. The rest was left in thick strands over her face, one had forced her to close her left eye. There were three… lines, from the three… er… spurts. Only a bit had remained in her mouth, and she giggled. She then began gathering the strands that landed on her, forming a thin, shiny film across most of her face, and brought it all back to her mouth. She moaned as she swallowed it.

"You… you sure…" I breathed.

"I don't react to kissing anymore," Vetra chuckled. "It's fine." She stood and leaned against my ear. "Tastes good too…" I gulped, that alone was getting me excited all over again. Vetra pulled me
back down to where I had been sitting in the water. I groaned happily as I welcomed the hot water back. I had forgotten what I had been missing, despite my legs still being in the water. I let my whole body sink under the water, I was in bliss. Quickly, a thought occurred. I took a bit of water into my mouth, being very conscious to ensure I was nowhere near where some… landed, and resurfaced, leaning back where I was. I turned to look at Vetra, who was moving closer again. And then I spit the water out, impacting her right in the middle of her face. Both of her eyes were closed as she froze.

Her eyes opened, a brow plate raised, as her colony markings started to wash away. Her mandibles flared with a grin, and she dove herself, obviously getting some ammo herself. I began laughing as I saw some of the water leaking out from the side of her face, as a Turian's mouth didn't exactly completely close. Those mandibles still left gaps, and her colony markings were now gone. Didn't stop her from shooting a stream of water out at me, which I wiped off my face, smiling. Vetra stuck her tongue out at me playfully.

I began splashing her, and she retaliated. We laughed together as we got water all over the bathroom. Vetra was getting closer, as more of her splashes brought more and more water over my face. Our laughter didn't die. Not until she fell back into my lap and I poked her thigh. She smiled, and her lips attacked mine again, her arms wrapping around both my head and shoulders, my own wrapping around her back and waist. I broke the kiss and began attacking her neck, causing her to moan and roll her head back, allowing access, and her hips rocked.

"Put it in," she finally breathed. I didn't cease my attack on her neck, but as she raised her hips, I positioned myself against her entrance, and she sank down. We both moaned in pleasure, and Vetra took the opportunity to crash her lips against mine again as she began bouncing lightly, causing more water to splash around. Our breathing both quickened, but her's always remained fastest. She moaned more frequently, and in higher pitch as she bounced on my lap. And she cursed like a sailor. Some of the words didn't even translate. But, I was used to that by now. Our kiss was broken as Vetra threw her head back and moaned loudly in pleasure. She wasn't done yet, but she was getting there. She rested her forehead against mine, and our movements got faster. I continued to focus on just holding it in. We stared into other's eyes. Her's were filled with love, lust, and pleasure.

"Do it. Please…” Vetra moaned, again, and then buried her head into the crook of my neck. I moved my hands from her waist to her ass, grabbed hold, and met her thrusts with my own, straining to hold it in. Waiting for her. "Scott… with me," she panted. "With me... " she moaned in pleasure again. "Now!" she screamed as we both released together. Vetra clenching around me, milking me dry as she threw her head back, her entire body shuddering and twitching. Her mouth wide open, her mandibles as far out as they could go. Subconsciously, I gave a few, final thrusts as my own body twitched, and I came to a full completion. Vetra collapsed in my lap and I could barely support myself with my arms on the edge of the hot tub. She shuddered again and lifted her head to look at me. She was smiling lazily. She glanced around.

"Well, we made a bit of a mess," she chuckled.

"Don't… fucking care," I muttered.

"Just… mmmmm," Vetra rocked her hips, moaning, just a bit. "Imagine how it'll be in that bed," Vetra giggled.

"My legs may feel a bit numb and wobbly, but that is sure as hell not stopping me from doing this," I breathed. I stood again, much like when I first lay her on the floor beside the hot tub. Vetra giggled and wrapped her legs around me, before moaning again as we were still joined. Given that
my hands were holding her up via her ass, well, that probably also had a little something to do with it. Carefully, even though Vetra placed her lips against mine once more, I stepped out of the hot tub, and was careful to not slip on the floor as we returned to the bedroom. We may be drenched from the water, but, don't care. I stepped in front of the bed, and fell forward. We laughed through the kiss as the very soft bed cushioned her fall. We parted, and Vetra rubbed the back of my head with an open, three fingered palm.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too." We spent the night showing each other just how much.
Well… a bit more than the night. It uh… may have been that night, and the entire next day. We just remained locked in our apartment, only leaving the bedroom for the food that was in the fridge, or the occasional bathroom trip. I… uh… I think the most clothing we put on, was boxers for me, and panties for Vetra. And that was only for our expeditions out of the bedroom. Well… ok, fine. Several of those also turned into sexpeditions on a couch or chair. One may ask what finally got us out of the apartment.

