

Kiss of the Raptor: Strange New Universes

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Kiss of the Raptor: Strange New Universes

by [DavidFalkayn](#)

Summary

V'lana Avesti commands a Romulan Warbird that finds its way into the Mass Effect Universe and into a mystery that will cross the lines between time and universes before the story ends and will involve multiple universes and characters. This story is a reposting of my story on AO3 and book one is complete there. This is the first part of a multi-part series belonging to what I've nicknamed the "Raptor-verse". I will also be bringing in my other stories in the series, "Transitions" and "Universes in Collision" here as well. All of these stories can be found on AO3. Fair warning: here are a lot of slow-burning long term plot threads in this story, so be prepared and please...be patient...I'll try to make it worth your while! :)

Notes

This story was originally posted on fanfiction.net many moons ago and has gone through many changes since I began it in 2013 or so. The complete work can be found on AO3--I'm reposting here so that others might see it if you want. I'm glad to see Ad Astra moving to the AO3 format as I post most of my work there because I prefer the interface and kudos/comment system. For those curious, I'm not writing my Sutherland series any more for a variety of reasons, however you will find some familiar names in the Raptor-verse stories as I have repurposed some of those characters for this series--they're fun characters to write, so I decided to bring them over rather than have them languish in obscurity. As for Liz--while you might hear Admiral Shelby's name mentioned a time or two in the Raptor-verse, she really doesn't have a part to play in the story and I'm taking a more canon approach towards her--in other words, she's not who she was in the Sutherland series. However, I've taken that hedonistic aspect of Liz's as well as a few other character traits of hers (Hungarian background, pleasure seeking, recklessness, determination, etc), and transferred them to an original character that you will see as the story evolves--Captain Zsuzsanna Rosza. Like the old Liz Shelby from the Sutherland series, she's in a class all her own. This story has grown far larger than I had originally anticipated it being several years ago when I first started it. As more content was added to both STO and ME, that gave me more material to work with. I'm enjoying reimagining these favorite characters from the Sutherland and Perseus series and hope you do too. In some cases, the names remain the same, but I've changed their backgrounds somewhat to better fit into the Raptor-verse time frame, in other cases, I've changed their names, but more or less kept their characteristics. Those who have read my older series will recognize them once you've met them. I've also done some tinkering with the Star Trek and ME timeline as far as time passage is concerned. A good example here is Ashley and Rana. Because they crossed not only universe barriers, but also time, I have them spending some years in the STO universe by the time we reach the point where the two universes actually meet and plots converge. I have reasons for doing this that you'll see as the story unfolds, but also, a passage of time really is necessary from a storytelling perspective. As a game, the designers need to maintain a reasonably rapid flow of events. Characters doing miscellaneous stuff for a year or two or longer doesn't work in game terms where you want to stress immediate danger. Extending the timeline allows me to develop plotlines and characters much more deeply--you'll see that especially where Ashley and Rana are concerned. I hope everyone enjoys this monster of a story and please feel free to leave comments.

Meet the Players

Project Lazarus

“Heart rate’s still climbing. Brain activity is off the charts! Stats pushing into the red zone! It’s not working!”

“Another dose. Now!”

“Heart rate accelerating!” Wilson called back, “Brain functions are...they’re...”

“Out of the way, Wilson!” Miranda Lawson growled as she pushed her assistant aside. Grabbing a hypodermic, she plunged it into her patient’s chest.

“Heart’s stopped.” Wilson said, “Brain activity fading.”

Grabbing two defibrillator paddles, Miranda attempted to jump start her patient’s heart, but in vain as she saw the flat line going across her screen, soon to be followed by a second and then a third flat line.

“Brain functions have terminated.” Wilson reported somberly, “Shepard is dead.”

“We were so close!” Miranda sobbed as she looked down on the scarred red headed woman who had been earmarked by no less than the Illusive Man himself to be humanity’s last hope. Regaining control over her emotions, the dark haired scientist announced in a clipped Australian accent, “Prepare the body for autopsy when I get back. I want to know exactly what killed her. I have to inform the Illusive Man. He’ll want to know about this immediately.”

Shaking his head as the head of the Lazarus Project left the room, Wilson thought, *Sucks to be you Miranda. Couldn’t happen to a nicer woman.* Looking down at the now fully deceased Shepard, Wilson’s thoughts this time turned a bit more pensive and even regretful, *For what it’s worth, Shepard, I am sorry. To die once is bad enough, but to have to die twice...Thing is, some very powerful people do not want you to fall into Cerberus’ hands and they paid me a lot of money to see to it that you didn’t. Hopefully, this time you’ll be able to rest in peace—you truly have earned it.* His mission completed, Wilson made his way to the shuttlebay as unobtrusively as possible. Entering the shuttle, Wilson ordered the pilot, “Ok, take us out. We’re done here.”

Once she entered the Quantum Entanglement Chamber, Miranda’s body was scanned. Immediately afterwards, a holographic image of the Illusive Man, sitting in his chair and smoking a cigarette appeared. “If you’re speaking to me now, Miranda, then it’s safe to assume that the news is not good. Does it involve our project?”

“I’m afraid so.” Miranda replied, “Shepard is dead—irreversibly dead. The readings were normal and then there was a sudden spike followed by death.”

“Have you completed an autopsy?”

“No as yet. I thought it best to inform you first.”

“Understandable.” The Illusive Man replied as he took a drag from his cigarette, “And I appreciate it. Once you’ve completed the autopsy, I would like to see the results.”

“Of course.” Miranda acknowledged.

“I’ll let you get to your business then, Ms. Lawson.” After he had terminated the connection, the Illusive Man turned to a man dressed in dark clothing standing next to him. “Divert resources from Project Lazarus to Project Rebirth immediately and cease recruitment efforts for Moreau, Chakwas, Donnelly, and Daniels as well as the others. We don’t need them now.”

“And Chambers and Gardiner?”

“Put Chambers in public relations and reduce her security clearance appropriately.” The Illusive Man decided. “She performed well enough in that role prior to Operation Lazarus and I’m pretty sure she’ll continue to do a good job as one of our public faces. Also, she hasn’t been exposed to any sensitive information as yet—she was about to be, but I was waiting for confirmation on Moreau and Chakwas before bringing her fully in. As for Gardiner, Hawthorne, and the other false front crewmembers we’d planned to bring in for Shepard’s benefit—for now, place them on low-level security work. If any of them—including Chambers—wish to tender their resignations, allow them to go with the standard warning exit debrief. They don’t know enough about our operations to pose a threat—no need for dire measures against them.”

“What about the SR-2?” Kai Leng inquired.

“Continue with that, but I want a dedicated Cerberus crew—we no longer have to worry about making our new Shepard comfortable.” The Illusive Man responded.

“And Operative Lawson?”

“Operative Lawson is no longer of any use to the organization and too much of a security risk to be allowed to leave. She knows too much and, if she does do an autopsy, might well tumble on to her true identity. We cannot risk that.” The Illusive Man declared in a businesslike voice, “Terminate both her and Mr. Taylor’s employment with extreme prejudice—along with any of the other scientists attached to Project Lazarus.”

“Wilson?” Miranda called out as she entered the laboratory containing Shepard’s body only to find just the body there and no assistant. Activating her comm link, Miranda spoke, “Jacob? Have you seen Wilson?”

“No.” The voice of the station security chief responded, “I thought he was in the lab.”

“He’s supposed to be here.” Miranda replied, “But he’s gone. Can you do a search for him? I want him here ready to answer questions.”

“Will do, Miranda.” Jacob replied as the Australian woman began the grisly work of carrying out the post-mortem of Commander Jane Shepard. Running a sample of the deceased Commander’s blood, Miranda muttered, “No... Can’t be. That wasn’t there when the crisis began. The only way those elements could have entered her blood was when...”

“Another dose, Now!”

“That bastard!” Miranda spat out as she activated her link, “Jacob! Wilson’s a traitor!”

“He’s gone, Miranda.” Jacob tersely reported, “A shuttle departed with him on it.”

“Damn.” Miranda cursed as she quickly performed a series of mental calculations, “Assume the Illusive Man gave the order immediately after cutting off communication with me.” Miranda whispered under her breath, “He’ll order a full cleansing. It would take fifteen minutes...maybe half an hour for a wet ops team to prepare and embark on a shuttle. Travel time to here...another hour.” Quickly grabbing an OSD from her computer, Miranda spoke in an urgent voice to her old friend, “Jacob. We have to leave here now!”

“What are you talking about, Miranda?”

“Shepard’s dead. Wilson killed her.”

“Damn.” Jacob gasped, “But why are you wanting to take off?”

“The Illusive Man has probably ordered a clean slate on the project.” Miranda explained as she walked briskly towards the shuttle entrance. “The cleanup team should be almost here. It would be better if we weren’t when they arrive.”

“What about the other scientists?” Jacob asked, “We can’t just leave them stuck here to get killed!”

“I’ve just given my authorization to order an immediate evacuation of the station.” Miranda replied as she punched in an authorization code on a computer console. “I need you to enter in your code to activate it.”

“Consider it done.” Jacob replied, adding, “I’ve also ordered the mechs to fire on any intruders not showing station ID—so don’t lose your card until after we’ve boarded the shuttle.”

“Right.” Miranda acknowledged as the hall lights turned red and the evacuation alarm sounded. “I’ll meet you at the shuttle bay. Hurry.”

“Hurry up, Miranda!” Jacob shouted as the dark haired scientist rushed towards the open shuttle doors. As soon as she had entered, Jacob banged twice on the Kodiak’s side, “Close that damn door and get us outta here!” He bellowed. As the shuttle departed the station, Jacob could make out another Kodiak bearing Cerberus colors approaching. “Must be the hit team. Get as much distance as possible between us and them.”

“We’re losing him.” Miranda sighed in relief as the invading Cerberus shuttle resumed its approach towards the station. “Must have decided that we weren’t worth the trouble.”

“Or that the two of us would still be on the station.” Jacob observed.

“Not a bad analysis, Jacob.” Miranda replied with the barest trace of a grin. Her smile vanishing, she inquired, “How many people did we get off?”

“Not enough.” The former corsair sadly shook his head. “Not enough shuttles or time to get everyone off. Maybe the mechs will knock that kill team out—force the Illusive Man to send another—buy time for more people to escape.”

“Not likely, Jacob.” Miranda shook her head, “He probably sent in a second team behind this one as backup or to pick up stragglers. I’m afraid the only ones who made it are the ones who’ve already gone.”

“So...” Jacob asked, “Where do we go from here?”

“Omega.” Miranda decided. “There we can get new identities. Lay low until an opportunity presents itself.”

“Opportunity?” Jacob exclaimed, “What sort of opportunity?”

“An opportunity to strike back at the Illusive Man... Deal with the Collectors...deal with whoever Wilson’s working for...or if we’re really lucky...” The Australian scientist said with an evil grin, “All of the above.”

A Different Universe...Beta Thoridor System...Earth Date, June 2409

“Decloak! Attack pattern alpha! Fire all weapons!” Subcommander V’lana Avesti ordered as her *Valdore*-class warbird materialized behind its target, a Hirogen Hunter Frigate. Green beams of light lanced from the warbird as a large superheated ball of plasma travelled unerringly through the gap punched through the hunter’s shields by the energy beams. Seconds later, a giant explosion filled the viewscreen, but before

the crew of the *Gallena* could celebrate, fire from all sides rained down upon the Romulan warship.

“Evasive action.” V’lana ordered, “Emergency power to shields. Fire at will. We have to get the attention of those Hirogen. Give that freighter time to escape.”

“I’d say we got their attention.” Tovan Kev, V’lana’s first officer and old friend, sarcastically replied as he quickly moved to ensure his subcommander’s orders were followed. “We need more power for the port and starboard shields!” He shouted out to the chief engineer, a Reman girl, still a teenager, manning her console on the bridge.

“I’m giving you all I can.” Veril, the little Reman engineer, responded, then added with a grin, “And maybe a little more!” Punching a button on her console, the teenager smiled as a shockwave emanated out from the *Gallena*, temporarily knocking out the weapons and engines of the two attacking Hirogen frigates.

“Now!” V’lana ordered as her first officer launched torpedoes and beams at one of the frigates, instantly destroying it. “Cloak!” The subcommander then ordered as the warbird shimmered into nothingness. “Course 119 mark 2.” She ordered as her human Starfleet exchange officer moved quickly to follow her instructions. “Aim for his weak starboard shield. Closer...closer...NOW!” The warbird decloaked as once again green beams of light and a ball of plasma poured forth, instantly destroying the last of the attacking frigates.

“The freighter has successfully escaped.” Satra, the lithe science and communications officer of the *Gallena* reported.

“Good.” Tovan sighed in relief. “Subcommander, I’d suggest we find what we came here for and then get out before their friends arrive.” He gestured with his head towards the viewscreen filled with the debris from the Hirogen frigates.

“Good idea, Big Brother.” Turning to her science officer, the subcommander ordered, “Satra? Begin scans.”

“Scanning.” The science officer complied, “Anomaly found on the fifth planet. Only a trace atmosphere. We’ll need environment suits.”

“Helmsman? Set course for the fifth planet—maximum impulse.” The subcommander ordered. “Satra? You’re in charge of the landing party. Pick your people and be ready to beam down.”

“Understood, Subcommander.” The Romulan science officer affirmed, “Hivan? Veril? You’re with me.” Turning to the first officer, Satra asked, “I’d like to take Miren and Solona as security if that’s all right with you?”

Watching as the science and engineering officers departed, Tovan joked with his commanding officer and childhood friend, “That woman can out-Vulcan a Vulcan when she wants to.”

“She does have the deadpan delivery down pat, doesn’t she?” V’lana smirked as she fidgeted in her seat to adjust her miniskirt.

“That she does.” Tovan laughed. “And...she’s as cold as ice.”

“Oh?” V’lana chuckled, “I take it you know from personal experience?”

“Not me.” The Romulan first officer smiled, “Hivan. He tried to charm her in the galley during third meal. She knocked his engines out with her first volley.”

“You know what Hivan’s problem is, don’t you?” V’lana asked.

“Other than he’s as ugly as a Nausicaan?” Tovan grinned, “No.”

“He’s the wrong gender.” V’lana replied. “She’s not interested in any male...not even you, Big Brother.”

“Suits me just fine.” Tovan replied, his face souring for a moment, “I’m not looking right now anyway.”

“You’re thinking about her, aren’t you?” V’lana gently inquired, “Charva.”

“Yes...no...yes.” Tovan confessed, “Was she lying to us about Virinat? Did she know all along what Hakeev’s plan was? Did she set us up? Or was Hakeev and the Tal Shiar using her? Or both? V’lana...” The youthful Romulan first officer sighed, “What do you think?”

“Honestly.” The auburn-haired subcommander replied, “I don’t know. She could have been telling the truth. She could be a dupe. It wouldn’t be the first time the Tal Shiar used their own people without their knowing it. Or...” She said, sounding a cautionary note, “She could have been in on the deception. It also wouldn’t be the first time that a good person was corrupted by the Tal Shiar.”

“I know.” Tovan sighed, “That’s what frightens me.”

“Well...” V’lana declared as Beta Thoridor Five grew larger in the viewscreen, “We’ll find out when we find out. Put us in standard orbit and tell Satra to get to work. I want to get out of here before the Hirogen make another appearance.”

The landing party of five, all wearing Romulan environmental suits, beamed down to nothing less than stark desolation. Looking up at the pitch-black sky full of stars, Lieutenant Satra, taking out her tricorder, quickly got down to business. “This way!” She directed, pointing to a rocky outcropping. “I’m picking up faint phased neutrino frequencies emanating from there.”

“Look a little closer at it.” Veril gasped, “It’s not just an outcropping. There are ruins. Old ruins, I’d bet, very old.” The young Reman remarked enthusiastically.

“We’ll see when we get there.” Satra replied in a matter-of-fact tone that barely hid her growing enthusiasm. “Now, let us not waste any more time.”

Arriving at the outcropping, Satra at once saw that there were indeed ruins of an ancient culture scattered amongst the rocks. Activating her tricorder, she announced, “Preliminary dating indicates that these ruins are at least fifty million years old.” As her tricorder beeped, the science officer pointed towards a slab lying on the ground, “The neutrino emissions are coming from that slab.” Approaching the block, Satra remarked, “This slab is not natural. It is constructed of a substance similar to duralinium only several orders of magnitude harder.”

“Could it have been used as part of a ship?” Veril asked as she investigated the area around the slab.

“Possibly.” Satra conceded. “The question is...where did it come from?”

“Maybe this is a clue?” Hivan hollered, waving Satra to a wall. “Look at that!”

“Fascinating.” Satra remarked, “It seems the Elachi were no more than servants to something or someone else.”

