

A Cold Wait

a *Mass Effect: Andromeda* fanfic

by Rodo

for *Isilloth*

“PEEBEE! HURRY!” SARA Ryder called from behind cover while bullets and plasma beams whizzed past. This mission had gone to hell faster than you could say “I told you so” in all galactic languages, not just elcor. A couple of meters to her left, Jaal was covering Peebee, who just *had* to get her hands on some Remnant artifact she’d seen through the vents while they snuck past a vault.

The moment Jaal ducked back behind cover to let his shields recover, Sara turned and started firing. There were just *so many* kett; in the distance, she could see two more drop ships approaching. They needed to leave. Fast. At least Peebee was ducking from cover to cover faster than Sara had ever seen her do before. When a Chosen took aim at her, Sara incinerated him.

“Thanks!” Peebee screamed, entirely too chipper for a situation like this.

‘Ryder,’ SAM interrupted her dark musings. ‘Kallo can’t find a safe spot for extraction nearby. You need to make your way off this glacier – it’s too unstable to land.’

“Done!” Peebee cried as she finally jumped over the chunk of ice that shielded Jaal from kett bullets. “Tell the big guns to come save the day!”

“Not. Happening,” Sara ground out between shots. The recoil was beginning to hurt her shoulder. “We need to move a couple of clicks south.”

“And you’re telling me this now?” Peebee complained, suddenly a lot more sober than moments before.

“To be fair to Ryder,” Jaal interjected, “you weren’t around for most of this mission.”

Just as Sara ducked back into cover, Jaal took aim again. It was a futile effort. The kett ranks weren’t thinning at all, and the staccato of gunfire only grew.

“Hey, this was important! I’ve never seen anything like this before. It could tell us things about the Remnant we couldn’t even imagine.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Sara could see Peebee fumble the damn thing out of the bag she’d stashed it in. “Not now,” she growled, and before Peebee could argue further she added: “Time to run. Now, Peebee.”

After a second's hesitation, Peebee obeyed. She sprinted across the icy field, light-footed and determined. The snow barely slowed her down. So very different from Sara, who hated Voeld with a passion. Everything was covered in snow and ice and darkness, and Sara got stuck in every snowdrift while her armor's life support was struggling in all that cold. In a little while, the display at the bottom of her visor would turn red, not that she could do anything about it now.

"Your turn," she said when she broke cover again to shoot at the avalanche of kett moving towards them. Jaal, to his credit, didn't hesitate, no matter how much he might wish to protect his beloved. He was a soldier, and he knew one of them would have to go first. He also knew that Sara would never let one of her crew go last if she could help it. She didn't look back once he'd vanished from her field of view, she simply aimed her assault rifle and peppered an Anointed with bullets until he collapsed on the ground. Through the blue haze of her shields, she took aim again, and again, until—

The crack was terrible. It froze her heart, the same way thunder used to when she had visited her grandparents on Earth as a little child. It shook the ground too, spreading like a spider's web through the ice. Sara almost didn't hear the muffled cry of the voice she loved to hear the most. But she did, faintly, and the kett were forgotten. She whirled around and what she saw almost made her lose her mind: where there had been an even, snow-covered glacier just moments before, there was now a dark abyss, and Jaal was nowhere to be seen. For one short moment, Sara thought she had lost him. Then she saw his hand, desperately clinging to a ridge of unstable ice.

Sara didn't hesitate. She ran. She didn't care that the ice below her feet might break, didn't even think about it. All she thought about was Jaal. He'd been fifty meters away at first, but Sara closed the gap between them faster than she ever had. The last few meters, she jumped, throwing herself on her belly and stretching out her arm to grab his. Just in time. She saw Jaal's grip slipping just as she grabbed his wrist. Then she was dragged forward by his weight. It was pure luck and the weight of her armor that stopped her from falling into the crevasse as well.

For a moment, time stood still as Sara stared into Jaal's eyes. They were wide and scared. Jaal was silent, but his eyes seemed to beg her – whether to save him or to let him go, she didn't want to know. The life support display turned red as the icy wind cut across the meager protection her armor offered. But Sara couldn't let go. She grit her teeth and tried to hold on. Behind her, the wind and the kett and the ice roared, but all she could see was Jaal's eyes. They were so full of love and warmth. She *had* to save him.