It was a call, from Kandros. I put a shirt on and took it down in the kitchen.

"Hey Kandros. Something going on?" I asked. He had raised a brow plate on the vid-com, and I saw a slight smirk.

"Given you've been locked in an apartment penthouse, I wouldn't be surprised if you've forgotten. But, do you remember when you asked Vetra and I to put out feelers for anything on the Benefactor, and we talked about Tann's apartment?" I struggled to hide the blush at being called out here. But, it all came back to me.

"Yeah, right I remember. It had an alarm or… something, tied to his desk, no reliable way to get past that," I nodded.

"It's a camera with a live feed, yeah. Well, leadership, myself and Tann included, just arrived back on the Nexus. So, tonight is when the Landing Day celebrations begin over on this end. So…” he trailed off.

"It's a perfect chance to poke around…"

"Exactly. Now, Tann wouldn't think twice if you just didn't show up at all, and were still locked into your penthouse, but then, other than missing out on some celebration with more than just one person," Kandros teased. "You also wouldn't be able to sneak over to his apartment. He'd get suspicious. So, the only way you'll get your window is if you show up tonight, mingle, and leave. Tann will just assume you got bored and went off to do things he really doesn't want to picture. I or one of the other Pathfinders can handle the security at his desk when he's distracted, out in the larger Ops area. You'll just need give us a signal that you're heading out." I nodded thoughtfully along as Kandros explained the general plan.

"That sounds like something we can do, Kandros. I'll go talk to Vetra about it. See you tonight." The call ended.

"So, what did he have to say?" Vetra called out from above. I walked out to below the second-floor balcony. Vetra was trying out one of the robes we had found in the walk-in closet. She had it snug against her, very form fitting. Wait, stop, down boy, get your head-no, not that one, get it into the game! We got important shit to do! Not important people to do!

"There's a party tonight, and if we want to see if Tann knows anything about the Benefactor or not tonight, then we need to make an appearance before leaving for Tann's place. You know, so everyone assumes we're either on our way back here, or, I dunno, fucking in some broom closet at Nexus prom night," I joked.

"Could just fuck on Tann's bed too," Vetra suggested jokingly. I burst into laughter.

"Imagine! He gets home tonight, and just wonders why the hell is bed is sticky! Ha!"

"Tempted to do that," she chuckled. "So, dress code?"
"Oh! Right, hang on," I typed a quick message to Kandros, asking. I got a reply seconds later. "Formal. Like, Tuxedo formal." Looks like I'll be digging out my old dress blues.

"Ooh, I can finally see how you look all dressed up," Vetra purred.

"Been a long time since I've seen myself dressed up too. Should be a surprise for both of us. Thinking I might see if the rest of the crew will go. If nothing else, it would cover us a bit more."

"Sounds fine to me. If Lexi's willing to let Sara go, I'm sure she'd love to be out and about."

"You're right. Would be nice to hang out with her without anything to worry that much about. Oh! Almost forgot. Anything I can do to help you get a dress or something? Or…?"

"Oh, don't you worry," Vetra laughed. "Of course I have something. But, you don't get to see it until tonight."

"The lovely lady has a surprise, it seems. I can't wait…" I stated deeply, powerfully. Just gazing up at Vetra. She grinned, and shuddered a bit, plenty of pleasant memories coming back. I chuckled.

"Go on. Talk to the others, find your outfit. Believe it or not, getting my colony markings back on takes longer than you'd think," Vetra shooed.

"You know, you don't look half bad without it. The markings still look good, and they're definitely you, but, just saying."


"And you'll never stop getting it. Not even when we're old and wrinkly, holding hands in lawn chairs watching a sunset," I smirked.

"Go before I jump off this balcony and start fucking you right here, right now," Vetra laughed, yet clearly restraining that.

"Only thing that encourages me to do is stay, but… ah well, whatever the lady wants… though I am going to need to get changed, first."

"Ugh, damn it, you're not leaving without another quickie," Vetra grumbled, as she came down, via the stairs, and dragged me back to the bedroom.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Life… is good. Life is really good. Pretty much stress free, I happily strode back onto the Tempest. SAM had informed that the only crew on board right now were Lexi and Sara. Before going to find my dress blues, I stopped in the Med-bay. Sara was sat up on one of the medical beds, and Lexi running another examination.

"Where the hell have you been?" Sara questioned, not aggressively, mind you, she asked with a smile on her face.

"My new penthouse. With Vetra," I shrugged. All she was getting out of me.

"Jesus Christ, you two are like rabbits!" Sara exclaimed, as Lexi just smirked and shook her head.