“Ships approaching.” Ensign Julieta ‘Liz’ Weller, another Starfleet exchange officer, called out from her position at one of the warbird’s tactical consoles.

“Kev to landing party. Get what you need and beam up now. We’ve got company.”

“Understood.” Satra acknowledged. “Five to beam up.”

“Reading seven Hirogen ships including an *Apex*-class battleship.” Weller reported.

“Landing party is aboard.” Tovan announced to his commanding officer.

“Cloak and get us out of here.” V’lana ordered as the Romulan ship disappeared.

“We have a problem, Subcommander!” Tovan called out as a swirling black vortex appeared near the warbird, with a mysterious ship exiting. “That ship’s Elachi.”

“So I see.” V’lana remarked as she noticed the mystery ship drawing closer. “Any indication they spotted us?”

“Negative.” Tovan shook his head as Satra and the other senior bridge officers took their positions.

“Good.” V’lana’s lips turned up into a dangerous smile that her old friend knew only too well.

“You’re not thinking of attacking it—are you?” Tovan exclaimed.

“No.” V’lana shook her head, but her first officer did not have long to relax as she continued, “I intend to go into where it came out.”

“You’re going into the vortex!” Tovan exhaled as he absorbed the news.

“Yes.” V’lana replied with a crooked smile, “It doesn’t appear that they can detect us cloaked—not if we keep our emissions as low as possible while passing near them. We go through the vortex...see what’s on the other side...and then pop out once we’re done.”

“That’s assuming the vortex is stable and remains fixed in the same location.” Satra interjected.

“Tovan...all we’ve been doing since Virinat is reacting.” V’lana declared as she got out of her chair, pulling down the 23rd century issue miniskirt that she liked to wear. “And I’m sick and tired of it. It’s time we found out more about our foes and maybe...hopefully...get a lead on who or what took our people and where they are, get our people back, and give whoever’s doing this a lesson in why it is not a good idea to piss off a Romulan.”

“Piss off?” Tovan chuckled, “Sounds like your human grandmother talking.”

“Maybe.” V’lana retorted, momentarily flashing a crooked grin before once again growing pensive, “I never got the opportunity to get to know her. I remember when I was little and Father was still alive, he called her a ‘force of nature’.”

“Yeah. Janna’s the same.” Tovan sighed as thoughts of his missing sister rushed through his mind. “Well, if we’re going to do this...Then let’s do it now.”

“Engines...half impulse.” V’lana ordered as she returned to her chair. “Reduce all emissions to minimum. Silent running until we clear that ship and enter the vortex. Now!”

Subcommander V’lana Avesti’s lips turned up in a sad smile as she saw the anomaly filling her viewscreen. *If this is the end, then it has been a helluva twenty-three years of living. From living on the streets and in the bars of Nimbus III to starting a new life on Virinat to commanding a warbird...not bad for a former teenage thief, con artist and hooker.* The youthful Romulan thought as her ship drew ever closer to the anomaly’s gaping maw. Taking a deep breath, her thoughts once again drifted back to her last days on Virinat where the most dangerous thing she had to face were the Khellin bugs breaking Arven’s irrigation pipes.

“Thinking of home, V’lana?” Tovan asked, intruding into her reverie.

“You know me too well, Tovan.” The subcommander remarked as she brushed back a lock of her luxurious long auburn hair, exposing her pointed ear. “You know what they say—live fast...die young.”

“Is that your human part talking again?”

“Hmf...maybe.” V’lana chuckled, “I heard grandmother always did have something sarcastic to say. Father said that grandfather would complain that he could never get her to shut up, so maybe I’m following in her footsteps.”

“Well, you certainly have a flair for the traditional.” Tovan riposted, nodding his head at the subcommander’s uniform—mesh top with maroon officer’s trim, miniskirt, maroon belt around the waist, and thigh-high boots.

“Yeah...well...what can I say? I got that from my other grandmother. Father left it to me when he died. He...” She choked for a moment before continuing, “He told me that he was sure she’d have wanted me to have it.”

“It certainly has a controversial history attached to it.” Tovan noted wryly.

“That it does.” The subcommander chuckled. “That’s part of the reason why I choose to wear it. It equally offends them all—Tal Shiar, Vulcan, and Klingon—even a few humans. Remember the look on that Vulcan Starfleet Admiral T’nae’s face? Priceless. She knew the history of that uniform and my other grandmother—her mother was probably around when it happened. Hell!” V’lana snorted, “**She** was probably around—bitch.” V’lana’s eyes twinkled mischievously as her warbird passed by the alien ship.

“Much as I’d like to scan that thing...” Tovan muttered only to have his commanding officer interrupt.

“We can’t take the chance.” V’lana shook her head. “We’d come out of cloak”

“And that would be bad.” Tovan quipped.

“Very bad.” V’lana agreed and then, raising her voice, ordered, “Full Alert. Maintain emission controls and prepare to enter the anomaly.

“Entering anomaly...” Satra counted down, “In five...four...three...two...one...”

Mass Effect Universe: A freighter bound for the human colony of Freedom’s Progress

“How long until we reach Freedom’s Progress?” Kaidan Alenko asked the captain of the MSV *Columbia*, the *Kowloon*-class freighter that the undercover Alliance operative had booked passage on.

“We should be there tomorrow.” Captain Raymond responded, “All we have to do is hit the mass relay in the next system and we’re there.”

“Thanks, Captain.” Kaidan replied, but as he turned to leave, the captain called him back.

“Mr. Alenko? You seem to be in a big hurry to get there...”

“Yeah.” Kaidan lied, “I have family—a sister—she’s having a baby and I want to be there for the big event.”

Nodding his head in understanding, the captain responded in an encouraging tone, “We’ll try to get you there on time.”

Returning to his cabin, Kaidan first sent off a quick progress report to the man who had sent him on this mission, Councilor David Anderson. He then took out a picture from his wallet. The picture was of a redheaded woman with freckles and green eyes. Turning the picture around, he read the little handwritten note on the back: *Kaidan, the day you entered my life was the day I truly began to live. Love always, Jane.* As he placed the picture back into his pocket, the ship rocked violently, knocking the dark-haired biotic off his feet. Picking himself up, Kaidan heard an alarm klaxon and the captain’s voice on the loudspeaker.

“The *Columbia* is under attack by pirates. Our engines are out, and we are about to be boarded. Do not attempt to resist. I have been assured that if we do not resist, the pirates will merely take what they want and go.”

“Sorry, Captain Raymond.” Kaidan growled as he checked his M-3 Predator pistol, “I don’t think that’s how this situation is going to play out.” Taking a deep breath, Kaidan placed his hand on the door, but before opening it, he heard the voices of two of the *Columbia*’s crewmen on the other side.

“Captain Raymond says that the pirates want our passenger. We’re to stand guard and not let him out. Hopefully, they’ll take him and go.”

“Hurry up and lock the door. We don’t want him getting out.”

Sorry. Kaidan thought to himself as he charged his barrier. *Too late.* Moving quickly, the biotic placed one of the crewmen, brandishing a club, in stasis while simultaneously, being careful not to use too much power, throwing the other crewman down the corridor. “Sorry.” Kaidan apologized to the man in stasis. “The field will wear off soon. If I were you, I’d find some cover.” *Better move.* The Alliance officer thought as he made his way down the corridor. *I need to get to a shuttle or escape pod—fast.*

Captain Raymond waited as the airlock door opened to reveal a squad of Blue Suns mercenaries. “I did as you told me to do.” The merchant captain pleaded, “I have the person you want locked in his quarters and under guard.”

“Take us to him.” The Batarian commanding the squad ordered, gesturing with his assault rifle.

“This way.” The captain nervously complied as he led the mercenaries towards their prize.

R.R.W Gallena

As the *Gallena* entered the anomaly, V'lana felt a faint shudder running down her spine. She then heard whispers but could not make out what the voices were saying. Then—darkness until she heard her science officer's voice.

"We're clear of the vortex." Satra reported. "The anomaly is collapsing."

"I was afraid of that." Tovan grumbled.

"Cloak." V'lana ordered. "Where are we?"

"Not too far from our previous location." Satra reported. "The stars are where they're supposed to be, but there are...irregularities."

"Not picking up anything on standard communications frequencies." Ensign Weller reported. "Broadening search. Picking up something...a distress call!"

"This is the MSV Columbia, we are under attack by pirates. Engines out and we're about to be boarded. Send help immediately!"

"While there is a Federation starship called the *Columbia*..." Satra reported, "The prefix code MSV is not in use by anyone."

"Not by anyone we know, at least." Tovan qualified.

"Let's investigate." V'lana decided. "Maximum warp. Weapons at the ready."

MSV Columbia

As they approached the passenger's quarters, the Batarian Blue Suns squad leader, upon seeing the opened door and unconscious crewman in the corridor, growled, "I don't see him." Activating his link, the batarian reported to his superior on board the pirate ship, "The target is loose. What are your orders?"

"The Alliance officer is to be taken alive. The others are not important."

"Understood." The batarian acknowledged as he drew his pistol and pointed it at Captain Raymond's head. "You heard. You're expendable."

"No!" Raymond cried as the batarian fired one round, instantly disintegrating the captain's head in a red haze.

"I want that officer!" The batarian squad leader barked.

Kaidan watched the entire tableau unfold from his place of concealment behind the galley counter. His anger mounting, the sentinel activated his omnitool as he popped out of hiding, sending out a cryoburst at the batarian while simultaneously renewing the charge to his barrier. Ducking back under cover, Alenko took a deep breath as a burst of automatic weapons fire passed over his head.

"The damaged ship must be the *Columbia*." Tovan commented as the *Gallena* closed to visual. "I'd say the other vessel's the pirate."

"Shouldn't we hail them, Subcommander?" One of the Starfleet officers inquired, "Order them to stand down."

"No." V'lana shook her head. "They've shown by their actions that they're pirates, and they'll be treated accordingly."

"I should remind you that this is a violation of the Prime Directive." The Starfleet crewman pointed out.

"And if this were a Starfleet vessel that would matter." The subcommander responded with just a note of irritation in her voice. "Weapons to full. Target engines and weapons first."

"Target locked." Tovan reported as V'lana leaned forward in her seat.

"Decloak and fire!"

"I want that officer taken and taken alive!" The batarian ship commander ordered his boarding team leader. "If you cannot accomplish even that task properly, I'll have you scraping varren droppings for the next year." Closing communications, the commander looked out the view window, gasping in astonishment and horror at the site he saw. A large winged ship painted with a bird of prey suddenly appeared out of nothingness. He then saw green lights glowing.

Recovering from his shock, the batarian commander began to order, "All weapons...engage. Shields..." But before he could finish his words, green beams lanced from the ship, accompanied by a massive ball of energy. "Maker of all..." The commander whispered as the plasma torpedo consumed him, his ship, and his crew.

"What the...!" Kaidan gasped as he felt the *Columbia* violently rock.

"The ship!" One of the turian Blue Suns called out to his superior, "It's...gone. An alien ship attacked it."

“Kill the target and everyone else.” The batarian squad leader ordered. “If we go down, we’re taking as many with us as we can.”

Popping up again, Kaidan froze one trooper with his cryoburst, following it up quickly with a throw that shattered the human Blue Sun.

“I want everyone tossing a grenade on my mark!” The batarian ordered, “We’ll see how well he can dodge.”

“No survivors from the pirate vessel.” Tovan reported.

“Scans indicate that there might be fighting taking place on the merchant ship.” Satra indicated.

“Two boarding teams consisting of troopers and medics.” V’lana ordered. “I’ll command one team and Solona the other. I want one human on each team as well. Weller...” The subcommander ordered, nodding her head at the human woman with close cropped blonde hair, “You’re with me. Lanning...you’re on Solona’s team.” Turning about at the turbolift door, V’lana instructed, “Big Brother...take care of my ship.”

Kaidan was feeling the pressure. He’d survived the grenade volley, but it cost him his tech armor and barrier strength. Now, he was down to his last thermal clip and his fatigue was catching up with him. Taking the picture out of his pocket, Kaidan gazed one more time on the image of his deceased lover. “Well, Jane. Looks like I’ll be joining you and Ash soon.” As he made ready for his last stand, the Canadian biotic heard a faint buzzing and then five columns of green light appeared behind the Blue Suns. To the Alliance Officer’s astonishment, those green columns materialized into human—or human-like—figures, one of whom, wearing, of all things, a silver mesh miniskirt and top, trimmed with maroon. The miniskirt wearing woman pointed at the Blue Suns and then all hell broke out as green beams of light lanced from the pistols and rifles carried by the newcomers who quickly ducked for cover.

The Suns, to their credit, quickly adjusted after half their number went down in the initial onslaught. Taking advantage of the situation, Kaidan launched yet another cryoburst, freezing a mercenary as he was simultaneously hit by one of the green energy beams. The resulting explosion surprised everyone—the newcomers, Kaidan, and the Blue Suns. Taking advantage of the mercenaries’ temporary shock, the newcomers struck as one of them, this one obviously human—although wearing a strange red and black uniform—fired her pistol, hitting each Blue Sun in turn with a yellow beam.

“They’re all stunned, Subcommander.” The human reported.

“Second team? Status?” The miniskirt wearing woman spoke, raising her wrist.

“Engine room secure. Moving to secure bridge. No resistance.” A female voice responded.

Addressing the human, the miniskirt wearing woman, whom Kaidan now realized had pointed ears as well as auburn hair that reminded him so much of Jane, commanded. “Have these prisoners transported to the brig. I want them stripped of their armor and weapons and carefully searched.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” The human promptly replied.

“There’s one more behind that counter.” One of the newcomers pointed out to the miniskirt wearing leader.

Addressing Kaidan, the alien woman called out, “If you’re not one of those pirates, you have nothing to worry about. I am Subcommander V’lana Avesti, commanding the Romulan Republic Warbird *Gallena*. We’re here to offer assistance and medical care, if necessary.”

Deciding that he had nothing to lose, Kaidan, holstering his pistol, staggered out from cover. “My name is Kaidan Alenko.” He stammered as he tried to walk forward, “Staff Commander, Systems Alliance Navy.” Taking two more steps, the fatigued marine collapsed to the deck.

“Doniela!” V’lana called out as she rushed to the collapsed officer.

“We need to get him to medical.” The Romulan nurse declared as she passed her tricorder over the biotic. “These readings are like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“Beam him straight to medical and inform me once he’s fit enough to answer questions.” The subcommander ordered as Doniela and her new patient beamed off the freighter.

“Solona? I want all computer records mined and downloaded. I want to know who and what we’re dealing with here before we go any further.”

“Yes, Subcommander.” The Romulan security specialist responded.

“Any further orders?” Ensign Weller asked.

“Secure the ship and then beam back. We’ll leave word with whoever owns it when we get the chance.”

“Aye, Subcommander.” The human tactical officer acknowledged.

“Tovan? Beam me back to the ship. We have some prisoners to interrogate, a guest in sickbay, and questions that need answering.”

Omega

Holstering their weapons as soon as they entered the clinic proper, Miranda and Jacob walked up to the reception counter, making sure that their hands were clearly visible. “Medigel and other supplies.” Miranda offered as she slowly placed the supplies on the receptionist’s counter, her every movement carefully watched by the human security guard and two LOKI mechs standing behind the receptionist.

“Thank you.” The receptionist responded, her lips now turning up in a slight smile on receiving the donation, “These are desperately needed.”

“Can we see Mordin Solus?” Jacob inquired.

“He’s in the labs.” The receptionist replied, “But don’t bother him unless it’s something important. He’s been working almost nonstop since the plague began.”

Making their way to the labs, Jacob and Miranda saw a batarian doubled over in a corner violently coughing and a turian slumped in a chair, his head lolling. “Those poor people.” Jacob remarked, shaking his head as he witnessed the scene before him, “And no one seems to care except him.” The dark-skinned former Cerberus operative nodded his head in the direction of a salarian wearing a white lab coat scurrying to and fro through the lab going from one patient to another, dispensing medical advice and prescriptions and calling for medication where appropriate.

“That must be Dr. Solus.” Miranda concluded as she made her way into the lab, Jacob following close behind. “Doctor Solus?” The dark haired Australian scientist called out. Seemingly ignored by the salarian, Miranda raised her voice slightly, “Dr. Solus?” Still ignored, Miranda approached to nearly arm’s length of the scientist and called out, Dr. Solis? Can I have a word with you?”

“Oh!” The salarian doctor exclaimed, finally recognizing the presence of the two humans standing before him. “Hurry. Much to do. Not enough time.”

“We came to help.” Miranda began only to be cut off by the salarian.

“Are you a medical doctor?”

“I’ve had training.” Miranda replied.

“Name?”