"Ryder!" Peebee called, but she was too far away. For a second, Sara could see her when

she looked up, running towards them and bracing herself to help them with her biotics. Then Sara felt the ground give way, and all she could see were ice and darkness. Her stomach dropped as she fell, then she fired her jump-jets to slow her fall. That had been a mistake; the crevasse was too narrow, too uneven and the boost sent her flying straight into the ice. Next to her, she heard Jaal grunt with the impact as well. In her head, she heard SAM call her name, right before she hit the glacier wall again.



Sara came to with a groan. Her head hurt, as did her limbs, but she felt all of them, and an experimental wriggle of toes and fingers proved that she could move them all as well. The armor and shields must have absorbed the worst of the fall.

“Jaal?” she asked, still lying on the ground. After a moment, she added “SAM?”

They both responded at the same time: Jaal with “I’m here,” SAM with ‘Ryder.’

“Are you alright?” she asked with an apprehensive hitch in her voice. But when she moved her head (which her neck didn’t appreciate) to look at him, he seemed better than she felt, as much as she could tell in the dim light. Jaal was sitting with his back against the icy wall, cradling his rifle, with no obvious wounds.

He answered with a deep, affirmative hum and a wry smile. “And you?”

“Well, I’ve been better...” she began, but before she could continue, SAM butted in.

‘You’re hurt, but not grievously so,’ he explained. ‘You might have a concussion, but you were only unconscious for two minutes and thirteen seconds.’

“Great,” Sara whined. She didn’t feel completely fine. She felt like she’d bounced off a dozen walls. But the bruises were superficial, even if they hurt and wouldn’t fade for weeks without medical assistance. At least the crevasse was sheltered from the harsh weather of Voeld’s atmosphere, so her life support was green again. Small mercies... She sat up with a sigh, then gingerly made her way over to Jaal, who let her settle at his side without question. Even with the armor and the life support systems, the side of her that touched him felt noticeably warmer. She let her head drop to his shoulder and wished she could feel his *roffinn*. She really hated Voeld. Why couldn’t they be stuck in a cave somewhere on sunny, temperate and now mercifully less radioactive Eos?

Jaal wrapped an arm around her, drawing her closer. He knew how much she hated the cold. It didn’t have a measurable physical effect, of course. The helmet display told her that there was a marginal increase in ambient temperature, but at temperatures below minus twenty, her non-mechanical, very biological sensors couldn’t tell the difference. Sara

appreciated the gesture, though. And she supposed Jaal's hug had a bit of a placebo effect, considering that she felt warmer even when she shouldn't.

"What about the intel Anjik asked for?" he asked.

Sara patted her hip. The data core was still firmly lodged in one of the specially-reinforced armored pouches at the side of her leg. It had probably made it through the fall better than she had. Anjik had thought that the kett might have information on the former angaran settlements in the area, and she'd been right.

"Fine," Sara said.

"Good. I wouldn't want to go through all this trouble with nothing to show for it."

Neither did Sara. At least Peebee had got away. But with the kett base so close by, there wasn't much the crew or the Resistance could do other than a full frontal assault on extremely unsafe ground. She wondered whether their lives were worth it. No use in counting on it anyway. They had to try to get out of this mess on their own, even if the cavalry was on its way. An upward glance didn't immediately provide her with a solution, though. She could barely make out the rim of the ice sheet, nor were there any hand holds or ledges. Even with the jump-jets, it was far too high.

Jaal followed her gaze and sighed. "We will need to find another way out. Or wait for help."

Sara sighed in resignation. Neither option sounded terribly tempting at the moment. Help might take hours if not a day to arrive, if it ever came at all, but if she was being perfectly honest, she didn't want to move. Jaal's shoulder was far too comfortable and her bruised muscles wouldn't appreciate moving about. If only they were in her quarters on the Tempest instead of stuck on fucking Voeld.

"You're right," she finally admitted.

"But you don't like either option," Jaal concluded, his voice vibrating with unvoiced laughter.

Sara tilted her head a bit so that she could see his profile. "You know me too well."