"Believe it or not, I didn't come here to talk about my relationship," I chuckled. "There's a Landing Day party on the Nexus tonight, Vetra and I are using it as a means to sneak into Tann's apartment,
look around for information on a shady benefactor of the Initiative," I explained. "Lexi, you willing to clear her for that?"


"ONLY, if you go easy on the Alcohol. Two drink max."

"Yes!" Sara cheered.

"It is formal though, as in, I'll be wearing my dress blues," I warned. "You're free to come too, Lexi. Whole crew is." Lexi nodded her thanks.

"Yeah, yeah, that's fine. I brought along my own too, it's whatever," Sara waved it off. "I'll just be glad to actually use my legs without someone trying to hold me up!"

"Yeah, you're more used to someone holding your legs down, aren't you," I teased.

"Shut the fuck up," Sara laughed. As my own subsided, I hugged my sister.

"Glad to finally have you back."

"Glad to be back." I parted from the hug.

"Alright, well, I'm going to go find my outfit, dunno how deep it's buried somewhere, but it's there. And I'll send out a message to the rest of the crew. Want Vetra and I to pick you up on the way? You can see the building we're in from the landing pad," I offered.

"Sure, just send me a message when you know you're heading out. I'll be ready by then."

"Alright, so let you know that we're leaving at a time thirty minutes before we actually plan on leaving, so you'll be ready when we get there, got it."

"Fuck you," Sara laughed again.

"What have I gotten myself into," Lexi murmured, shaking her head.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

Most of the crew had accepted the invitation for tonight, and I found my dress blues at the literal bottom of my pile of clothes in the closet. After another meal, appreciating Vetra's fresh application of the Colony markings, I combed my hair, trimmed my facial hair, showered, without Vetra, and was now buttoning the last button of my dress blues. Fit firm and snug, but not uncomfortably. I looked myself over in the mirror. I looked good.

"Vetra, how do I look?" I called out from the first floor, looking up to the balcony.

"Hold on, I'm almost ready myself," she called back from our bedroom.

"Should I go on up, or wait down here for suspense and some dramatic flair? Like a… fashion show or something," I joked.

"Well if you come up here I have a sneaking suspicion we'll just need to put everything on again, so…" Vetra trailed off, chuckling. I couldn't argue. So, I just lounged on the couch. We had run the cushions through the washy, so, no chance of my ass getting sticky anymore. I crossed one leg sideways over the other as I relaxed and waited. "Alright, coming out." I heard her footsteps, and
watched as she stood at the railing, hand on her hip, leaning to the side.

Holy mother of shit.

It was a purple dress that covered her entire torso but left the arms completely free. It was highly form fitting, and there was a belt at her waist that sparkled a bit, also purple. At the front, the skirt ended just above the knees, while the rest at the sides and back went down to the ground. Her legs were also uncovered, and from my angle it appeared like she was wearing large slippers. Fit her feet just fine, but, still big feet. She had left her visor off, and her colony markings were darker than usual. All in all? She was a damn beauty. I just stared, mouth agape, unable to speak.

"Whaddaya think?" she asked, and slowly spun around. The back of the dress only covered only the part of her back without a carapace, so it curved along that. I completely forgot what she had just asked, as I just… drank it all in. Vetra waited another moment, before she raised a brow.

"Scott?"

"Yeah…?" I answered, remembering to blink.

"Did you hear what I said?" I didn't. I didn't hear her ask either. She rolled her eyes and started coming down the stairs, until she stood in front, hand still on her hip, and I think she found humor in this.

"Have I ever told you, you're beautiful?" I murmured. Vetra giggled.

"Once. Maybe I should tell Lexi that I found a way to finally shut you up. Dress pretty," she joked. "Come on, let me get a look at you." I didn't move. She rolled her eyes and picked me up, jolting me out of my trance. Vetra looked me up and down, before running her hands across my chest and along my sides. She purred. "Somebody looks handsome…"

"Apologies for my interruption, but the party is starting soon, and additionally, you told Sara that you would arrive to pick her up in fifteen minutes time," SAM reminded, speaking through my implant. I grumbled as Vetra raised a brow.

"SAM says we need to get going. Need to get Sara and head for the party," I explained.

"Hm, so that you heard," she teased.

"Hey, can't help the fact his voice is literally in my damn head," I defended, smirking.

"Excuses," Vetra shook her head, teasingly. She then threw her head back, gesturing towards the door. "Let's get going then." We held hands all along the way. We got a few looks as we departed the tram to the commons outside the Tempest landing bay, but those looks weren't disapproval, rather, surprise, I think. Either way, I didn't try to slink my hand away from Vetra, or anything of the sort. We found Sara waiting in the Cargo bay. She had let her long, brown hair down and was in her own dress blues, same as me. She smiled upon seeing us.