“Miranda Lawson”

“Miranda Lawson...” Miranda could almost hear the wheels turning in the salarian’s head as he spoke, “Miranda Lawson...paper published on rejuvenation of dead tissue...conference report on potential of cybernetic implants. Fascinating.” Miranda’s eyes widened at Mordin’s apparent knowledge of her career. “Was employed by Cerberus...high security...participated in action that prevented terrorist attack on Citadel...one of few to actually see the Illusive Man. Employment recently terminated...high bounty offered for death or capture. Perfect for job. Welcome aboard.”

“Thank you.” Miranda replied, nonplussed, “What about Jacob?”

“Hmmm...Alliance...became disillusioned with Alliance following Eden Prime and resigned commission...joined Cerberus...played major role with you in foiling terrorist plot...joined you in leaving Cerberus. Bounty almost as high as yours. Welcome also, Mr. Taylor. Will make excellent head of security.”

“How do you know so much about us?” Jacob asked

“Very attentive to scientific community.” Mordin smiled, “Pay attention to rumors. Also...was in STG. Still have connections. You start work immediately. Ms. Lawson? Need you to analyze compounds. Mr. Taylor...have vorcha problem in northwest sector.”

“I guess it’s time to go to work.” Jacob grinned as he hefted his shotgun. “I’ll see you later, Miranda.”

Undisclosed Location: Cerberus Base

The Illusive Man and his bodyguard then entered a room where scientists, hunching over computer consoles worked. Addressing the head scientist there, The Illusive Man asked, “How is progress going on the Enhanced Defense Intelligence.”

“Work on EDI is coming along nicely, Sir.” The scientist replied, “Its programming has been successfully shackled and we anticipate no problem integrating it with the SR-2’s systems.”

“Good. Keep me updated as to your progress.”

“Yes, Sir.” The scientist responded as he returned to his work.

As the Illusive Man and Kai Leng made their way back to his office, the employer inquired of his bodyguard, “What news do you bring me regarding Ms. Lawson and Mr. Taylor and Dr. Solus?”

“Lawson and Taylor have both apparently gone to ground on Omega and Dr. Solus is apparently still trapped in his clinic in the quarantine zone.” Kai Leng responded. “I’ve done as you’ve instructed and hired Zaeed Massani to eliminate Lawson and Taylor and bring us Solus.”

“He’ll fail.” The Illusive Man flatly stated, “As intended.”

“He’s a diversion?” The assassin inquired.

“Of course he is.” The Illusive Man nodded his head as he took another drag from his cigarette. “Massani’s nothing more than a gun for hire. Anyone of those three are capable of removing him with little to no trouble.”

“While Massani distracts any potential competition, our new acquisition will be ready to take on her real task: the Prothean relay on Fehl Prime.”

Getting Acquainted

Chapter Summary

Kaidan meets the new arrivals as V'lana sets the *Gallena* on course to a new mystery.

Chapter Notes

Some might wonder why I apparently killed Shepard. Well...there are reasons as you'll see later on. Shepard's supposed death also gives me the room to bring in some plot twists I otherwise wouldn't have been able to accomplish.

Rematerializing in the *Gallena's* transporter room, Subcommander V'lana was at once greeted by her first officer, Centurion Tovan Kev. "Subcommander. The prisoners are in security confinement and our 'guest' is currently undergoing treatment in sickbay."

"Have you begun interrogation of the prisoners?" V'lana inquired as the pair exited the transporter room.

"Not as yet." Tovan replied. "I wanted to wait for your orders as to how extensive you want the interrogations to be."

"Are they offering resistance?" V'lana inquired as the two officers stepped into the turbolift. "Security Confinement." V'lana ordered as the turbolift began to move first towards the warbird's stern and then to go down into the lower decks.

"You might say that." Tovan grinned. "One of the four-eyed aliens decided to charge his cell's restraining force-field. He's still unconscious. The others seem to have gotten the message, but they're not talking."

"Well..." V'lana replied, her lips turning up into a crooked grin, "Let's take a look and see what we have in the zoo."

As the two senior officers entered the confinement area, they were met by the security officer commanding, a taciturn Romulan named Merek, as well as the *Gallena's* science officer, Lieutenant Satra.

"That's the one who ran into the force field." Merek noted, pointing at a four-eyed alien lying unconscious on the bed in his cell.

"According to the library database on the freighter, he's called a Batarian." Satra explained. "Their political entity is the Batarian Hegemony. Slave-holding society, they're active slavers and pirates in this region of space. They also serve in several mercenary units."

"Thugs for hire." V'lana quipped as they moved to the next cell, in which sat a taciturn individual with bird-like features and mandibles.

"This one is a turian." Satra reported, "They are one of four species that possess seats in the governing body of this...universe."

"Universe?" V'lana exclaimed, raising an eyebrow in an almost Vulcan gesture.

"That is the conclusion I have come to, Subcommander." Satra nodded her head, further explaining, "The anomaly wasn't a wormhole to another section of our space. Rather, it was the doorway to another universe. The aliens who opened this apparently harnessed dark energy to do so."

"I see." V'lana paused for a moment to brush back another stray lock of hair. "And you say these turians are one of the dominant species in this universe?"

"Yes." Satra nodded her head, "Along with the asari, salarians, and...most recently...humans."

"So...humans are present here." V'lana commented and then asked, "What about Klingons, Romulans, Vulcans...any other races from our universe?"

"Not that we are aware of." Satra shook her head, "But then...it could be a simple matter that our races hadn't been contacted yet due to the method of starship propulsion they use."

"We can discuss that in greater detail later." V'lana quickly cut off her science officer before she could deliver yet another lecture. "Have you gotten any information from this prisoner?" The subcommander asked, turning her attention to Merek.

"No, Subcommander. He hasn't said a word since he regained consciousness. I wanted to wait to get your approval before resorting to more extensive interrogation techniques."

"You acted correctly." V'lana nodded her head approvingly. "Let's see the last prisoner and then I'll decide."

"Very good, Subcommander." The security officer saluted. "This one is human. He's the only one who has been even slightly communicative."

"What is your name?" V'lana asked the bearded man pacing in the cell. "What is your planet of origin?"

"I'm not telling you anything, you pointy-eared freak." The human sneered, "The Blue Suns will fix you."

"Typical human bluster." Tovan snorted, "No offense." The first officer cracked a grin at his part-human commanding officer.

"None taken." V'lana smiled back. Speaking loud enough so that their prisoner could hear, V'lana ordered, "Bring in Neilana. She's a telepath. Have her tear into his mind and rip everything out. I want her to dig as deep as she has to. Tell her I don't care if she leaves nothing more than a husk when she's done."

"Immediately, Subcommander!" Merek crisply acknowledged and then spoke into the comm channel on his console. "She's on her way and says she's looking forward to it. It's been too long since she's ripped up a human's mind."

"Neilana's going to love you..." V'lana purred evilly as she addressed the prisoner. "Speaking as a telepath myself, I can tell you first hand that there's something...orgasmic...about ripping into someone's mind...tearing into their innermost secrets and desires...and then stripping everything away from them. Gets me juiced just thinking about it..." V'lana sighed as she began to feel aroused in spite of herself at the prospect of letting that other part of her, the dark side that she kept carefully under control escape, even if only momentarily. "I might just have to join her. I love a good mind-fuck. It leaves me feeling so...so sated."

"No!" The human mercenary screamed as he saw the look of predatory anticipation on the alien woman's face, "Please. Don't do it. I'll tell you what you want to know! Just don't rape my mind."

"Shut up!" The turian cursed, "They're bluffing."

V'lana gazed wordlessly into the human prisoner's eyes, transfixing him with her stare. "You look so scrumptious..." She purred as her lips turned up in a grin that was both lascivious and sadistic at the same time. "I'm not sure I can wait for Neilana to get here before I start feasting on your thoughts."

"I don't think they're bluffing Tyran." The human cried, "I'll tell you what I know...just leave me alone you sadistic..."

"Talk then." V'lana commanded as Neilana sauntered through the doorway, "Who are you and where are you from?"

"My name is Trask." The human confessed, "Jeffrey Trask. I was born on Earth. Hung out with the gangs...joined the Alliance to keep out of prison...deserted a year ago after killing my sergeant...and joined the Blue Suns."

"Why did you attack that freighter?" V'lana questioned.

"We were supposed to snatch that Alliance officer and bring him to Vido on Zorya."

"Who's Vido?"

"Shut up!" The turian named Tyran growled menacingly as he stood up in his cell.

"Merek." Subcommander V'lana ordered, "Silence that prisoner."

"With pleasure." The security officer responded as he drew his disrupter and, setting it for stun, fired at the turian, instantly knocking him unconscious.

"Now..." V'lana again turned her attention back to the human prisoner, "Again...who is Vido?"

"Vido Santiago. The head of the Blue Suns. I don't know why he wanted him." Trask quickly added, "I'm just a grunt—that sorta stuff's way above my pay grade."

"I think he's telling the truth." Tovan whispered as V'lana nodded her head. Raising her voice, she again addressed the prisoner. "So...you were to take him directly to Zorya..."

"No." Trask shook his head. "We were to go to Omega first, switch ships, and then go on to Zorya."

"Shake off possible pursuers." Tovan murmured.

"Very likely." V'lana agreed. "I think we've gotten everything we're going to get from him for now." Turning to the security officer, the subcommander ordered, "Increase the quality of his rations and permit him limited entertainment media—and make sure the other two prisoners know that you're doing it." Turning to her first officer, the lovely subcommander remarked, "I think it's time we paid Commander Alenko a visit."

"Yes, subcommander." Merek grinned as he quickly picked up on his commanding officer's intent.

"You're creating a wedge between him and the other two." Tovan whispered as the two senior officers walked out of security holding and back to the turbolift. "They'll regard him as a traitor, forcing him to turn to us for protection."

"You know me too well, Big Brother." V'lana laughed as she commanded the turbolift, "Sickbay."

Glancing down at his petite commanding officer and best friend, Tovan remarked, "You're not that strong a telepath, you know. I mean... you're stronger than most Romulans, but you're nowhere near as powerful as Neilana, much less a trained Vulcan."

"I know..." V'lana replied, "But he didn't know that. Still...getting into someone's mind...digging into their intimate moments...it really is an aphrodisiac for me."

As the turbolift door opened to let them out near sickbay, Tovan said only half joking, “You know, Little Sister, there are times you scare me to death.”

Omega

Mordin’s Clinic

“Compound not successful. Arrests course of disease but does not cure. Provides temporary respite only.” The salarian doctor murmured as he moved quickly from one computer console to another. “Adrenaline levels?” No. Amino acid sequences? Not likely. Hemoglobin!” Mordin jerked his head up as he finally arrived at a solution. “Cure needs elements of human DNA, but iron in the form of hemoglobin or hemocyanin not effective. Nickel? No. Nickel-based blood still subject to contagion. Cobalt? Not likely. Silicon? Possible. Most likely candidate—copper!”

“There are no species we know of that use copper as the base for their blood cells.” Miranda pointed out.

“Then must find way to synthesize.” Mordin declared, “Or discover new copper-based species.”

“I think we took care of the vorchas by the residents’ quarters.” Jacob announced as he and a team of clinic guards guided a group of refugees into the hospital. “Found these people holed up in an apartment. Food’s almost gone.”

“Take care of them, Daniel.” Mordin ordered one of his assistants. “Thank you, Jacob.”

“Anytime, Doc.” The former Cerberus operative smiled, “Feels good to be helping people again.”

Zaeed

As his transport docked at Omega, Zaeed Massani inspected his weapons yet again. His lips turning up in a slight smile, the mercenary and former leader of the Blue Suns recalled his recent conversation with a representative of the Illusive Man, a lovely chocolate-skinned woman who spoke with a slight posh accent.

“That’s a lot of credits sweetness.” Zaeed remarked, “Enough for me to retire on.”

“That was the idea, wasn’t it?” The woman responded, “One final job. Complete this favor for us, and we’ll help you tie up your last loose end and then you can retire.”

As he looked at the pictures of his targets, Zaeed sneered, “Consider Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor dead and Dr. Solus yours.”

Archangel

“This ought to put a crimp in Jaroth’s eezo shipments. Archangel smirked triumphantly as his team secured the contaminated canisters for treatment and disposal. “That’s the third one. Jaroth’s having a bad week.”

“Garrus?” Turning about, Garrus Vakarian nodded his head as one of his team approached.

“What is it, Sidonus?”

“I’ve come across a possible lead on a Blue Sun shipment, but the contact insists that he’ll only talk to you.”

“Do you trust this contact?” Garrus inquired.

“He’s the one who tipped us off to this cache.” Sidonus replied.

“Excellent.” Garrus grinned, “Arrange the meet and then afterwards, we’ll brief the rest of the team. For now, get some rest. You’ve put in a good week’s work—I’d say you’ve earned a little downtime.”

R.R.W. Gallena

“The spacefaring races use a different form of FTL travel than we do.” Satra lectured, “They use something they call element zero to create mass effect fields which effectively reduce the mass of an object to the point where FTL travel through normal space is possible. They can travel roughly a dozen light years a day with these mass effect drives.”

“That’s faster than we can cover with warp drive.” V’lana noted.

“True...but that implies constant acceleration and good quality engines. The ship would have to decelerate which would add to travel time and other factors such as the need for the ship to discharge static electricity buildup at regular intervals and refuel act as limiting factors. Also, to attain high speeds requires correspondingly large engines. Given the positives and negatives, I would say that our FTL systems are roughly comparable—each has advantages the other doesn’t, and each has disadvantages the other doesn’t. But...” The science officer added, “Most of their civilian ships aren’t even equipped with FTL drives—they use mass effect relays.”

“Mass effect relays?” Tovan repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes. These relays allow for instantaneous travel between two points by creating a mass free corridor between two relays. A primary relay permits instant travel over thousands of light years, but a ship can only travel between those two relays. Secondary relays allow for shorter range, but more flexible travel.”

“So...the great majority of trade, commerce, and exploration goes along the roads set up by these relays.” V’lana observed. “Did the dominant cultures here—the turians, asari, salarians, and humans—develop these mass relays?”

“No.” Satra shook her head. “The library records indicate that it was a civilization calling itself the Protheans that disappeared approximately fifty thousand years ago.”

“Disappeared?” Tovan interjected.

“Yes. The records in the ship’s library didn’t explain how or why.”

“Hmm...maybe our guest might have some insights.” V’lana commented as they reached the sickbay door. As the door slid open, V’lana and the other officers entered and, approaching the patient’s bed, noticed that a security force field had been erected.

“Is there a problem with the patient?” V’lana asked Aven, the warbird’s Romulan doctor.

“When he regained consciousness, he panicked.” The doctor reported, “Apparently he’s a telekinetic as he picked up Nurse Doniela and threw her back. Fortunately, she’s not hurt. We managed to sedate him, and I erected the confinement field.”

“He must be what they call a biotic.” Satra surmised, explaining to the others in the room. “A biotic is someone who was exposed to this element zero in utero and develop nodules throughout their bodies that can generate mass effect fields. These mass effect fields can be used to manipulate objects or a great variety of other abilities.”

“Sounds useful.” V’lana remarked, “But potentially dangerous.”

“Yes.” Satra agreed, “Different societies have different laws regarding biotics. Some direct them into the military, others license and regulate them, and the asari are all naturally biotic.”

“Interesting.” V’lana commented, “And our patient. Do you think it’s safe to awaken him?”

“It should be now.” Aven declared, “The confinement field should keep his abilities in check.”

“Very good. Wake him up.” The subcommander ordered as Dr. Aven administered a hypospray into the patient’s neck, then withdrew back behind the confinement field.

As Kaidan opened his eyes, he found himself lying on what seemed to be a hospital bed. He had imagined that he had woken up earlier to find a woman looking down at him with pointed ears. When the woman stuck something to his neck, the biotic reacted instinctively, tossing her back with a biotic throw. He then saw a flash of yellow light and then darkness. Waking up and raising his head, Alenko could make out four blurry figures.

“Ah...you’re awake.” The middle figure seemed to be the one speaking. As his vision cleared, Kaidan blinked. He was right. There were four individuals—two male and two females and all four had pointed ears. However, it was the one in the middle that caught his attention. Her hair...it was almost the exact same shade of auburn as Shepard’s and her eyes that same hue of stunning green. She was much shorter than Jane though—barely five feet nine inches Kaidan guessed. She also wore the same miniskirt and top as the woman he saw on the freighter. His eyes wandered down to her thigh-high maroon leather boots and...Kaidan had to admit, nicely curved thighs. She was cute in that almost, but not quite pudgy way, Kaidan thought as his appreciation for her form was interrupted by a voice that sounded more amused than offended.

“My eyes are up here.”

Startled, Kaidan quickly looked up to see the auburn-haired woman flash a mischievous smile at him. “I’m sorry...”