Jaal chuckled a little. "Sara, I doubt there is such a thing as knowing you too well for me."

A smile spread on her face, and for a moment Sara was tempted to lower her visor to press a kiss to his lips. But they were on Voeld, and it was too cold. Later, when they were back somewhere warm and safe, she promised herself.

"We should get up, shouldn't we?" she asked.

Jaal simply hummed. He was far too good-humored for this situation. But then again, he could walk around Voeld without having to worry about frostbite. Sometimes, Sara, really envied him his angaran physiology.

Her muscles protested as Sara straightened her back and struggled to her feet. From the corner of her eye, she could tell that Jaal was wincing too – it seemed she wasn't the only one who had hit one too many hard surfaces in the past half hour. When Jaal noticed her, he scoffed, as if to say that it was nothing serious. It might not be, but Sara worried nonetheless.

“We've decided to look for a way out, then?” he asked.

“Did you want to stay and wait, then?” Sara retorted.

Jaal shook his head. Of course he didn't. Waiting while others took action wasn't in either of their natures. She took stock of the situation. There were two ways to go in the crevasse. One, the narrower end, led upwards. The other, wider path led down. Both were illuminated by the eerie, undulating blue light reflected and filtered by the glacier's walls. Neither path seemed particularly promising.

‘I'd suggest the path leading down,’ SAM suggested. ‘Orbital sensors indicate it leads further from the kett base, and potentially down towards the foot of the glacier.’

Sara exchanged a glance with Jaal. “Sounds good, SAM. Keep the Tempest updated.”

If SAM could nod, Sara got the feeling that he would. Instead, she took his silence as agreement and slowly stumbled down, deeper into the ice. Jaal followed close behind, a reassuring presence behind her back. As they descended deeper into the glacier's heart, the diffuse light dimmed and dimmed. Sara switched on her helmet light, and the shadows that played across the ice just made their surroundings seem even more unreal than they had before. Still, they persisted on their course, their footsteps echoing through the silence. Until their path split in two.

Looking at their two options, Sara wondered if SAM had something to add, but he didn't. She exchanged a doubtful glance with Jaal, who huffed.

“I vote for the left one,” he said, even though he didn't know which way to go. But since Sara didn't either, she followed his lead. If it was a dead end, they could always double back.

After the first quarter hour of climbing over great hunks of fallen ice, Sara was beginning to doubt Jaal's choice. Maybe they should have waited where they had fallen. SAM had informed them that he could no longer get a fix on their position through the ice shield shortly before they had chosen this path. If the others came looking for them, they wouldn't be easy to find... with a small shake of her head, Sara banished her doubts. Now wasn't the time to second-guess herself. Things would work themselves out, somehow. They always did. By now, she was a pro at winging it. And she had Jaal with her, she reminded herself with a short glance backwards. Her partner looked intently ahead

and seemed not the slightest bit worried. After all, they were together. He would only be worried if she was stuck down here on her own.

“The path is getting wider,” Jaal remarked. She’d been drifting off, Sara realized. There was something about the relative warmth compared to the surface and the dancing light and shadows that made her feel drowsy, like looking at a hanar lava lamp.

Jaal was right. With every step, there was less ice surrounding them. Even above their heads, the darkness felt somehow less oppressive. Maybe they were finally getting somewhere. Sara was about to consult SAM when she heard Jaal gasp almost inaudibly.

When Sara followed his gaze, she saw what he had: their lights illuminated the tunnel before them, but where there should have been only ice, there wasn’t. About ten meters in front of them, the path – which had been gradually leading downwards so far – was starting to level off, and there was something down there that wasn’t made of ice. For a moment, Sara thought they’d reached the bottom of the glacier. Then she correctly classified the rounded shape and material. All around them, encased in ice, were others as well.

“Is that...”

“A *daar*,” Jaal whispered. “There shouldn’t be a *daar* here.”