"Looking good Scott, and, Vetra, great dress. Any chance the person who made it came to Andromeda?"

"Sorry, don't think so," Vetra chuckled. "And thanks. I could see about helping you find a tailor or something soon, though."

"Might have to take you up on that offer. Alright, come on, let's go already," Sara urged, leaving us needing to catch up with her.
"Someone's eager," I teased.

"The fuck did you expect?" she laughed. "I've spent over a month in a bed, and the few hours I was able to move freely, I was fighting for both of our lives! I haven't seen an of the Nexus yet! And I've only met your crew!"

"And you'll have plenty of time to fix that tonight," Vetra remarked. The rest of the way to the tram, and then ops, was spent either quiet, or minor questions being asked between my sister and my girlfriend. When it finally came to a stop, we stepped out to find that before the door to ops, was a doorman.

"Ah, the Human Pathfinder and company," he greeted in a thick French accent. "Some of your crew has already arrived, and, fortunately, all so far meet the dress code. Please, enjoy the party," he gestured to the door. Vetra and I hooked our arms together and stepped through. The lights had been dimmed, with a dance floor designated by the comm consoles Sid and others work. The prison had been given a temporary wall between here and there, and there were buffet tables in the Militia HQ. I suspect that if any ops were going on, they were simply being handled elsewhere. Sara was studying everything and almost everyone. Vetra and I were just making passing glances, looking for other crew, other Pathfinders, or Kandros himself. Sara, still managing to follow us, was brought to the second level to look out. The crowd was decent, but not packed. The second level was even less packed, and no one seemed to be around the Colonial Affairs portion. I spotted Jaal and Peebee, they were on the dance floor. Wait, there's Liam too. Not close enough to be a third wheel, but still kinda part of their group. Not slow dancing right now anyway.

"Ryder, good to see you," Raeka greeted with a smile. She was dressed in a uniform, similar to me, but, Salarian style. "And Vetra, a pleasure."

"Good to see you too, Raeka," I returned first.

"You too," Vetra added. She leaned a bit closer and whispered.

"Mingle for thirty minutes, be on the dance floor, and leave. I'll make my move then." She returned to her original spot and spoke at regular volume.

"You should try the wine, Scott. And, Vetra, Avitus says the brandy tonight is some of the best he's had." We both thanked her for the tip, knowing that part of our mingling would need to involve actually doing as suggested. "I'll take my leave of you two, for the evening. We can talk more as we work together, Ryder." Raeka nodded and left us. As suggested, we made our way towards the alcohol.

"So, I don't know how to dance…" I whispered.

"Just follow my lead, we'll give them a show," Vetra smirked. I have a bad feeling about this.

---

**Pathfinder Scott Ryder**

Well, Tann definitely knows we're here, which, is what we wanted. Caught a glimpse of him looking over the rest of the crowd from the second level, sipping a glass. I was certain our eyes had met. But, well, now came the part I was a bit… afraid for. Our signal that half an hour had passed was coincidentally, met with a slow dance song starting to play. My heart began racing as Vetra lead me by the hand towards the dance floor. I pulled at my collar to cool off. I hope I wasn't sweating.
"Hand here," Vetra whispered as we got onto the floor. She placed my left hand on her hip and her right was on my shoulder. "And here." my right held her left at about shoulder level to the side. "Now just left and right." As she began to nudge in one direction, I followed, our feet, for the most part, staying paired. As we fell into the rhythm, I started to relax. And, with it being a slow song, we just gazed at each other. Eventually, Vetra rested her forehead against mine, and just let out a deep breath.

"Love you, V," I whispered. She smiled.

"You too, Scott." Her eyes opened, and her forehead was removed. The song started to pick up, and a devilish light appeared in her eyes. She started leading me around more. The movements larger. The nerves started to return, as others slowly began to stop to watch. I was spun around, to my surprise, a small, cry of surprise, barely restrained that drew a few chuckles. Shit, she's really doing this to me, huh? She just winked as I continued being led, as the song reached a climax. The moment said climax was coming to an end, I was dropped to a ninety-degree angle, an arm hooked around my lower back, keeping me up, Vetra's smirking face centimeters from mine, before she pulled me up. The crowd began clapping, as Vetra led me off the dance floor.

"Could have warned me," I whispered.