“V’lana.” The woman replied, the teasing grin still on her face. “Subcommander V’lana Avesti. You’re on board my ship, the Romulan Republic Warbird *Gallena*. We came in answer to the distress call of that freighter you were on. We destroyed the pirate ship, but, I’m sorry, we couldn’t save the freighter’s crew—they were all dead by the time we got there. You were the only survivor.”

“I see.” Kaidan replied, quickly adding, “Ummm...thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” V’lana nodded her head once in Kaidan’s direction.

Kaidan then noticed a shimmering around his bed. “Confinement field.” The subcommander explained, “It seems you used those interesting abilities of yours to toss my nurse clear across sickbay.”

"I'm sorry." Kaidan apologized, "Is she hurt?"

"Other than a few bruises, she's fine." V'lana replied in a gentle voice.

Sighing in relief, Kaidan again apologized, "I didn't mean to. I guess I must have woke up and panicked when I saw her."

"I think we can drop the field if you promise not to throw any more of my doctors or nurses into bulkheads. I need them to fix my bruises and not their own." V'lana replied with a smile.

"I promise." Kaidan smiled back.

"Doctor?" The subcommander asked, turning to the older male, "Is Commander Alenko fit for release?"

"Let me check, Subcommander." Dr. Aven replied. Approaching Kaidan, the doctor stated in a calm, reassuring voice, "I just have to run a quick diagnostic on you. It's non-invasive and you won't feel any discomfort."

"All right, Doc." Kaidan replied as the doctor ran some sort of device over his body.

"As far as I can tell, he's healthy." Dr. Aven reported, "Those nodules give off readings that are not standard human, so I had to recalibrate. I would ask that he come in for regular checkups until I can build a baseline for him."

"Commander Alenko?" V'lana addressed the human biotic, voicing her command as a request.

"Of course, Subcommander." Kaidan responded with a slight smile, "Your ship...your rules."

"I just love it when a man knows his place." V'lana riposted with a grin of her own. "Now, if you would accompany me to my office, I have a feeling we have much to talk about. Tovan? Keep us in position and cloaked for now. I'm curious to see whether these Blue Suns have friends. If so, we'll arrange an appropriate greeting."

"Yes, Subcommander." Tovan grinned as he made his exit.

"Satra? Would you accompany us? I think I'd like my science officer on hand."

"Of course, Subcommander."

"This way, please Staff Commander..." V'lana gestured with her hand towards the door.

"Thank you." Kaidan replied as he tried to take in the strange surroundings. As he walked down the corridor with the subcommander and science officer, he couldn't help but notice the traffic going to and fro. "No offense, but your race seems quite advanced. I'm surprised we haven't run into you yet."

"It's complicated." V'lana chuckled as they entered the turbolift. "Bridge." She commanded and then turned her attention back to her guest as the lift began to move. "I'll explain when we get to my ready room. I have a feeling we have a great deal to discuss."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Kaidan replied as the lift door opened on to the warbird's bridge. Mouth agape as he took in the viewscreen and the sight of the officers at their consoles, Kaidan shook his head in wonder until he spotted a human woman with close cropped blonde hair, almost shaved off, wearing a black and red uniform. "Human? Where did she come from?"

"Ensign Weller?" The subcommander called out, gesturing for the young human to come to her, "Staff Commander Kaidan Alenko, this is Ensign Julieta Weller, she's an exchange officer from Starfleet."

"Starfleet?" A thoroughly confused Kaidan exclaimed.

"It ties into where we come from and why you haven't heard about us." V'lana declared. Turning her attention to the young ensign, the subcommander further requested, "Ensign Weller, why don't you join us? I'm sure the Staff Commander would like to talk with you."

"Yes, Ma'am." The youthful Starfleet officer responded as she fell in behind the other officers.

"This way, Commander Alenko..." V'lana gestured, "My ready room is on the other side of that doorway."

Ilium

All for naught! Liara sobbed at her desk. *All the pain...the heartache and misery...Feron. It was all for nothing.* Again, she read her source's report. Shepard was killed—irretrievably killed. Her body gone...apparently destroyed when the Cerberus base possessing it was destroyed in the aftermath of the Illusive Man's cleaning up after the failure. The man apparently responsible for Shepard's murder, Wilson, seemingly dropped off the grid—probably dead. His employers—unknown. Liara mentally ticked off the possible candidates: *Another faction within Cerberus—doubtful. The Illusive Man seems to maintain very tight control over his organization. Alliance Intelligence? Unlikely, but not outside the realm of possibility for a black ops group to carry out such an operation. The Council? Highly unlikely. It had already written her off as dead. An unknown party? Very likely—will have to keep monitoring to see who or what shows up. The Shadow Broker? While he wanted Shepard's body intact to give to the Collectors, it's not outside the realm of possibility that he'd order her killed if he couldn't get to her. He's still my priority target.* Liara decided as her face took on a determined look. *Not only do I owe him for what happened with Feron, I'm going to need his resources if I'm ever going to find out what happened to Shepard. I owe her that much at least.*

As the doors slid open to reveal the subcommander's ready room, Kaidan again gasped in astonishment, "Your office! It's so...large!"

"Wait until you see a *D'Deridex* or a Federation *Galaxy*." V'lana chuckled. "Have a seat on a chair or the couch and we'll talk. Would you like something to drink? I'd offer you Romulan ale or Khellid nectar, but it's probably a little too soon after your release from medical for you to be indulging in spirits. Tarkalian tea, perhaps? I find it soothing after a hard day."

"Thank you." Kaidan replied with a smile, "I don't think my system could go with anything stronger right now anyway."

"Ensign?" The subcommander requested.

"Right away, Ma'am." Ensign Weller responded as she walked towards a small alcove in the wall and placed an order for three Tarkalian teas. Again, Kaidan gasped as he saw three cups filled with a steaming beverage materialize in the alcove from nothing.

"Replicator." V'lana chuckled. "It converts energy into matter and vice versa. Very convenient for long trips."

"Cuts down on having to carry provisions." Kaidan noted, "But you say it converts energy into matter? That's remarkable! No hunger..."

"There are limitations." V'lana replied. "Not everything can be replicated, and you need to have the power grid to support replicators—they are power hungry. Besides, to me, replicated food doesn't have quite the same taste as real food and drink. That's why I always ensure that I bring along enough Romulan ale and Khellid nectar along with a few other guilty pleasures."

Picking up two of the cups, the young ensign handed one to the subcommander and then approached Kaidan, "Sir?"

"Ummm...thanks." Kaidan replied as he cautiously took the cup in his hand and sniffed the pleasantly fragrant aroma of the tea.

"Go ahead, take a sip." V'lana prompted, her lips turning up in an amused grin, "I promise it's not poisonous. See..." She then took a sip from her cup as the ensign did the same from hers.

Cautiously sipping the tea, Kaidan was surprised at how it tasted—a touch sweet, but with the slightest amount of tanginess reminiscent of, but not quite, lemon. "This is good." The human biotic exclaimed as his eyes appraised a painting hanging over the couch.

"It's a painting of Virinat, my home." V'lana explained in a somber voice. "Before the Elachi and Tal Shiar came."

"Elachi? Tal Shiar?" Kaidan asked as he sat down on the couch.

"The Tal Shiar started off as a combination intelligence and secret police branch of the old Romulan Star Empire." V'lana explained, "But it gained more and more power—to the point where its ships and troops were as powerful as the military's."

"That can lead to disaster." Kaidan noted.

"It did." V'lana agreed, nodding her head. "Don't get me wrong—even before the Tal Shiar took power we Romulans were a passionate and warlike people—and more than a little xenophobic, I'm afraid. We conquered a large empire and fought a bloody war with your people, but even then, we loved colors and music and in spite of the violence and the wars and the martial and xenophobic airs we put on, we...we knew how to live and love. The Tal Shiar took much of that away. Our lives became gray...we were afraid to talk to each other...unsure as to whether our best friend or our brother or sister was a Tal Shiar agent."

"Wait...the Systems Alliance hasn't even met your people, much less fought you in a war!" Kaidan interjected.

"That's where things get interesting..." V'lana hesitated for a moment before continuing, "You see...we came through a subspace tear from another universe."

"What?" Kaidan sputtered, spitting out a mouthful of tea.

Gesturing for Weller to replace Kaidan's cup with a fresh one, V'lana tried to explain. "My warbird had just taken out some Hirogen ships in the Beta Thoridor system and some of their friends showed up with a battleship. I was getting ready to warp out when an anomaly appeared close to our location. Whenever this anomaly appears, it is usually accompanied by an alien ship that proceeds to attack and abduct any other ships or beings it encounters. Besides Beta Thoridor, we encountered anomalies at Khitomer, Helix, and..." Her voice trailed, "Virinat."

"Your home?" As V'lana nodded her head sadly, Kaidan said in a soft, low voice, "I'm sorry."

"They were there before the Tal Shiar." V'lana explained and then told the story about how she had encountered the spider-like creatures and a strange device in the Khellid caverns. "I don't know how long they'd been there—not long, I think. The Khellid had only recently been acting strange—normally, they're pretty docile, but a few days before the attack they had gotten much more aggressive. Anyway, when the Tal Shiar attacked, I, Tovan, and a few others did everything we could to get as many to the shuttles as possible and as we were fleeing, I saw...things...picking up colonists...people I loved...being snatched up and taken away and I couldn't stop it."

"I'm sure you did everything you could." Kaidan empathized, the Romulan subcommander's actions reminding him very much of what someone else he knew...and loved...would have done in similar circumstances.

"Thank you." V'lana replied with a gentle smile. "Anyway, getting back to Beta Thoridor, I decided that I was sick and tired of reacting instead of acting, so I ordered us into the anomaly. Hopefully, we'd be able to do reconnaissance on who or what these beings are. Find out who's kidnapping my people and maybe even figure out where they were based. Instead, we got spit out here and we picked up your

freighter's distress call..."

"For which I am grateful." Kaidan interjected and then asked, "Were you able to find out anything at all about who these beings might be?"

"We're not sure, but, before the Hirogen and that anomaly appeared, we picked up some interesting scans on our sensors centered on the fifth planet. I decided to investigate and sent Lieutenant Satra and a science team down to the surface." The subcommander then nodded her head once at the science officer.

"Upon landing, we found ruins—ancient ruins." Satra explained. "I dated the ruins as being at least fifty million years old. We also detected faint neutrino emissions and this..." She then activated the monitor. Kaidan paid close attention to the faded etching on what appeared to be a polished slab. She then showed an image of one of the walls of the ruin. Kaidan gasped as he saw strange alien creatures being apparently herded by other aliens into a ship. As he examined the ship, the human saw something vaguely familiar.

"Can you enhance that?" Kaidan asked, pointing at the ship. Nodding her head, Satra touched a few buttons on the console, enlarging and cleaning up the image. "No!" Kaidan shook his head as he saw the unmistakable cuttlefish-looking form. "Can't be. That's impossible!"

"What is it, Commander?" V'lana inquired, her stomach beginning to tighten as she at once recognized the mixture of worry and fear on the human's face, "Do you recognize what that thing is?"

"It's a Reaper." Kaidan replied in a soft whisper.

"What is a Reaper?" V'lana asked. Kaidan then told an increasingly rapt audience the entire saga of Commander Jane Shepard from Eden Prime to the destruction of the *Normandy*, tactfully leaving out what had happened between him and Jane just before Ilos. "*Sovereign* told Shepard that he was just one of many similar...entities...I guess you could call them that...and that they were coming to destroy us all just as they did the Protheans fifty thousand years earlier."

"Do you know why they're doing this?" V'lana inquired.

"No." Kaidan shook his head, "I think they see us as resources to be harvested—but I'm not sure." He then paused for a moment before saying, "It looks like they might be doing the same thing in your...universe."

"There are no records of similar 'harvests' of species in our universe." Satra explained, "Nor do any of the spacefaring races use mass effect technology."

"What do you use?" Kaidan inquired.

"We travel by warping space." V'lana replied, "Most of the races such as the Federation and the Klingon Empire use matter-antimatter engines while we rely on artificial singularities."

"Wait a minute!" Kaidan paused to take a deep breath before continuing, "You're saying that this ship is powered by a singularity and the other races use matter-antimatter propulsion?"

"Yes." V'lana replied with a twinkle in her eyes.

"And warp travel is by no means the only method of FTL travel in our universe." Satra interjected. "Some species rely on ion propulsion, still others use other means."

"*Sovereign* did say that the Reapers had created mass effect technology intending for it to guide the development of the different cultures along the lines that they wanted." Kaidan recalled. "But...if your universe doesn't have Reapers, then how do you explain that artifact or that artwork?"

"The artifact could have come from a ship from an earlier one of your extinction cycles." Satra speculated. "Perhaps it fell into an anomaly and broke up either on impact or more likely, prior to impact. And the artwork on the ruin—possibly from survivors or others who came through later."

"So...who are the Elachi?" Kaidan asked.

"We're not really sure." V'lana replied. "While we were investigating a matter involving the Tal Shiar, we boarded some Cardassian freighters. On one of the freighters, we recovered a log entry. Play it, Satra."

Kaidan watched in fascination as he saw humanoid aliens being literally fed into a black anomaly. Then, as he gazed at the feet and lower legs of the intruders, he exclaimed, "Those look almost salarian!"

"They're an amphibian race in your universe, right?" V'lana asked.

"Yeah." Kaidan nodded his head, "But if those are salarians, what are they doing on that ship? How did they get there?"

"Those are both very good questions." V'lana remarked.

"I remember when Shepard and I were on Virmire..." Kaidan recalled, "We ran into some salarians who had been indoctrinated."

"Indoctrinated?"

"*Sovereign*...the Reapers..." Kaidan explained, "They can get control of your mind...force you to do what they want you to do."

"Similar to the Platonians." Satra observed.

"I hate god-like aliens. They're nothing but fucking pains in the ass." V'lana grumbled, drawing a chuckle from Kaidan and a shy smile from Ensign Weller. "So...it appears there might be more than one connection here." V'lana noted, "But where do we begin to investigate? Any ideas?" She asked, directing her inquiry at Kaidan.

"Maybe." The biotic nodded his head, "The freighter I was on was enroute to a human colony, Freedom's Progress, that had gone dark a few days ago. I was sent to check the colony out to see what was going on."

"You think what might have happened at Virinat and Helix happened to your colony?" V'lana asked as a cold chill ran down her spine.

"I don't know." Kaidan answered, "Could be. It's worth checking out, isn't it?"

"It is." V'lana nodded her head. "Give the coordinates of the colony to Satra and she'll pass it on to our helmsman and we'll warp to the colony."

"Umm...subcommander?" Kaidan proposed, "That might take too long and there is a mass relay close by. Your ship should be able to use it."

"Satra?"

"Theoretically, we should be able to travel via their mass relays. We would need to feed into the relay's computer the ship mass and destination, but the relay should treat our ship like any other." The science officer replied.

"What about the singularity core?" V'lana pointed out, "Would the energy from the mass effect field have a negative impact on the singularity or vice versa?"

"I'll run the numbers as the humans say." Satra replied, "And coordinate with Veril, but, at this time, I don't foresee any problems. Our shielding should be more than able to handle any possible stresses.

"One other thing, Subcommander..." Kaidan tentatively inquired, "You mentioned you have humans on your crew and that they belong to something called Starfleet..."

"Yes." V'lana smiled, "Ensign Weller...why don't you fill the commander in."

"Yes, Ma'am." The young ensign replied, "My name is Ensign Julieta Weller and I was born on Earth."

"Where on Earth?" Kaidan inquired.

"Berlin." Weller responded. "I entered Starfleet Academy and just graduated. Applied for and was accepted into the Officer Exchange Program."

"Officer Exchange Program?" Kaidan interjected.

"It's where Starfleet officers and officers belonging to allied governments like the Romulan Republic exchange officers. I'm doing a tour of duty on the *Gallena* while a Romulan officer from this ship is serving on a Federation vessel."

"Federation?"

"Earth belongs to the United Federation of Planets." Ensign Weller explained.

"I'm sure that Commander Alenko can find out everything he needs from our library computer." V'lana smoothly interrupted. "Right now, though, we need to get the commander properly outfitted and get those coordinates to the mass relay so that we can set a course for Freedom's Progress." The subcommander pressed a button on her desk, "Tovan? Can you come in here for a moment?"

"Subcommander?" The first officer inquired as the doors slid open to admit him.

"See that Commander Alenko has clothing replicated for him and have the quartermaster issue him body armor and personal shield. I think body armor that can resist kinetic energy and rounds would be best as this universe tends to make use of projectile more than energy weapons. Kinetic armor will also help against biotic attacks. After you get him outfitted, take him to a holodeck and give him some range time with the plasma pistol and rifle and then find him some quarters."

"Yes, Subcommander." Tovan acknowledged.