“At the bottom of a glacier? I agree, that’s a strange place to build a settlement.” It was a joke of course. Jaal shot her a look that meant he wasn’t amused (except he absolutely was). The *daar* obviously hadn’t been built in the glacier – it had been built *before* it. The one house they could see clearly was almost completely covered in ice. As they walked closer towards it, they could see that the walls had been torn by the slow movement of the glacier, the roof had been depressed by the tons of ice. Beyond and in the walls, Sara could make out the shadows of at least six more buildings that floated through the ice as if it were a river or an ocean. Which it probably had once been. The *daar* was one of the few sparse reminders Sara had seen that once upon a time, Voeld had been a golden world. That back when she’d left the Milky Way, it had been a temperate world.

Walking through the corpse of a settlement felt unsettling in a way Sara couldn’t explain. She was used to the fiery destruction of the kett by now, to burned-out houses and bullet holes. She was used to ancient, buried Prothean artifacts, millennia old, ageless and mysterious. This was different. It was as if she could feel how the settlement had withered away as the planet cooled. People gradually left for warmer shores, until those were freezing over as well. How must it have felt to the angara to watch helplessly as their world turned against them?

“This is like walking through the history of my people,” Jaal said. Sara could hear the bitter sadness in his voice. It was the weight of all those years of fruitless fighting, the loss

of so many people. Usually, Jaal handled it well. His optimism and tenacity were something Sara admired him for. But after they had grown close, she had become privy to these vulnerable moments. She was glad for it. After all, it meant she could help him. The temperature display at the edge of her visor read -20.43°C – better described as really fucking cold. But not so cold that she'd die instantly without her armor.

“Jaal,” It was her tone as much as the name that got his attention. At once, his eyes focused on her. “You're right, this is the history of your people. But it is more than that. It is a testament to what you've overcome. What you've survived. It's also a reminder of what you hope your future will one day be again. A Voeld that isn't covered in ice, where people can live peacefully without fear of the kett.”

“It's what I hope *our* future will be,” Jaal corrected her with a smile.

Sara couldn't help but smile back. With, quick, practiced movements, she wriggled her right arm out of its armor and quickly placed her hand against Jaal's face. The way he leaned into the touch and closed his eyes was worth the biting cold.

“I really want to kiss you right now,” she confessed.

Slowly, Jaal's wonderful blue eyes opened again and he eyed her like a cat. “But?”

Sara laughed. “But I really need to get my arm back into the armor now. I'm starting to lose feeling in my fingers. If I took my helmet off, I don't think I'd enjoy that kiss very much.”

Jaal chuckled while Sara struggled getting her armor back onto her stiff fingers. His dark mood was gone. It didn't return while they examined what they could of the *daar* either. Sara couldn't help much, but she let SAM direct her to whatever he thought worth observing and dutifully scanned what he told her to, while Jaal provided an angaran perspective. In the end, they explored the various cracks and holes for about half an hour, before they had collected as much information as they could. Hopefully Avela would know what to make of their find. Anjik would undoubtedly appreciate the extra data to augment the kett intel as well.

In the course of their inspection, they had found several smaller cracks in the ice that they would have missed had they simply walked through the ancient *daar* without giving it much thought. Through one, Jaal detected a slight breeze on his skin, too light to move even the fringes of his *roffinn*. That fortunate discovery kept them from rolling the dice on which path to choose a second time. The hole was small, and Jaal had to take off his rifle to crawl through the narrow passage, but eventually it widened.

In the end, it took them another two hours to make it to the surface. There were more narrow passages, and on the last part of their journey they needed to use their jump jets, cling to ledges and carefully climb the walls. Sara's heart beat fast from exertion and

elation when a last firing of her jump-jets catapulted her out of the crevasse and onto the sheet of snow-covered ice. With a relieved sigh, she rolled onto her back and spread her limbs while Jaal landed next to her. He was far more dignified about it and stayed on his feet. When he spotted her just lying there, he stared down at her fondly.

“What are you doing there?” he asked.

“Making a snow angel,” she replied, and started to move her arms and legs about furiously. Jaal eyed the activity dubiously. Sara responded with raised eyebrows.

“I’ll ask Liam once we’re back on the Tempest.”

Sara laughed. Out loud. She couldn’t wait to get off this planet and somewhere warm. “SAM, notify the Tempest and the Resistance,” she said. And after a pause she added: “And tell Peebee she’s responsible for doing the dishes for the next month.”

Fin