"And miss out on the fun of surprising you?" Vetra retorted. "Come on, you were fine. Besides, you're the Pathfinder to them, won't hurt to make you look a bit human around them," she teased. Arm in arm, we told Sara we were heading out, and she reassured she'd be fine heading back herself. We returned to the tram, the French doorman wishing us a fine evening. As the tram was about halfway towards the apartment block that Tann has his in, we got a message from Raeka. Clear. That was the only word it said. But that was all we needed. The tram stopped, and we casually made our way in the direction of his Apartment. Finally, we arrived, and Vetra got to work on the lock. I just stared and watched her. Enamored by her figure, her body, her… everything. Helluva woman I got. If only Dad could have met her, and I hope mom will, someday. I-

"Scott? Scott! Don't do this again!" she muttered.

"Uh… what? Sorry," I rubbed the back of my head.

"Doors open, come on," she pulled me inside the apartment. The layout was much the same as Kesh's. Something which likely annoyed him greatly.

"I'll check his bedroom, you check this room. Maybe the guest bedroom is turned into an office or something," Vetra suggested. I nodded and began opening drawers in the kitchen. Nothing but exactly what you'd expect in a Kitchen drawer. Tried the living room. Nothing. Vetra came back just as I began feeling my hands under sofa cushions.

"No luck in the bedroom." She checked the guest. "Got an office." I stood and joined her. I got SAM into Tann's computer.

"Check for anything on the Benefactor," I ordered. SAM began searching, Vetra opened file cabinets, scrolling through.

"I only have a note in a journal about you asking about any Benefactors," SAM informed. I hummed to myself, tapping my chin as Vetra finished combing through for any linked files.

"Damn, nothing," she grumbled.

"Fuck it, I'll check the bathroom." Again, nothing. This was frustrating. Maybe he really doesn't
"Want to try looking for something hidden?" Vetra suggested. My eyes widened, and I activated my scanner. I searched every inch of the damn place. Nothing detected. I sighed.

"I almost can't believe that he may genuinely not know anything," Vetra chuckled.

"Me neither. Damn it I wish we could have gotten something."

"Yeah. Sorry this was a waste of time," Vetra apologized.

"Well… I suppose it wasn't. Not really," I glanced over. She tilted her head. "Got to see you in that dress."

"Yep. Alright, we're going back to the penthouse."
Alright, this is the last chapter of the story! Fair warning though, if you're interested in the trilogy story, the portion after the planet sequence involves spoilers for parts of the trilogy that, except for one part, I've yet to write. You know, the ending and everything.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

The next morning, everyone was due back to the Tempest. But before we left, Vetra and I gave Sid the news about the Penthouse, and how she was welcome to stay and use it. When she arrived so we could give her a tour, she was… awestruck, and ecstatic. And Vetra cheekily told her that she just had to try out the Hot tub. She had bolted out the door, so she could go get all her things, and the hamster.

But why were we called back to the Tempest in the first place? Curiously, SAM had requested it. It was only on the ship that he was apparently instructed to provide more details. The ship was ready to go, and SAM requested that I head to my quarters, alone for a moment. Odd. But, I played along.

"So, what's this all about, SAM?"

"According to Initiative projections, each world you have surveyed has reached 100% viability. In essence, that translates to the entire cluster. Heleus is Viable. This has revealed a new task."

"A new task? What is it?"

"It is a significant milestone, Pathfinder. And preparations have been made for some time."

"But, SAM, what are you talking about? I mean, damn am I glad this is all secure, but what's the task? The preparations?"

"Updating objectives. You have a high-priority destination." I checked my Omni-tool.

"Habitat Seven? What?"

"I have been instructed not to reveal mission parameters. Please, don't be late. Shall I instruct Kallo to begin the journey immediately?"

"Uh… yeah, sure…"

"Understood. According to my approximations, it should take slightly longer than a journey to Eos, given Scourge presence." I didn't respond, instead moving to the door and letting Vetra back in.

"So…"

"I don't know either, Vetra. But, for some reason, it's pulling us back to Habitat 7. SAM's been instructed not to tell us," I shrugged.
Well that's damn weird.

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

We finally came out of FTL. I was standing on the bridge, Vetra, leaning against one of the rails in the middle, just behind me. Habitat 7 appeared, taking up most of the viewport. The Scourge damage still present.

“What am I supposed to see here, SAM?” I questioned.

“I'm picking up… Initiative signals. Magnetosphere charges and atmosphere probes,” Kallo informed, confused.

“The vault here remains non-functional, even with Meridian. However, with 100% viability to invest, we've begun terraforming this world with Initiative technology.” Ah, well, that's neat. I still saw this world as a grave, however. Not that I don't want people living there someday, I just don't know what I'm supposed to gather from this.

“Ah, the good old fashioned, Hard Way. It'll eventually be a home, too. Thanks to you,” Kallo remarked.

“Dad would have liked that. Heh, he'd have hated seeing a potential world just sitting there,” I managed a chuckle. Vetra stood now, closer behind me.