Turning her attention to Kaidan, V'lana explained, "As you've probably already noticed, we're fairly lax on uniforms on this ship. Partly it's a matter of it being a command decision on my part—as long as the crew performs to the standards I expect, I don't care what they wear or don't wear. They can report to shift naked as far as I'm concerned, as long as the job gets done. Other starship commanders, both within the Republic and the Federation, are much stricter and others are like me—shipboard uniforms are captain's or commander's prerogative. Our rank and other personal information is stored biometrically and easily attainable, so uniforms are really more a matter of idiosyncrasy than anything else. I've seen officers and crews in civilian clothing...23rd century uniforms like what I'm wearing...24th century uniforms—you name it—it's probably being worn out there somewhere. If you feel more comfortable in a service uniform you're familiar with, please feel free to have one replicated."

"Thank you." Kaidan replied as he stood up, seeing that the meeting was coming to an end.

"If you'll accompany me, Commander?" Tovan gestured with his hand towards the door.

"Oh, Commander!" V'lana called out before Kaidan could exit through the door, "I'd appreciate it if you could join me for evening meal tonight in my quarters. Tovan will show you the way."

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Kaidan modestly replied, “I think I’d like that.”

“Satra?” V’lana commanded as the men left the room along with Ensign Weller, “Be sure about those calculations. We only get one shot at this.”

“Understood, Subcommander.” The science officer nodded her head as she left the ready room.

“Now...” V’lana murmured as she sipped her tea, “Things are really going to get interesting.”

One of Our Colonies is Missing

Chapter Summary

Kaidan and V'lana arrive at Freedom's Progress where Kaidan meets up with an old friend.

Chapter Notes

The apparent absence of Shepard and the introduction of the Romulans does mean that events are going to play out much differently than in canon as you'll soon see. This story is just getting started folks :)

Also, I'll be writing a set of stories that will be focusing on certain aspects of what will become a multi-universe spanning story. The first one will look at the captain and crew of the Terran--now Federation Starfleet Lafayette-class destroyer Belladonna and it's rather...colorful...commanding officer--Captain Zsuzsanna Rosza (any resemblance to a certain hedonistic captain of the USS Sutherland is strictly intentional) and her first officer--among other things--Commander Eliza Flores. As you'll see, their Terran Empire, while on the surface might look like a Mirror Universe, really isn't--it's a universe of its own--as Lieutenant Salome Jenkins describes it--an alternate universe with a lemon twist.

Omega

"Tell Tarik I've done as he's asked." Sidonus muttered to the batarian sitting next to him in the lower bar in Afterlife. "Archangel bought the story about Garm and the Blood Pack running guns in the Kenzo District. The rest of the team will be at the hideout while we investigate the warehouse."

"Good." The batarian replied. "Garm has agreed to throw away some vorchas and a krogan. They should provide Archangel enough of a fight to convince him that your tip was genuine. There's a cache of weapons there as well. That should seal it for him. Once you're done there and we've taken down his team, the money will be transferred to your account. If I were you, I'd make myself scarce afterwards until you hear of Archangel's death."

"Don't worry, I will." Sidonus nervously replied as he slipped off his stool and began to walk away from the bar.

"Good doing business with you." The batarian smirked as a human sitting at the bar collapsed to the floor, dead. Laughing, the batarian quipped to the bartender, "Looks like you got another one, Forvan! What's this one make? The second one this week?"

"Third!" The batarian bartender joked back with an evil grin as he handed a drink to his fellow batarian. "Here you go."

"Just put it on his tab." The batarian mercenary joked as he looked down at the dead human, "Not like he's gonna complain."

RRW Gallena

"Jolan tru, Commander. Hello." Kaidan stood mouth agog as his eyes fell on the Romulan subcommander wearing, this time, instead of her uniform, a floor-length, nearly translucent, white dress with jade green and gold trim and a slit down the side that exposed her calf and part of her thigh. "I see our quartermaster was able to replicate one of your uniforms for you." She noted, nodding her head at Kaidan's blue and gold Alliance class As.

"Yes. He...replicated...a whole wardrobe—dress, casual, work—everything!" Kaidan remarked, still somewhat taken aback by the subcommander's appearance. "Ummm..." He stammered, "That's a nice dress you're wearing."

"Thank you." V'lana grinned, "The dress is not replicated, although the jewels are, I'm afraid. I purchased it on Risa when I was on shore leave recently. Unfortunately, I don't get much of an opportunity to wear it so, whenever I get the chance, I like to bring it out. Come..." She urged holding out her hand for her guest, "Dinner should be ready soon."

Taking her hand, Kaidan smiled, "Lead the way, subcommander."

"V'lana." The Romulan woman gently corrected, "When we're off duty, you can call me V'lana."

"All right." Alenko nodded his head, "But only if you call me Kaidan."

"It's a deal, Kaidan. Come, our chef promised to outdo himself. But for now...why don't you have a seat and join me for a drink or two." She then poured a blue liquid from a flask into two narrow crystal goblets, "Romulan ale." She smiled, "Non-replicated."

"Thank you." Kaidan responded as he took a tentative sip of the blue liquid. As the alien drink touched his tongue, his taste buds exploded in rapture. "This is great!"

"Thought you'd like it." V'lana replied as she took a sip of her drink, "Romulan ale is one of those things that a replicator really can't match."

"If you don't mind me asking..." Kaidan tentatively began, "You seem kind of young..."

"You're wondering why a twenty-three year old woman was put in command of such a large warbird?"

"Ummm...frankly...yeah." Kaidan nodded his head, "No offense intended."

"None taken." V'lana smiled, "It's a fair question. Fifty years ago, I'd have been nothing more than a Sublieutenant just graduating our Military College. There's absolutely no way I would have been given any command—much less command of a *Valdore*. Did you read about what happened to Romulus and Remus?"

"Yeah." Kaidan nodded his head sadly. "A nearby star system went supernova and totally destroyed your home worlds."

"And killed billions of Romulans and Remans. The rest of us were scattered in colonies, on ships, and on outposts. Then Nero pulled his shit and the Klingons decided to play scavenger and pick on the Empire's corpse while the Tal Shiar and Sela tried to return to the 'good old days'. And then everything else and things got even uglier." The subcommander shook her head, "I could take hours talking about it and all we'd both get are splitting headaches." Pausing for a moment to regain her composure, V'lana continued, "Have you noticed that most of the Romulans in this crew are either young like me or older—much older?"

"Yeah..." Kaidan noted, "I have. I don't see too many who'd correspond to what humans would call middle aged."

"That's because many of the ones who are middle-aged remain loyal to the Empire and its obsolete and outdated ideas and notions either through fear or a misguided sense of allegiance." V'lana declaimed, her eyes taking on a fierce hue. "What they don't understand; what they can't accept, is that the Empire is dead, and it's not coming back and shouldn't come back. Anyway..." She said as she calmed herself, "It died long before Hobus blew up."

"What do you mean?"

"The Tal Shiar held us in such a stranglehold that the Empire was on its way to collapsing anyway from suffocation." V'lana answered. "Revolts and unrest were already tearing it apart even before Hobus went supernova. You can only keep people down for so long before they decide enough is enough. Those seeking reunification with Vulcan...Remans pissed off at being enslaved...the military pissed at the Tal Shiar...the casteless and lower caste sick of being mistreated...younger people wanting something more—pick any or all—the lid was coming off."

"I guess I can see where you're coming from." Kaidan nodded his head. "What about this Federation? I've noticed you've allied with them."

"They're better than the Klingons." V'lana adamantly declared. "The Klingons will want to subjugate us once they've gotten our cloaking and singularity technology—make no mistake about that. While the Federation does have this annoying habit of assimilating and absorbing cultures into itself, I think we can resist that and maintain our independence—I hope we can at least, although I'm beginning to have my doubts—there's a lot about the Federation that's appealing to me..."

"Like what?" Kaidan curiously inquired.

"Well..." V'lana smiled, "Nude sunbathing on Risa...sipping champagne in Paris...cutting loose in an Argelian nightclub. Hell of a lot better than being just another subject race of the Klingons like the Gorn, Orions, and Nausicaans. Besides, can you see me singing ridiculous Klingon war songs, eating live gakh, drinking bloodwine, and getting into head-butting contests with a bunch of ugly, smelly Klingons?"

"No..." Kaidan chuckled, "Not really."

V'lana chuckled merrily, "Anyway, to get back to your question, because we're so scattered now, the Republic has to make the best use it can of its limited resources—and that includes its people. When Virinat was attacked, Tovan and I got as many people as we could to the shuttles and to D'Vex's old warbird." She gestured with her hand holding the goblet towards the model of a flat ship with wings and two cylindrical projections, "The *Pharos*, my first command. Once we escaped, D'Tan, the leader of the Republic, confirmed me in command and I've been commanding warbirds since. We use what we have, Kaidan, because we don't have the luxury not to."

"Damn." Kaidan whispered in a low voice, "It sounds rough in your universe."

"I think it's rough wherever you go." V'lana remarked with a crooked grin, "You find good people and stick with them and do the best you can—that's all any of us can do." As she uttered those words, a chill ran down Kaidan's spine. "Are you ok, Kaidan?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Kaidan nodded his head, "Your words just then reminded me of something someone once told me.:

"Must have made an impression on you." She remarked with a grin as she held out her hand. "I think chef is ready for us now."

"Yeah." Kaidan replied with a sad smile, "She did."

Nodding her head softly, V'lana chose not to comment on her guest's last words as he escorted her to her seat, held out her seat for her to sit down, and then sat down at the table. Kaidan then gasped at the plate set before him, "This looks and smells terrific!" The Canadian grinned, "Is that what I think it is?"

"The chef calls it a 'Porterhouse steak, cooked medium rare.'. He says most humans love it." V'lana chuckled.

"You have a good chef." Kaidan replied with a grin. "What is that you're eating?"

"Roasted hlai'vanau. Normally, it's reserved for holiday meals..."

"Kind of like turkey at Christmas." Kaidan observed.

“Right.” V’lana smiled as she forked a mouthful of meat and put it in her mouth. “I guess chef felt today was a special occasion.”

Smiling at the gusto exhibited by the subcommander as she began to devour her meal, Kaidan quipped good-naturedly, “I guess it must be good.”

“Here” V’lana smiled as she speared a portion of meat and held it out for her dining partner, “Try some.”

“Only if you have some steak.” Kaidan countered as he held out a portion of his steak for her.

“All right.” V’lana grinned as the two exchanged portions. Biting into the beef, V’lana’s mouth watered, “This is good! It sort of reminds me of travit, but it’s got a sweetness and taste all its own.”

“You should try some of my grilled steak sometime.” Kaidan smiled, “Or maybe one day I’ll surprise you and ask the chef if I can fix you a real Canadian breakfast.”

“Which is?” V’lana queried with a wicked grin.

“Scrambled eggs, Canadian bacon, and more bacon—with beer to wash it down. It covers all the important food groups—meat, eggs, more meat, and grain.”

Laughing, V’lana gently teased, “I might just take you up on that one day. Looks like I’m going to have to schedule an extra-long workout session in the gym tomorrow.” She smirked as she sipped a human wine provided with the meal. “My major weakness.” V’lana confessed with a gentle laugh, “I’m what you humans call a hedonist. I love to eat and drink and do other things—a little too much sometimes. If I didn’t work out every day, I’d end up fatter than a Ferengi merchant!” As she savored yet another bite from the steak that Kaidan had given her, the Romulan woman remarked, “You know, our Vulcan kin don’t know what they’re missing by being strict vegetarians.”

“I was reading in your library computer where your people split from these Vulcans.” Kaidan commented as he swallowed a bite of hlai’vanau. “I can’t quite understand them.” He admitted, “How do they go about their lives without feeling any emotions?”

“It’s not that they don’t have or feel emotions.” V’lana corrected, “It’s that they suppress those emotions...although they like to say that they master their emotions...but I think suppress is a better word choice. When a Vulcan loses his or her temper—and they have—they’re worse than the angriest Romulan because they’ve kept things bottled up for so long that when they finally do explode, they tend to go supernova.”

“I think I can see that.” Kaidan nodded his head, “What about crime? Do Vulcans have more or less crime than the other species?”

“They like to say they have less because they’re in control of their emotions.” V’lana replied, “But don’t believe it. Vulcans can be as sociopathic or psychopathic as any other species and when a sociopathic or psychopathic Vulcan decides that it’s logical to commit murder, they can be very dangerous.” V’lana then narrated her story about how she had sniffed out an attempt by a Vulcan to derail peace negotiations between the Romulans and the Vulcans taking place on Vulcan. “Vulcans like to present an aura of smug superiority.” V’lana concluded, “But that’s all it is—a mirage. Deep down, they’re like everyone else.”

“So I take it you’re not one of those Romulans who support reunification?” Kaidan asked with a smile.

“Been reading about that—haven’t you?” V’lana quipped back. Her smile vanishing, she responded with a shake of her head, “No. It’s not that I dislike Vulcans—it’s just that it’s been too long. We’ve been separated for thousands of years. We’ve developed our own culture with our own values and our own way of looking at the universe. The Vulcans seem to only want reunification on their terms. They want us to embrace the teachings of Surak. To surrender to logic and ‘master’ our emotions like them and I don’t want to do that. I like being able to laugh at a dirty joke or cry when I read a moving passage in a book or, yeah, feel angry when someone pisses me off...”

“Pisses you off?” Kaidan chuckled, “I’ve noticed you’ve used that phrase a time or two.”

“Yeah...It’s a saying I picked up from you humans., along with a few other choice words. A human I met once said that I had a real...what was the word he used, ‘potty mouth?’ I told him to fuck off.”

“You didn’t!” Kaidan exclaimed with a broad grin.

V’lana laughed and then her eyes and expression took on a steely look. “One thing you’ll find out about me—I’ll let you know where you stand pretty quickly. I don’t take shit and I look after my people. Anyone fucks with them, I drop a plasma torpedo down their warp core.”

Her words again reminding Kaidan of someone he once knew and treasured, a sad, yet tender smile appeared on his face, “I’ll keep that in mind, V’lana.”

“You better.” V’lana smiled back. Her laughter dying down, the subcommander confessed, “I don’t know how the Vulcans do it—containing their emotions and all. I like being able to feel and yeah, sometimes that can be good, and it can hurt at the same time like... falling in love. But I think it’s worth it.”

“Yeah.” Kaidan replied in a soft, low voice, “I get that.”

“She was special to you, wasn’t she?” V’lana gently stated, a sad smile coming to her lips.

“Huh?” A surprised Kaidan responded. “How did you...”

V’lana replied, the sad smile remaining on her face. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, Kaidan. I probably shouldn’t have said anything. Tovan always tells me that I have a big mouth.”

“Thanks. And it’s ok.” Kaidan’s lips turned up into a sad smile of his own. “It’s just that...I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it yet. Give me

some time. After all—we've just met."

"Fair enough." Her smile then widened as the chef brought in the final course. "All right! Dessert! I think you'll love this, Kaidan. Tree candy! It's very good...sweet. And Khellid nectar to wash it down. Well...come on..." She urged with a big grin as she shoveled some candy into her mouth, "What are you waiting for?"

"I had fun." Kaidan remarked as he and the subcommander stopped at the entrance to his quarters. "I can't remember when I've laughed so much or so hard."

"I think we've both been on some pretty rough roads." V'lana smiled back as she looked up into her human guest's eyes. "It's good to be able to relax with good company."

"That it is." Kaidan replied, then teased, "So...I guess this means our first date is over?"

"First date?" V'lana smiled as she raised her eyebrow in an almost Vulcan manner, "Hmmm...I guess you could call it that. But...if I remember how you humans do this...you get to plan and pay for the next one."

"Deal!" Kaidan smiled as the couple held hands. "Well...I guess I better go now. Tomorrow's a big day."

"Yes it is...we arrive at the mass relay and then Freedom's Progress."

"Good night, V'lana."

"Good night, Kaidan."

As he entered his darkened quarters, Kaidan thought, for the briefest of moments, that he saw Jane sitting at the edge of the bed flashing a wicked grin at him and nodding her head approvingly. And then when he looked back, she was gone. "I hope that means you're ok with V'lana." Kaidan said in a soft voice, "I think you'd like her."

Ilium

"What do you mean Kaidan Alenko has vanished, Nyxeris?" An astonished Liara said to her secretary.

"The freighter he was on, the MSV *Columbia* has ceased transmissions near the Freedom's Progress mass relay." Liara's asari secretary replied.

"I see." Liara answered back, "Thank you, Nyxeris. I'll take it from here. You can go ahead and take your midday meal break early."

"Thank you, Dr. T'Soni." The secretary responded as she left her employer's office and made her way down the stairs until she found an isolated corner of the transport hub. Activating her omnitool, she typed a brief message to her employer, the Shadow Broker, "Package reported disappeared. T'Soni unaware of Alenko's whereabouts. Awaiting further orders."

As soon as she was sure her secretary was out of the office, Liara pressed a button on her desk and spoke, "Tali? This is Liara. Kaidan has gone missing. It is important I contact him. If you hear anything on his whereabouts, let me know."

R.R.W. Gallena

"Approaching mass relay." The Romulan at the helm announced as the turbolift doors opened to admit Subcommander Avesti. Sitting down in her chair, she spoke into the comm, "Commander Alenko to the bridge."

"I'm on my way." A voice responded. Moments later, the turbolift door opened again to reveal a dark-haired human male wearing an Alliance duty uniform.

"Have a seat." V'lana directed, gesturing towards an empty chair with a console behind and to the right of her command chair. "As you can see..." She said, nodding her head towards the viewscreen, "We're about to reach the mass relay." Turning to a pink-skinned alien wearing a Starfleet uniform standing behind a console, the subcommander inquired, "Picking up anything on your scanners, Clo?"

"Negative, Captain...Excuse me, Subcommander." The alien responded.

"Cloak us and take us to the relay. Satra...feed in the necessary information that the relay needs so that we can activate it."

"Yes, Subcommander."

The helmsman then called out, "Relay in five...four...three...two..." The *Valdore*-class warbird then shot out of the mass relay, appearing moments later in another system.

"The coordinates place us in the Freedom's Progress system, Subcommander." Satra announced.

"All systems green." Tovan reported, "We're still cloaked."

"Third planet Class M." Satra reported, "Evidence of an extensive settlement."

“There are over nine hundred thousand people in the colony.” Kaidan noted.

“Maintain cloak.” V’lana ordered, “Bring us into standard orbit and scan for life signs and any anomalies.”

“Entering standard orbit.” Tovan announced.

“Scanning.” Satra declared, “No signs of human life. Unidentified ship on the ground giving off energy emissions with life signs near it, but I cannot make out what they are.”

“Maybe they’re part of who or whatever attacked the colony.” Kaidan guessed.

“Possibly.” V’lana nodded her head, “Or they could be scavengers or an investigation team. Can you give me something more precise?” The subcommander inquired.

“Negative, Subcommander.” Satra replied. “There’s too much interference from the ground.”

“Then it looks like we’re going to need go and find out for ourselves.” V’lana’s lips turned up in an anticipatory smirk. “Alenko...Satra... you’re with me. Get armored up, draw weapons, and meet in transporter room one in thirty minutes. Tovan...the ship is yours.”

“Subcommander?” The loyal first officer interrupted as his commanding officer got up out of her chair.

“I know, Big Brother...” V’lana remarked with a mischievous grin, “You want me to take a security officer with me. Very well, assign someone...preferably a human in case we run across colonists we weren’t able to detect.”

“Thank you, Little Sister.” Tovan replied, his lips curled up in a knowing smirk. “Have fun down there.”

“I’m not so sure about this armor...” Kaidan grumbled as he looked down at the skin-tight duralinium armor he was currently wearing. “Doesn’t look like it offers much protection. And...” he tugged at it, “It’s kind of tight...if you know what I mean.”

“Looks good from where I’m standing.” V’lana smacked her lips as her eyes lingered over the human biotic’s muscular form. “Why? You don’t like what you’re seeing?” She asked as she pirouetted, showing off her skin-tight armor.

“It looks perfect on you.” Kaidan grinned, “But I feel kind of...you know...” His face reddened as he glanced down.

“You’re supposed to wear your regular clothes over the armor, silly!” V’lana joked as she slipped on her top and miniskirt and then put on her boots. Kaidan then gasped as she touched a button on her wrist, causing her armor to turn transparent. “Another advantage.” She grinned. Her smile vanishing, she further explained, “The armor will protect you against most high velocity projectiles and kinetic energy such as biotics and from physical attacks such as from a bat’leth or a club. It’s like any other armor though—it does have limits. It can eventually be overcome. So, don’t stand in front of a dozen troopers shooting at you. And it’s less effective against energy weapons—but the races here tend not to use energy weapons as extensively as we do, so that’s not as serious an issue as it would be back home. We use this armor against Klingons, Nausicaans, and Gorn mostly because they like to get up close and Gorn like to throw big rocks and stuff at you.”

“Ok...that makes me feel better.” Kaidan smiled as he began to dress in his uniform.

“Good.” V’lana leered, “Because I’m going to sit back and enjoy the show.”

“You’re telling me this thing will scramble my molecules and then reassemble them on the surface?” A stupefied Kaidan exclaimed.

“Yep.” An amused V’lana nodded her head.

“And you do this all the time?” Kaidan remarked as he slowly and hesitatingly made his way to the transporter pad.

Nudging him towards the center of the pad, the subcommander nodded her head again, “All the time.”

“And it always works?”

“Energize.” The subcommander ordered before turning to Kaidan, leaving him with these parting words as their patterns dissolved, “About 99% of the time.”

“99% of the time!” The human biotic nearly screamed as their patterns reformed on the surface of Freedom’s Progress.

Running his hands over his chest and legs, Kaidan sighed in relief, “Everything’s there.”

“I’ll say it is.” V’lana responded with a lascivious grin.

Shaking his head, Kaidan quipped with a grin, “Subcommander, pardon me for saying so, but you’re impossible!”

“Yes.” V’lana responded with a nod of her head, “I am.” Then, in a split-second, the subcommander’s mood was all business, “What are your scans picking up, Satra?”

Activating her tricorder and scanning, the Romulan science officer crisply reported, “Detecting no human life signs. Unknown alien life signs to the north.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go.” V’lana decided, “On the way, we’ll check out some of the houses and buildings—see if we can find some clues on what exactly happened here.” Activating her communicator, V’lana spoke, “Tovan? What are you picking up?”

“Still unable to scan that area with the life signs.” The first officer reported, “Also, the interference from that area might interfere with our ability to beam you up.”

“Understood, Big Brother.” V’lana responded, “Keep cloaked and maintain scans.” Turning to her landing party, the subcommander ordered, “All right. Let’s go.”

“This felt like when I went back to Virinat.” V’lana whispered as the landing party walked down a deserted street. “Except worse.”

“What do you mean?” Kaidan asked as they passed a school that looked like it was open and ready for students.

“On Virinat, you could see the destruction left by the Tal Shiar plasma beams and disruptors. Here...it’s like someone had just mass transported them.” Turning to Satra, the subcommander asked, “You sure you’re not picking up traces of transporter use.”

“Negative, Subcommander.” The science officer answered back. “There are some interesting residual energy traces though.”

“Record for later analysis.” V’lana ordered.

“There’s a colonial administration building.” Kaidan called out, pointing to a building that had the symbol painted on the front. “There might be something there.”

“Good idea.” V’lana nodded her head as the landing party made its way into the building.

“Let me see if I can download some of the computer records into my omnitool.” Kaidan said as Satra did the same thing with her tricorder.

“Hmmm...that’s interesting.” Kaidan called out. “This entry’s incomplete.” He said as he showed it to the rest of the landing party. “Starts off typical...plan for the day stuff...and then...the person making the entry states that he hears a strange insect-like noise and then it cuts off.”

“Is there insect life on this planet?” V’lana asked.

“Yes.” Satra confirmed, “It’s possible that the person making the entry was talking about local insect life.”

“Possible...but not likely.” Kaidan demurred. “If the insect life is local, you tend to identify it. It wouldn’t be ‘strange insect-like noise’, he’d say something like ‘mosquitoes are buzzing’ or ‘there’s a bee’.”

“Good point.” V’lana nodded her head. “Be sure we have a copy of that and anything else of potential value.”

“Subcommander.” The human security guard called out, “I’m detecting movement outside. Bipedal...they look like robots.”

“Security mechs.” Kaidan exclaimed. “Take them out!”

“Fire!” V’lana ordered as projectiles whizzed overhead. Beams of plasma energy then converged on both mechs, destroying them.

Stepping out to investigate, Kaidan knelt down next to one of the mechs as the security officer ran a tricorder over them. “LOKIs” The Alliance officer said, “They’re used for security, but they shouldn’t be active now unless...”

“Unless someone around here has activated them.” V’lana finished.

“Think it might be those alien life signs ahead?” Kaidan asked.

“I’d bet on it.” V’lana responded as she ordered the landing party forward. After walking several meters, Satra called out. “More mechs... these ones airborne.”

“Rocket and assault drones!” Kaidan shouted. “Get to cover!” Moving quickly, the biotic dived behind a crate as he punched a button on his omnitool, overloading one of the rocket drones, causing it to explode. Plasma beams shot out from the human security guard and Satra’s weapons as V’lana fired her rifle, unleashing a hailstorm of reddish-purple bolts of energy that completely shredded an assault drone as Kaidan finished the last drone with a cryoburst and a plasma beam.

“Whoever is doing this is pissing me off and when I catch up to them, they’re going to learn why that’s not a good idea.” V’lana growled as she ordered the landing party to move forward. “Let’s get moving!”

After taking out another set of mechs and drones, this time encountering four-legged mechs, V’lana asked as she kicked at the remains of one of the mechs with her toe. “What are these called?”

“Fenris” Kaidan replied. “They can take out a shield quicker than anything and they’ve got ugly jaws.”

“Reminds me of a Rottweiler.” The human security officer said. “My neighbor had one when I was a kid. Wonderful dogs—unless you’re an intruder.”

“Yeah.” A friend of mine had one as well.” Kaidan replied with a chuckle. “Loved to chase the mailman.”

“We’re close to the signals now.” Satra announced, “In that building.”

“All right.” V’lana ordered, “Set weapons to stun.” She said as she switched to a Starfleet issue phaser pistol. “Let’s give them a chance to talk but be ready if they turn out hostile.”

“Right.” Kaidan nodded his head as the landing party readied weapons.

“On three.” V’lana whispered, “One...two...three!” The Romulan subcommander then kicked down the door leading the others in as they barged into the room with weapons drawn.

One of the aliens immediately drew his weapon, but before he could fire, a bolt from V’lana’s phaser struck, causing him to slump to the ground. “Weapons down.” The Romulan ordered as the aliens, wearing environmental suits that completely covered them and opaque helmets that covered the face of the being in the suit, slowly and grudgingly complied.

“What?” One of the aliens, wearing a purple sash and purple hood over her head, cried out as she rushed to the side of her fallen comrade. “What did you do to him?”

“He’s just stunned.” V’lana replied, “He’ll recover soon.”

“You don’t understand.” The alien sobbed as she carried out a careful diagnostic of her fallen comrade, “His suit! If there’s a rupture or a tear...he could get infected.” After several seconds, the alien relaxed, “He’s all right. No tears or ruptures.” Standing up, she walked confidently to V’lana. “Who are you and why did you attack us?”

“We’ve been battling your drones and mechs since we’ve arrived.” V’lana exclaimed as her Romulan blood began to assert itself once again. “What did you expect?”

“They’re not our mechs!” The alien cried out, “We didn’t reprogram them!”

“Then who did?” The human security officer inquired, seeking to ease tensions between her volatile superior and the alien.

“Who are you?” The alien asked, “That isn’t an Alliance uniform.”

“They’re not Alliance, Tali, but you know I am.” Kaidan then stepped forward so that his old *Normandy* squad mate could see him.

“Kaidan!” Tali cried out, her happiness evident in her voice. “What are you doing here and who are these people?”

“They’re friends, Tali.” Kaidan said, inclining his head at V’lana in unspoken communication. Taking the hint, the subcommander gestured for Satra and the human security officer to lower their weapons as she lowered hers. “This is Subcommander V’lana Avesti of the Romulan Republic. She commands a ship in orbit. The others are part of her crew. Subcommander, this is Tali’Zorah nar Rayya...”

“Just call me Tali.” The purple-clad alien said through her vocalizer.

“Tali is a Quarian.” Kaidan explained.

“The migratory species.” Satra deduced.

“Correct.” Tali responded and then, turning to the subcommander, took notice of both the pointed ears and faint brow ridges, “I’ve never seen your species before.”

“As Commander Alenko said, we are called Romulans.” V’lana explained, “We came to assist the commander in his investigation.” She hesitated for a moment, unsure as to whether to continue, until she saw Kaidan’s almost imperceptible nod, “Our people are also being taken.”

“Do you know what happened here, Tali?” Kaidan gently inquired.

“No.” The quarian shook her head. “We were shocked when we arrived. This was a large colony. And to have everyone just vanish...”

“Why did you come here?” V’lana inquired.

“We were looking for a quarian named Veetor.” Tali explained, “He was on his pilgrimage.”

“Pilgrimage?” V’lana interrupted.

“It’s a rite of passage for the quarians.” Kaidan explained, “When a quarian is ready, they go out on their own.”

“Correct.” Tali said as she picked up the narrative, “The pilgrim seeks something of value to give to the captain of the ship he or she wishes to join as a ceremonial gift. It marks the passage from adolescence to adulthood.”

“Why did Veetor come here?” Kaidan inquired more out of curiosity than suspicion.

“Veetor liked to help others.” Tali explained, “So he came here, thinking that he could do the most good in a colony such as this that was finding its feet.”

“He’d fit in well with the Federation.” The Starfleet security officer observed.

“The problem is...” Tali explained, “Veetor has always been...sensitive—if you understand what I mean.”

“In other words...” The usually blunt V’lana stated, “He’s mentally fragile.”

“Correct.” Tali reluctantly agreed before continuing, “I’m afraid that whatever happened here...along with possible infection if his suit was damaged...might have made him delusional. He’s reprogrammed the mechs—killed several of my own people. Kaidan...Subcommander... please...don’t hurt him.” Tali pleaded, “He’s not responsible for his own actions. He’s scared and alone. Please...help him.”

“Where is he?” Kaidan gently asked.

“He’s in the control center across the courtyard, but there’s a large mech blocking the way. It has already hurt or killed a half dozen of my own people.” Tali cautioned.

“What sort of mech is it?” Kaidan asked.

“An Ymir.” Tali replied.

“Ymir?” V’lana raised an eyebrow.

“Heavy mech.” Kaidan explained, “Fires missiles and projectiles. It has two mass accelerator cannons in its right arm and a rocket launcher in the left. It’s also shielded and armored.”

“We can’t target it from orbit because that same interference that’s blocking the *Gallena*’s scanners and transporters will interfere with its targeting sensors.” Satra noted.

“That means we’re going to have to do it ourselves.” V’lana sighed. “Ok...what are the strengths and weaknesses of this Ymir and what’s the best way to take it down?”

“Concentrated fire to its head will destroy its processing core and cause an explosion—one that you do not want to be near.” Kaidan warned. “You can also disable it by shooting off its arms...but it’s usually better to just try to kill it with headshots.”

“Ok...” V’lana nodded her head, “We have our battle plan. We’ll take a few minutes to catch our breath. Satra...Crewman...help with the wounded. Kaidan? I’m sure you and your friend would like to catch up with each other. I’ll be over here...” She said, pointing to a chair. “Ten minutes...we move.”

Walking her old friend to a quiet, isolated corner of the room, Tali asked, “So...how did you meet these people?”

“Blue Suns attacked the ship I was on and she saved me.” Kaidan replied, “She’s good people, Tali...A bit quick tempered, a little earthy, and violent sometimes...” He smiled.

“Kind of like someone we both once knew and respected...and...” Tali whispered, “...in your case, loved.”

“I guess you could say that.” Kaidan replied as he glanced at the subcommander who returned his glance with one of her own and a slight smile. “I’ve read a lot about her people recently. They’ve been through so much...their home worlds destroyed in a supernova...their empire crumbled...scattered throughout the galaxy...fighting a civil war while at the same time trying to keep other races from taking what little they have left...trying to build a new life. They’re not perfect, Tali. They can be ruthless, cruel, treacherous, vicious, and without pity. Before their home worlds were destroyed, their xenophobia would have put the most zealous Terra Firma party member to shame and some of them—especially those on the other side of their civil war—still are as racist and xenophobic as ever.”

“They sound dangerous.” Tali observed.

“They can be.” Kaidan admitted, “But then, so can humans or turians or quarians for that matter. We all have our dark side. V’lana’s people can also be kind and loving and passionate and tender...” He then nodded his head in the direction of Satra who was comforting a wounded quarian.

“I see...” Tali replied, “And the human with them...she’s definitely not Alliance.”

“No...she isn’t.” Kaidan admitted, adding with a sheepish grin, “It’s difficult to explain in the couple of minutes we have left, but I promise, later, I’ll tell you everything...deal?”

“Deal.” The quarian agreed as she stood up. “And I’m going to hold you to that promise.”

“Satra?” The subcommander queried.