“There is one more item, Pathfinder,” SAM stated. "Opening channels to the Nexus," Cheering played from one of the bridge speakers. I raised a brow. “Meridian,” More cheering, my eyes started to widen. "Prodromos, Ditaeon, Taerve Uni, New Tuchanka," Ah, now I heard roars. My smile got wider as I turned back to Vetra. She just smiled back and hugged me. "And Initiative allies.” This was… uplifting. "By unanimous vote, this world is to be renamed. Habitat 7 is now listed astronomically as Ryder-1. The first Colony, shall be named Alec's Dream." I half broke from the hug to look out at the planet. I felt a tear come down my cheek.

“For you, Dad…”

Pathfinder Scott Ryder

I was nervous. Soon after the trip to Habitat 7, as Vetra was just… there for me, in my quarters, holding me as I thought, SAM alerted us with something… big.

Another message from the Milky Way had just arrived. We immediately were en-route to Meridian. I told Vetra that I should hear it alone, just in case. If it's positive, I'll share everything. If not… then that part is all they need to hear. And they can hear it from me. We had just arrived, and I raced to dad's old quarters, where the message was waiting. As my breathing settled, I was filled with dread. I don't know if I wanted to see. Hesitantly, I found the file.

We made it. My heart soared as I read that line over, and over, and over again. I opened the message. There were visuals attached. The vidscreen showed a young Asari woman, Liara, obviously. The background was blackened out, oddly, so all I saw was her face. She had freckles, oddly enough, and deep, blue eyes. She was smiling. Tired, but smiling.

"Alec," she began. "It is with the utmost pleasure that I pass on this message. We did it. The Crucible worked. The Reapers are gone. Now, I believe it would be appropriate that I not be the only one to pass on a message to the people of the Initiative. So, I'm joined by a few… friends,"
she beamed, as the background was no longer black. A row of men and women stood behind her. A multi-species crew. One of them, I immediately recognized. "Allow me to introduce to you, the crew of the Normandy. Starting, with Admiral John Shepard himself."

"Thanks, Liara," the… Admiral, smiled and stepped forward to the camera, a Quarian woman on his arm. The Commander was clearly still recovering from… something. Bruises on his face, a limp, scars on his arms.

"First, a message to you, Alec. Personally. I never knew you, but, David Anderson was… a dear friend. And he always spoke highly of you. Even after you were discharged. At first, I wasn't so sure, given the AI factor. As you'll see soon, my opinion on that is a bit more accepting," he chuckled warmly. "I want to apologize for those perceptions. You're N7. And that alone means you have my respect. As for the Initiative? I wish you all the utmost luck. You are all heroes yourselves, journeying out into the great unknown, knowing you'd never see home again. Here, we will remember you all. Unfortunately, our own rebuilding efforts will mean you won't be seeing a second wave of arks anytime soon. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if we haven't even begun arranging the means to establish contact with you all during my lifetime. I do have one more thing to say, but, well, I'll save it for the end. With this war, let me have some dramatic build-up," he chuckled. The woman on his arm giggled. It was kinda cute, I have to admit. "Now, onto this absolutely gorgeous woman."

"John, please," the Quarian chuckled awkwardly. She stood straight and began to speak. She spoke with authority, despite her earlier appearance of innocence. "I am Admiral Tali'Shepard vas Rannoch Nar Rayya. Formerly Tali'Zorah Vas Normandy. I have a message I would like passed on to the Quarians of the Initiative. At long last, we have reclaimed our Home world. I have stood under the sun, Tikkun, and gazed across the landscape. I have breathed the air of Rannoch, without a mask. Further, not only have we reclaimed our home, but we now live alongside the Geth, peacefully. The Geth do not require the land, and so, it is ours. During our exile, the Geth had even built a memorial, a burial ground, for the billions lost during, as they call it, The Morning War. And they have both maintained our abandoned cities and restored the planet's environment. Finally, they have developed software, which has been copied and sent within this message, to bolster our immune systems. It allows me, to do this." Tali reached her hand towards her mask as Shepard just smiled, holding her at the waist. Her fingers pressed against a few clips as there was a hiss. And she removed her mask and smiled.

Well… that's impressive.

"On behalf of both the Geth, and the Quarian people, we regret that you never had the chance to join in this accomplishment, and we also wish you the best of luck. After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light and through shoals of dust, I will return to where I began. Keelah Se'Lai."

She replaced her mask. The Comm-I mean, the Admiral, and his wife stepped aside, and a Turian man with heavy scarring on his right cheek approached.

"Well, this is going to be a lot less sappy and what-not than Tali's," he began teasingly. Looked like she was chuckling. "But, well, I don't know if you remember me, Alec. But, it's Garrus Vakarian. Castis' son. He and Solana are still alive as well, Dad wants to pass along more well wishes. Well, guess I should update you and the Initiative on the Palaven situation. Well… Palaven is… a mess. But, we're rebuilding. And that's in no small part to the Krogan's help. I suppose there's a few good ones out there," he glanced back at a Krogan with a big scar on his face, who smirked.

"You want me to beat your ass, Vakarian?" he rumbled with laughter.

"Go ahead and try it, Wrex. Go ahead and try," Garrus chuckled. Drack's definitely gonna want to
see that. "So, anyways, I don't really know what else there is for me to say, so… Say hi to Scott and Sara for me, alright?" I chuckled, guess he remembered us. Wrex approached next, wearing a heavy, red armor, and followed by a younger Krogan, a white armor.

"Unlike Vakarian, who I guess is alright, for a Turian," Wrex chuckled. "I have something that's… well, as meaningful as anything a Krogan can say gets. My name is Urdnot Wrex, leader of the United Krogan Clans. Yeah, that's all of them."

"Urdnot Grunt, tank bred by Warlord Okeer, and trained by Shepard. Leader of Aralakh Company." Woah, so, THAT'S what those notes of Okeer's we retrieved were all about.

"Yeah, yeah, this whelp's a good kid. Anyways, as you would have heard in the last message from Liara, Genophage is cured. We're being careful. Breeding programs, diplomacy with the other species. We're still warriors, but we're no longer pointing them at each other… as much… or the other species. We helped kick Reaper ass all over the galaxy. I like to think we were what brought all the smart people time to build the Crucible," Wrex chuckled again. "Now, one last thing. An old, VERY, old, friend of mine went along on your little Initiative. Nakmor Drack. Got a little message I'd like you to pass along to him. I fucking did it, you old fuck! And say hi to Kesh for me." Most of the Normandy crew seemed to laugh. Another person stepped forward. A… synthetic?

"Greetings, Alec Ryder. My name is EDI. I'm an AI, though, different than your SAM. I have read your thesis on AI, and I must commend you on your effort, it was very enlightening during my own pursuits to better understand, and work with Organics."

"And to bed Joker," Garrus called out.

"Yes, starting a relationship with Jeff was indeed helped by your notes, Alec. Unfortunately, it did not stop me from accidentally breaking his pelvis." Um… ew. Wait, is her body… smirking? The Normandy were certainly groaning. "That was a joke," she smiled, as the others just… didn't know what to make of it.

"And damn am I lucky," a man limped towards the camera, grinning. "I taught a robot to love!"

"Please, Jeff. Another moment," EDI requested.

"Yeah, yeah, alright," he limped away.

"Finally, I have a message for SAM. I wish I could have gotten the chance to speak with you. It would have been an enlightening experience for the both of us. I would have copied a part of my matrix onto this message, but, I do not wish to live without Jeff."

"Damn EDI… I think you're going to make me cry," Jeff murmured. She just smiled and stepped away from the camera. Now there was… a bug?

"Primi-" he cut himself off. "Pathfinder, my name, is Javik. I am informed that knowledge of me was sent to you in Dr. T'Soni's previous message. At the time, I would have thought such as foolish and pointless. As all I have known in my life is war against the Reapers. I was the Avatar of Vengeance. Now, that the war is over, I have experienced peace time. My perception has… changed. For the better. Now, I can understand why knowledge of the last Prothean should be passed along. I have sent a long my full knowledge of the Prothean Empire, as well as notes of how I now perceive what I once believed to be the only way." Javik ended with a nod and returned to the others. I felt… awed. Sara is definitely going to want to watch that message. A human woman stepped forward. Long, black hair, and rather large… assets.
"Alec Ryder, Miranda Lawson. I used to be a devoted member of the Terrorist Organization of Cerberus. Shepard, showed me just how much of a mistake that was. Now, I am proud to inform you that the Illusive Man is dead by his own hand. Cronos station, Cerberus' HQ, is utterly destroyed. As are the rest of their facilities and members. During the Reaper war, the Illusive Man and all the soldiers were indoctrinated. We suspect many higher-ranking members were as well but can no longer confirm. Cerberus has both been discredited, and obliterated. Rightfully so. Thank you, and good luck."

"We'll introduce the rest of the ground team before I say my final piece. Go on," he ended, gesturing to the others. A light skinned man with some slicked-up hair stepped up and saluted.

"Major Kaidan Alenko. Council Spectre." Next, a dark-skinned man, with a mostly shaved head.

"Jacob Taylor. Ex-Cerberus with Miranda. We were both involved with Shepard's resurrection. Then, an utter beefcake of a Hispanic.