“The injured have been stabilized and any environmental suit tears or ruptures repaired. I’ve also done what I can to boost their immune systems taking into account we’re dealing with a dextro-amino acid based species.” The Romulan science officer replied.

“Thank you.” Tali said as she checked on her crewmen. “I appreciate what you’ve done.”

“Glad to help.” V’lana replied as she turned to the human biotic standing next to her, “Ready to go, Kaidan?”

“Whenever you are, subcommander.” Alenko responded.

“All right.” V’lana smiled, readying her assault disruptor as she anticipated the coming battle, “Let’s do this.”

Entering the courtyard, V’lana spotted the mech standing before the door. “Kaidan? You and the crewman go right. Satra...Flank left.” Readying her weapon, V’lana commanded, “I’ll take the center. Fire on my mark.”

As the teams moved to take position, the mech struck, launching a missile at the security officer who was hit dead on, the missile overcoming her shielding and armor as it sent her flying several feet until her mangled form finally landed. “Now!” V’lana ordered as purple-red bolts streamed from her weapon while Satra fired with her plasma rifle and Kaidan, activating his omnitool, overloaded the behemoth’s shields.

“Don’t forget to target the head!” Kaidan shouted as he followed up his overload with a biotic warp.

“Right!” V’lana replied as she adjusted her fire, tossing a photon grenade for extra measure. “Fire in the hole!”

"Damn!" Kaidan swore as rounds from the mech's autocannon grazed his shield. Firing his plasma rifle, the sentinel hit the mech squarely in the head as Satra's and V'lana's beams converged there as well. All three maintained their fire as the metal brute slowly advanced until, finally, it stopped moving and began emitting a high-pitched howl.

"Run!" Kaidan shouted, "It's about to blow!" All three ran as fast as they could as the mech built up to a critical mass, finally exploding, the shockwave knocking everyone down.

"Kaidan!" V'lana called out, "Satra? You all right?"

"I'm fine, subcommander." Kaidan responded as he struggled to his feet.

"I'm unhurt as well." The science officer echoed. Moving quickly to check on their fallen comrade, Satra shook her head.

"Damn." V'lana cursed as she stared at the door to the control room. "This had better be worth it."

Entering the control room, the landing party at once spotted a lone quarian muttering to himself as his fingers almost literally danced over the console, "Monsters coming back. Mechs will protect. Safe from swarms. Have to hide. No monsters. No swarms. No no no."

"Are you Veetor?" V'lana demanded.

"No Veetor. Not here. Swarms can't find. Monsters coming. Have to hide."

"Veetor!" V'lana called out, "You're safe."

The frightened quarian seemed not to hear the subcommander as he continued to manipulate the console and mumble incoherently.

"He's too frightened to hear." Satra diagnosed as she ran her tricorder. "Extreme fatigue...alpha waves are very high..."

"Maybe this will get his attention." V'lana said as she drew her phaser and pointed it at one of the monitors only to have a gentle, yet firm hand press down on it. Turning her head, she saw that the hand belonged to Kaidan.

"I know a better way." He said in a soft voice as he activated his omnitool, turning off all the monitors and quickly attracting Veetor's attention.

"You're human." Veetor said, pointing to Alenko, "But they're not. Where did you hide? Where did they come from?"

"I'm Subcommander V'lana Avesti of the Romulan Republic." V'lana announced as she stepped forward.

"And I'm Kaidan Alenko, of the Systems Alliance. We came to find out what happened here."

"The monsters. The swarms. They took everyone." Veetor lamented. "I saw everything." He said as he turned the monitors back on.

"What is that?" V'lana asked, pointing to an alien being guiding what appeared to be a grav sled.

"I think it's a Collector." Kaidan gasped in disbelief.

"Who or what is a Collector?" V'lana asked.

"We don't know much about them." Kaidan explained, "They tend to work through middlemen like slavers or mercenaries. If the Collectors are involved with the Reapers, that would explain the disappearance of the colony. Their technology might be advanced enough to take an entire colony."

"Like the Borg." V'lana mused, "Except where the Borg are interested in technology, these Collectors are seeking organic life."

"The seeker swarms." Veetor explained as a multitude of flying insect-like objects flew across the monitor. "No one can hide. The seekers find you. Freeze you. Then the monsters take you away."

"How did you avoid capture?" V'lana asked.

"Swarms didn't find me." Veetor replied. "Monsters didn't know I was here."

"His environmental suit might have kept him from being detected." Satra surmised, "Or their instruments were calibrated to detect only humans."

"What about Virinat?" Kaidan asked, "Did whoever it was that took your people take any other species?"

"There were only Romulans on Virinat." V'lana said, shaking her head, "At least to the best of my knowledge we were the only ones there." Pausing for a moment, the subcommander then asked, "Can you tell me anything more about the Collectors, Kaidan?"

"I'm afraid not, subcommander." The human biotic replied, "Not much is known about them. Most people haven't even heard of them and to those who have, they're either legends or bogeymen to scare kids into behaving."

"So why are they kidnapping human and possibly Romulan, Reman, and Cardassian colonists and ships' crews." V'lana asked rhetorically. Turning her attention back to Veetor, she asked, "What happened afterwards?"

"The monsters loaded the people on to ships and then they left. The ships flew away, but they'll be back for me. No one escapes."

"I think that's all he knows, Subcommander." Kaidan said in a soft voice.

"We should take him back with us to the *Gallena*." Satra suggested, "Our sickbay can help him and once he feels better, perhaps he'll be able to tell us more."

"I studied them. The monsters. The swarms. I recorded them with my omnitool. Lots of readings. Electro-magnetic. Dark energy."

"Now that is fascinating." Satra remarked. "His readings might correlate with our scans of the different anomalies."

"We need to get outside this interference, so we can transport back to the ship with Veetor." V'lana declared as Tali entered the room.

"Wait." The quarian pleaded, "Veetor needs treatment and to be with his own people, not an interrogation."

"We'll give him treatment." V'lana replied in a soft voice, "And we're not going to interrogate him. We'll return him and you to your people if you'd like."

"Please." Tali begged, "Let me take him. You can take Veetor's omnitool—it has all the information he's recorded on it. I doubt he can add anything more. We need to get him to the Flotilla."

"I can understand caution." V'lana conceded with a sigh, "Very well. We agree to your terms."

"Thank you." Tali replied in a placating voice, "It's just that my people right now are very nervous about allowing those we do not know to get too close to our Flotilla."

"Because of the Cerberus attack?" Kaidan deduced as Tali nodded her head. Kaidan further explained to the two Romulans, "Cerberus is a pro-human intelligence and black ops group. I guess you could say it's our version of the Tal Shiar. They attacked the flotilla in order to snatch a female human biotic. Caused a lot of destruction and quarian casualties."

"Right." Tali confirmed, "So...you can understand why I and my people are so much on our guard?"

V'lana nodded her head, "I'd do the same if I were you. Very well, we'll take the omnitool, but I hope that eventually we can reach the point where we can work together. More than you can imagine might depend on it."

"Thank you." Tali said as everyone began to file out of the control room. Pausing for a moment, she asked, "Could I talk with Kaidan—alone?"

"Sure." V'lana replied, nodding her head once. "We'll be outside when you're ready."

"So...Kaidan..." Tali asked, "Do you trust her?"

"Yes...I do." Kaidan nodded his head. "Her people do have a history of backstabbing and double-crossing—something she's freely owned up to, but I believe her about being attacked and I think she's telling the truth when she says that many of her people are trying to find a different way. There's nothing like losing your home world to knock the arrogance out of you."

"I know." Tali responded somberly.

"I'm sorry, Tali." Kaidan quickly apologized, "I've got a big mouth."

"It's all right, Kaidan." Tali replied, "You're right. Something like that happening to you will change you as a people."

"From what I've seen of her, she's not a bad person. Strong willed...sure of herself...definitely quick tempered." Kaidan chuckled, "She can easily out cuss an Alliance drill instructor if she wants to."

"Reminds me a little of Shepard." Tali remarked with a sad fondness.

"Yeah." Kaidan acknowledged, his lips turning up in a sad smile, "She is a little like Jane."

"I miss her." Tali lamented as Kaidan hugged her close.

"Yeah." He said gently as tears came to his eyes, "I do too."

"But there comes a time, Kaidan..." Tali pointed out, the sadness still in her voice, "When we must let go otherwise our ghosts keep us from living."

"I know, Tali." Kaidan nodded his head, "You're right. It's just not easy."

"No it isn't." The young quarian remarked, "But..." She said as she spied the subcommander waiting outside, "I think maybe you've got someone willing to help you out with that—if you give her a chance."

"Maybe." Kaidan nodded his head slowly, "It's not like we're in a rush though. We have time. Like I told her, we just met."

"Well...we better be going." Tali said, "I have an important mission for my people I've got to get back to."

"You take care of yourself, Tali—and..." Kaidan added, "Don't lose touch. Friends need to stick together—now more than ever."

"I will." Tali replied, her vocalizer reflecting both her fondness for Kaidan as well as regret at their parting. "You take care of yourself and remember what we just talked about. I know you said you have plenty of time. But, as we both know, time has a way of slipping from us

faster than we would like.”

Returning to where the two Romulan women were standing and talking, Kaidan asked, “You two ready to head back.”

“Yes.” V’lana replied, “We’ll have to walk a bit though to get far enough away from both the interference and curious quarian eyes.”

“Don’t want the quarians to know about your transporter?” Kaidan asked as the three began to walk away.

“What is it you humans like to say?” V’lana replied with a chuckle, “I like to keep a queen in the hole.”

“Ace.” Kaidan corrected with a chuckle, “Ace in the hole.”

“Oh...there’s only one queen here.” V’lana laughed, “Make no mistake about that.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Kaidan quipped back.

“Good.” V’lana nodded her head smugly, “Now, let’s go back to the ship and figure out our next moves.”

As her ship rose from the surface and assumed orbit, Tali ordered a scan for the Romulan ship. “What do you mean you can’t detect anything.” The quarian engineer exclaimed in disbelief.

“Just that.” The quarian manning the helm replied, “There’s no evidence of any ship in orbit.”

“Nothing?” Tali exclaimed, “No heat emissions? No signs of static discharge or venting? Nothing?”

“Nothing, Tali’Zorah.” The quarian replied.

“Damn.” Tali swore under her breath, “They must have a stealth system even more advanced than the one the old *Normandy* used to have.”

Returning to her quarters, Tali saw the blinking light on her message console, activating the console, she played Liara’s message and then sent a reply. “Liara? This is Tali. On important mission but can stop off at Ilium on way. Met Kaidan. He’s alive and well. Need to speak with you. Will contact you when I arrive.”

Forging Alliances

Chapter Summary

V'lana forms a partnership with the Systems Alliance and Citadel Council while the Illusive Man schemes.

R.R.W Gallena

"I need to contact my superiors." Kaidan said as he and V'lana stepped off the transporter pad. "Let them know what's going on here."

"Who are your superiors?" V'lana asked as the two of them, accompanied by Satra, walked out of the transporter room towards the turbolift.

"Councilor Anderson is the human ambassador to the Citadel Council." Kaidan explained. "He's the one who sent me. He'll probably notify Admiral Hackett—he's the commander of Fifth Fleet."

"And you're under his command?" V'lana inquired.

"Yes...more or less." Kaidan answered back. "Since Shepard...died...I've been sorta working as Anderson's troubleshooter."

"This Shepard...she's the one you served under, right?" V'lana asked as they entered the turbolift. "Bridge." The subcommander ordered.

"That's right." The human biotic replied, nodding his head. "She was killed when our ship, the *Normandy*, was destroyed—we think by a Collector ship."

"I see..." Turning to her science officer, V'lana inquired, "Satra? Is there any problem with us tapping into their communications systems?"

"No subcommander." The Romulan officer shook her head. "It was actually quite easy once we took care of a few interface problems. You'll have both audio and visual."

"Good." Turning back to Kaidan, the subcommander said, "You can contact your superior when we get to the bridge if you'd like or...if you prefer privacy...you can make your call from my ready room."

"The bridge will be fine." Kaidan replied, "Allies should trust each other—right?"

"Right." V'lana inclined her head, pleased at the human's answer. As the door slid open to the bridge, V'lana took her chair as she ordered her science officer, "Satra? Hail Councilor Anderson on the Citadel."

"Yes, Subcommander." The science officer acknowledged as V'lana gestured for Kaidan to stand beside her.

The Citadel

"I have to meet the salarian councilor's representative in the Commons, Councilor." Ambassador Udina stated, all but spitting out the word 'Councilor'.

"Go ahead." Anderson replied, "I have some paperwork here to catch up on." The Councilor sighed as he watched his aide depart. "It never ends. You want this job so bad that you can taste it, Donnel, and I want nothing more than to let you have it." Shaking his head, humanity's representative to the Council looked up as he addressed his next words, "Maybe that was your intention all along, Shepard. You knew I didn't want the job and Udina did and that would make us both concentrate on what was most important—representing humanity's interests." As he returned to his current problem—a request from the volus ambassador for possible trade concessions on Eden Prime in exchange for help in rebuilding the colony, the incoming communications light on his monitor lit up, soon followed by a chime.

"Yes." Anderson rumbled as he activated the monitor. Then, his eyes widened as he saw a woman sitting in a chair wearing a mesh silver and maroon miniskirt and thigh high boots with Staff Commander Alenko standing next to her.

"Councilor Anderson?" The woman inquired in almost flawless English. Looking closer, Anderson saw that the woman had, besides long auburn hair and green eyes that so reminded him of Shepard, pointed ears and faint traces of brow ridges on her forehead. "Councilor Anderson? Can you hear me? Satra? Do we have a connection?"

"Yes, Subcommander." Anderson heard another voice speak.

"Excuse me." Anderson, regaining control of his wits, spoke, "I was just stunned..."

"I'm told I have that effect on men." The woman replied with a slight smirk that quickly disappeared. "I am Subcommander V'lana Avesti, commanding the Romulan Republic Warbird *Gallena*. I believe you already know Staff Commander Alenko?"

“Alenko? Would you care to explain what’s going on here?” Anderson asked as his eyes tried to take in the scene on the monitor. Occasionally, he would spot a figure with pointed ears crossing the screen and once he spotted someone that appeared human. “Where are you and who are these people?”

“They’re friends, Councilor.” Kaidan replied, “The *Columbia* was attacked by mercenaries and the subcommander destroyed their ship and rescued me.”

“Then I owe you my thanks, Subcommander.” The Councilor replied as V’lana inclined her head in acknowledgement.

“We also just came back from Freedom’s Progress, Councilor.” Kaidan reported. “The colony is gone.”

“The entire colony?” Anderson rose to his feet in shocked surprise, “No one left behind.”

“No, Sir.” Kaidan replied grimly. “Tali and some of her people were there when we arrived.”

“What were the quarians doing there?” The Councilor asked.

“They were looking for one of their people who had gone to Freedom’s Progress for his pilgrimage.” Kaidan answered. “When they arrived, they found the colony deserted. We got there a little after they did and after fighting through some mechs, managed to get to their missing quarian. He recorded everything that happened. I have it here.”

“Satra?” V’lana called out, “Can you transmit the information?”

“Yes, Subcommander.” The science officer responded.

“Councilor?” V’lana interrupted, “Would you like us to transmit the data to you?”

“Can you do that and be sure it stays secure?” Anderson asked.

Taking Satra’s single nod of her head as confirmation, V’lana replied, “Yes we can.”

“Then thank you, again. I’m ready for your transmission.”

Nodding her head at her science officer, V’lana signaled for Satra to begin transmitting. “You should be getting the data now, Councilor.”

“I am.” Anderson replied, amazed at the speed of the download.

“Good.” V’lana stated, requesting further, “I think it would be in our best interests if we met. We have much to discuss.” She then turned her head to Kaidan and nodded once, indicating that he was to speak.

“Councilor? The Romulans have had colonies go missing too. They think that what’s happening could be related and they want to work together. Sir, I’d strongly recommend taking them up on their offer. They have resources that we just don’t have, and we have resources that can help them.”

“It would be a mutually beneficial relationship, Councilor.” V’lana added, “But the decision, of course, is yours.”

“I think a meeting would be a good idea.” Anderson agreed, further adding, “It would also be a advisable if the other councilors were informed. Otherwise, they might think that we’re working against them.”

“Good to see that you’re one who sees the...how do you humans phrase it, the giant painting?”

“Big picture.” Anderson, along with Kaidan chuckled, “But yes, it would be better to let them know what’s going on. They might even have some ideas we haven’t thought of yet.”

“Very well then.” V’lana nodded once, “I’ll bow to your discretion. So...where do you wish this meeting to take place?”

“Would my office in the Citadel be acceptable.” Anderson suggested.

“It would.” V’lana indicated.

“We should inform Admiral Hackett.” Kaidan suggested. “He could be very helpful.”