"Zaeed Fucking Massani," he grumbled, chomping a cigar. "The best goddamn Mercenary in this Galaxy, and yours. And don't you fucking forget it." Next, a lithe, nimble looking woman. Asian, I think. A purple line on her chin, and short, scraggly black hair.

"Kasumi Goto," she bowed. "Greatest thief in the Galaxy. And, can you tell a Vetra Nyx, that I said hi?" I burst into laughter. Of-Fucking-Course she does. To follow up, a woman with a mostly shaved head, just a single thick strand in the middle that lead into a ponytail at the back, and she was covered in tattoos. She wore a short leather jacket, and it looks like she covered her tits with long bandages that went down into pants that were full of holes.

"Jack. Yes, that's my real fucking name. And, old man, or, your kid, or, shit, maybe your daughter, stop staring at my tits, alright?" she smirked, and walked off. An old Asari stepped up, shaking her head, but smiling.

"Please, excuse my student. I have not yet gotten to lessons on her… temperament."

"Yeah, and good luck with that, Granny," Jack remarked.

"She does not yet understand how far the patience of an Asari Justicar can stretch. Even a retired one. I am Samara. I find your journey to be wonderful and full of hope and stunning adventure. I wish you all fortune from the goddess." Shepard returned to the camera, hands behind his back.

"Now, I want to spread the names of our fallen friends, and their deeds, so that they will forever be remembered among the heroes of this war." The others bowed their heads.

"Ashley Williams," a picture of her was on the screen now. I recognized her. "She sacrificed herself to destroy Saren's indoctrination facility on Virmire." An old Salarian man was now on the screen. "Professor Mordin Solus. During his time with the STG, he had modified the Genophage when the Krogan were beginning to adapt. He lied to even himself about it, but, he was conflicted for many years. It led him to opening the clinic on Omega where I met and recruited him against the Collectors. We talked often, and he realized his conflict. During the Reaper war, he helped Urdnot Bakara survive her injuries and sickness from brutal experiments. She was the first step of his full redemption. The final step, was giving his life to spread the cure across Tuchanka. Giving the Krogan hope." Now, the image was that of a Drell. Green skinned.
"Thane Krios. He spent most of his life as an Assassin. But he was also a father. I will not tell that part of his story, but he joined me against the Collectors. He was a good man. He fought to protect Humanity despite being in the later stages of Kepral's Syndrome. During a failed Cerberus Coup on the Citadel during the war, he fought off an Assassin attempting to kill the Salarian Councilor. He was stabbed, and combined with his Kepral's Syndrome, died in the hospital, his son, and his friends, at his bedside, the next day." Next... a Geth. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to react. I wanted to turn it off now, but... I couldn't. This time, it wasn't the Commander, but Tali, who spoke.

"This, is Legion. He saved our lives aboard a derelict Reaper during the Collector Campaign. And he later earned my trust. He opened our lives up to the bigger picture, in regards to the Geth. It is because of him, that I believed peace between our people was possible. It is because of him, that we achieved peace. During the Reaper War, the fleet attempted to take Rannoch back by force, thanks to a weapon developed by Admiral Xen," she said that name with clear disdain. "It pushed the Geth back and forced them to enter a bargain with the Reapers. One that put them under their control. Except Legion. He refused. He helped us free the Geth from Reaper control, and then, discovered that the Reaper code that was within him, giving him personality, yet not making him a slave, could be transferred to all Geth. A ceasefire was ordered just as Legion was uploading his code. It cost him his life. In his final moments, he was no longer an avatar of the Geth consensus. He, was an individual. He had a soul." Tali sniffled, and Shepard held her close. Wow. She mourns a Geth...

"Finally, Admiral David Edward Anderson. A dear friend of both of us, Alec. He led the resistance against the Reapers on Earth. When the United Galactic Fleet attacked the Reapers on Earth, when it was learned that the recently stolen Citadel was the final piece of the Crucible, and was moved to Earth, he helped lead the ground attack in London. The very place he was born. He and I were the only two to survive a run to a beam that teleported us to the Citadel, so that we could open it, and end the war, once and for all. Unfortunately, the Illusive Man was there, and heavily indoctrinated. Anderson..." Shepard seemed to choke back some words. "Was wounded, gravely, before The Illusive Man shot himself. As the Crucible was activated, he died beside me..." A tear fell down his face.

"These were not the only casualties of this war, and all of them are heroes. Every man and woman who picked up a gun was a hero. I wish we could remember them all. People of Andromeda, you're not alone out there. We wish you well, and someday, we'll see you again." He saluted. "This is Admiral John Shepard and the Normandy crew, signing off."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!