“I’d recommend that as well, Subcommander.” Anderson added.

“Very well, that is agreeable.” V’lana acceded. “Also, we have prisoners from the ship that we destroyed in security confinement. I’d rather they be in your cells than mine. My security chief has been complaining constantly about the smell of the four-eyed one.”

“They captured a batarian, turian, and human, Councilor.” Kaidan explained.

Chuckling in spite of himself, Anderson replied, “We’ll take them off your hands, subcommander. I’ll contact the admiral immediately after talking with you. It should take a couple of days for him to get here.”

“That should work out for us as well.” V’lana responded. “I look forward to meeting you in person, Councilor.”

“Likewise, Subcommander.” Anderson replied as he cut off the transmission. Quickly punching in the code for Fifth Fleet, the Councilor sighed in relief as Admiral Hackett answered, “Admiral? We need to talk.” Several minutes later, after finishing his conversation with the admiral, the councilor activated the holographic link connecting him with his fellow councilors.

“Excuse me.” The human councilor apologized as the holographic images of the turian, asari, and salarian delegates appeared, “But I must speak to you about a matter of great urgency.”

“What is it this time, Councilor Anderson?” The turian councilor grumbled.

“We have encountered a new space-faring species.” Anderson replied, immediately drawing the interest of the other councilors. “They rescued an Alliance officer, Kaidan Alenko, when the ship he was on was attacked by pirates. Their representative wishes to meet with us in forty-eight hours in my office. I just thought you would like to be here when they arrive.”

“When did you first hear of this?” Valern, the salarian councilor inquired.

“Just now.” The human councilor replied.

“We need to prepare an appropriate greeting.” Tevos, the asari councilor, stated.

“I get the impression they want to keep this mission low-key, councilors.” Anderson advised. “Perhaps it would be better if we all just met in my office a little before they arrived. Then, once we hear from them again, we can proceed from there.”

“An astute suggestion, Councilor.” Valern blinked and nodded his head. “Very well...” He stated as the other councilors nodded their heads in agreement, “We will meet in your office in forty-seven Earth hours.”

RRW Gallena

“Set course for the Citadel.” The subcommander ordered. “Remain cloaked until I say otherwise.”

“Understood.”

“Drop alert status to standard. We’ve been on heightened and combat alerts for too long. I don’t want the crew burning out.” V’lana ordered, “And open the Raptor’s Nest, the holodecks and the other recreational lounges for leisure activities.”

“Yes, Subcommander.” Tovan acknowledged.

“Join me for drinks in the Nest, Kaidan, after we change and clean up?” V’lana tempted.

“Sure.” The human biotic replied. “Say...two hours?”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you then.” Turning to her executive officer, V’lana noted the raised eyebrow. “What, Big Brother?”

“Nothing, Little Sister...” Her old friend said as he flashed a knowing grin.

“Right.” V’lana retorted with a smirk. “I want you taking some time off now too. Satra? That goes for you also. Hivan? You have the chair.”

“Yes, Subcommander.” The burly science officer replied as he took his place in the chair vacated by his commanding officer.

After changing out of her uniform and into a comfortable dress and blouse with maroon belt, V’lana made her way down to the lounge where she waited until her date arrived. Nodding in approval at the short-sleeved shirt and jeans the human chose to wear, the subcommander waved him towards her. “Not bad.” She purred as she took in his muscular physique.

“You’re looking beautiful yourself.” Kaidan smiled back.

“I just threw this on.” V’lana confessed. “Come...” She smiled as she took the human’s hand and led him to a booth. “Sit. Someone should be coming by soon.” Almost on cue, a blue-skinned female with a bald pate and a small ridge running down the center of her skull and face down to her chest came over.

“What would you like?” The strange—to Kaidan—alien asked.

“I’ll have Saurian brandy.” V’lana replied.

“And you, sir?” The woman asked.

“Ummm...a beer...Earth beer.” He qualified.

“Coming right up.” The waitress replied.

“Ummm...” Kaidan stammered as V’lana chuckled softly.

“She’s a Bolian.” V’lana said, answering Kaidan’s stammered query. “They’re members of the Federation.”

“So, she’s one of the exchange officers?” Kaidan queried.

“Yes.” V’lana shook her head, explaining, “She’s one of the Starfleet exchange officers, but we do have civilians working for us as well. Unlike the ships controlled by Sela and the Tal Shiar or the Republic ships that have aligned with the Klingon Empire, those of us who have thrown in our lot with the Federation carry a few civilians on board.”

“Wait a minute!” Kaidan interjected as the waitress brought their drinks. “You’re telling me that some of your ships are allied with the

Federation and others with these Klingons?"

"Right." V'lana nodded her head as she sipped her Saurian brandy.

"And the Klingons and the Federation are at war with each other." A stupefied Kaidan exclaimed.

"Well..." V'lana drawled, "It's a bit complicated. While technically no longer in a state of open warfare, let's just say that sometimes...incidents...occur."

"I see." Kaidan responded in a somber tone, "That would mean..."

"Yeah...sometimes." V'lana nodded her head. "It sucks, and I think it's stupid."

"Why?" Kaidan asked. "I mean, why are your people doing this?"

"Because D'Tan's a fucking idiot." V'lana cursed and then explained after taking a big swig of brandy. "I think he's still got some of that old Empire way of thinking going on in his mind. He must think he can play both ends against the middle and come out on top. Well...that's not going to happen here." She said angrily as Kaidan just sat back and listened, just as he used to do when another redhead he knew needed to vent. "We need to be building trust right now. All D'Tan's scheme is going to do is breed distrust."

"So, what would you do if you were in his shoes?" Kaidan asked, again, treating her just as he would have treated Jane.

"I'd pick a side and stick with it." V'lana flatly declared. "Do that and even the other side respects you—you've made a choice and you're holding to it. You've shown you can be trusted."

"Good point." Kaidan conceded, "So why do you think D'Tan did what he did? And don't tell me it's because he's a fucking idiot because I get the impression he's not that."

"You're right." V'lana sighed, "He's not. I think he's desperate and feels trapped and is falling back on the old ways of thinking because he doesn't know how to do anything else. New Romulus is close to the Klingon border. There's no way we can hold on to it with what we have right now without the Klingons permitting us to do so. We just don't have the forces to take on both them and the Tal Shiar—even with Federation help. The Federation, on the other hand, has the resources to help us develop New Romulus that the Klingons just don't possess. Short-term, we need the Klingons as a shield. Long-term, the Federation is the better choice."

"I doubt either power is aligning with you out of the goodness of their hearts." Kaidan noted with a wry grin, getting an equal response from his companion.

"You've got that right." V'lana chuckled as she explained, "The one thing we have of value is our technology—namely our cloaking and singularity tech. If we are going to continue as an independent entity, we have to improve those technologies and develop new ones. To do that, we have to take a leaf from the Federation's book and emphasize science and exploration while not ignoring our military and at the same time keeping an eye on everyone else."

"Tall order." Kaidan remarked as he sipped his beer.

"Now I think you can understand why the other races are wrong when they say we're paranoid. You're not paranoid if they really are out to get you. But enough about me and my universe." V'lana smirked as the waitress brought the couple refills for their drinks. "I want to hear you talk for a while. What's it like to be a biotic? To be able to do all those things?"

"Aside from the migraines." Kaidan laughed, "It's not bad."

"Do you go to schools or training or anything like that?" V'lana inquired, then, seeing a dark look crossing Kaidan's face, held up her hand, "Seems I've brought up bad memories. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"No..." Kaidan sighed as he took a swig of beer, "It's ok. When they found out I was biotic, I was sent to Biotic Acclimation and Temperance Training or BAaT. We called it Brain Camp. It was a program set up by Conatix Industries backed by the Alliance located on Gagarin Station out beyond the orbit of Pluto—Jump Zero—it's where they did all the FTL experiments before discovering the mass relay at Charon."

"So...you were experimenting with alternative FTL!" V'lana exclaimed, further prompting, "But go on"

"Yeah. Most of us were teenagers. Problem was...no one knew what they were doing. Biotics had only just begun appearing amongst humans, so Conatix hired turians as instructors."

"They're the ones you fought a war with earlier, right?" V'lana interrupted.

"That's right." Kaidan nodded his head, "But Conatix and the Alliance didn't want to go through the Citadel—they thought it would make humanity look weak."

Chuckling, V'lana commented, "That's a pretty Romulan way of looking at things. Never reveal weakness to your opponents."

"Problem was..." Kaidan sighed, "Many of those turians were still nursing grudges from the war and took it out on us. One in particular, Vyrnus, had it in for me. I put up with his BS until he injured Rahna, one of my class mates. Something inside me snapped then. I went after him with everything I had."

"Good!" V'lana nodded her head approvingly. "The veruul got what was coming to him."

"He ended up with a broken neck and eventually died." Kaidan somberly retorted, "Probably would have survived if they'd have gotten him

medical aid in time.”

“Sounds like a whole bunch of people didn’t like him.” V’lana commented. Seeing the distressed look on Kaidan’s face, V’lana softened her voice as she placed the palm of her hand on the top of his. Feeling the refreshing coolness of his touch, The Romulan woman’s lips turned up in a slight smile, “You have to understand one thing about my people, Kaidan—and me. Contrary to what the Klingons and some in the Federation say, we Romulans are not amoral backstabbers and schemers. While Romulans don’t believe in the Klingons’ warrior code which is really all too often an excuse for petty revenge or get mired in the ethical and...to be honest...often self-righteous...moralizing of humans...no offense...”

"None taken." Alenko responded with a smile, "Continue."

Returning her date's smile with one of her own, V'lana picked up where she had left off. "We do possess a sense of...I guess you could call it honor. We call it *menhei'sahe*. It's our ruling passion. It might be different from what the others see as honor, but it's no less real. To defend a loved one is expected. Someone you cared about was being attacked and you came to her aid." Her eyes taking on a fiery cast, she said, "Heavens help whoever attempts to hurt those I love. I will hunt them to the end of the universe—Hells, I've hunted them through two universes already." Laughing, she shook her head, "And here I am dominating the conversation again. I'm sorry, Kaidan...go on."

"Well...there's not a whole lot more to say." Kaidan replied, still chewing over the words just recently spoken by the lovely and fiery woman sitting across from him.

"Is it your abilities that cause your headaches?" V'lana asked.

"No." Kaidan shook his head, "It's the L2 implants I'm fitted with. The implants are necessary for us to use and control our abilities. They're more powerful than the L3s and not as versatile as the L5s...but they have side effects that vary. In some cases, mental disorders, in other cases such as mine, headaches."

"Well...you let us know if you're having any problems. Unfortunately, I don't have any human doctors on board, but Aven does his best." V'lana remarked apologetically, "Now...talk to me." The subcommander smiled as she sipped her brandy, "I like hearing you talk."

Ilium

"Tali!" Liara smiled as her quarian friend entered her office, "Thank you for coming."

"We need to speak." The quarian engineer declared, "Privately."

"Of course." Liara nodded her head, "Nyxeris? Take a few hours off—with pay."

"Thank you, Dr. T'Soni." The secretary replied as she left her employer's office, activating her recording bug before she left.

"Come with me." Tali said in a flat tone. "I want to make sure we're not overheard by listeners."

"I scan my office constantly." Liara protested only to be silenced by her quarian friend's raised hand.

"This is too important to take chances. Where can we talk in absolute security?"

"Come." Liara replied as she escorted her friend out of her office. "There's an isolated park I've found that's as secure as anywhere else on this planet."

"Good." Tali responded, "Let's go." Minutes later, the skycar carrying the two friends touched down next to a small glade.

"Here" Liara said as she guided Tali to an outdoor table. "We can talk safely."

Tali then placed a small disc shaped object down on the table and touched it. As she touched it, it exhibited a flashing green light.

"Scrambling and detection device." The quarian explained. "Besides scrambling our words, it will alert us to any electronic listening devices."

"So...what is this about, Tali?" Liara asked, getting straight to the point.

"As I said in my message to you, Kaidan is alive and healthy." The quarian answered with more than a tiny note of pleasure in her voice.

"I remember." Liara recalled, "You said you saw him on Freedom's Progress." The information broker noted, "I read where the entire colony had vanished—apparently taken by the Collectors. Over nine hundred thousand souls..."

"It was...what was the human word...spooky." Tali said as she recalled, "Walking down the quiet streets and peering into the empty buildings where the occupants seemed to have just picked up and walked away."

"Was Kaidan there to check up on the colony?" Liara inquired.

"Yes." Tali nodded her head, "And he brought friends...not Alliance and not from any race I know of. Although...a human was with them, but she was definitely not Alliance."

"What do you mean?" Liara asked as her heart began to race, already anticipating her quarian friend's answer.

"There's a new race in the picture. Advanced...very advanced." Tali announced. "They have brow ridges and pointed ears, but otherwise look human and call themselves 'Romulans'."

"I've never heard of such a race." Liara replied, taking careful mental notes.

"They seem to prefer to use directed energy weapons." Tali recalled, "And they do use armor and shields—although both are very advanced. Their armor is apparently worn underneath their clothing and they seem to be capable of making it transparent as their commander wore a short skirt and didn't appear to have any armor at all."

"Transparent?" Liara repeated, disbelieving. Are you sure she was wearing armor?"

"I believe so." Tali replied with a nod of her head. "Her and her people took on an Ymir. They lost the other human who was with them and one of them said that the mech's weapons tore through both shield and armor."

"I'll make some inquiries and see if I can find out anything more about this new race." Liara said. "Do you know why they decided to come to Freedom's Progress?"

"They said they were helping Kaidan in his investigation." Tali recollected, "And Kaidan seemed to trust them. Although..." She hesitated, unsure as to whether to continue or not.

"Go ahead, Tali." Liara encouraged, "I need to know as much as I can about this new player before deciding what to do."

"I'm not sure what to say about them. They're curious...and fierce. Another thing...their commander—the rank they called her was subcommander." Tali continued, "Seemed quite a bit interested in Kaidan and it looked to me like Kaidan was returning that interest. So...that would imply that they have emotions such as love and friendship."

"If these people are potential allies, then that might be good." Liara sighed, "It's been two years since...Shepard...It's time he moved on. It's time we all did. Do you know anything else about these people?" Liara asked.

"No." Tali shook her head, "Except that they most likely possess a stealth system even more effective than the old *Normandy's*. After returning to our ship and leaving the planet..." Tali explained, "We scanned for their ship. We couldn't find any sign they were even there. No static electric discharges...no apparent use of a mass effect drive. The only answer I could come up with is that they must have found some means of duplicating an infiltrator's cloak on a large scale."

"You mean making an entire ship invisible?" Liara gasped.

"Yes." Tali nodded her head. "It's theoretically possible, but it would take a tremendous amount of power—more power than even our largest dreadnoughts could generate. However, it's the lack of traces of the use of a mass effect drive that has me most curious. They might have a means of FTL travel other than mass effect."

"That's impossible." Liara shook her head.

"Why?" Tali countered, "The only reason we all use mass effect drives is because each of our civilizations either discovered the tech in their home systems or nearby or were contacted by a culture that was already using it. It was just easier to abandon our own FTL research and go with mass effect drives and the mass relays." The quarian engineer then posed the question, "What if there was a society living in isolated space. No close-by mass relays or neighbors with mass effect technology. No Prothean caches or anything like that. Why couldn't they develop a means of FTL travel different from mass effect?"

"That makes sense." Liara conceded, further prompting, "Go on."

"Added to that..." Tali continued, "There are the weapons they used and their armor and shielding. Directed energy weapons—not mass accelerated projectiles. Their shields and armor were not derived from mass effect technology either, but from something else entirely. These people have gone off in a totally uncharted direction." Pausing for a moment to catch her breath, Tali declared, "We need them as allies and can't afford to have them as enemies."

"Then we better do what we can to make sure they are our allies." Liara responded as the two friends got up.

R.R.W. Gallena

"We are in the Serpent Nebula." Tovan reported as the *Gallena* exited the mass relay.

"Is the nebula interfering with our cloak?" V'lana asked as she sat in the center chair of the warbird.

"Negative, Subcommander." Tovan replied. "Cloak holding, all systems at optimal."

"Good. Open communications channel with Councilor Anderson. Let's see if he and this council are ready to meet face-to-face."

Human Embassy—The Citadel

"Are you sure about these people, David?" Admiral Hackett asked as the two men talked in the Councilor's office.

"We are taking a chance." The turian councilor, Sparatus stated, echoing the admiral's concern.

"I don't know." The Councilor answered honestly, "But Commander Alenko seems to trust them."

"I guess that'll have to do for now." Hackett said as the incoming transmission light flickered on Anderson's console, "Maybe that's them."

Activating the console, Councilor Anderson again saw the youthful Romulan subcommander sitting in a chair, Kaidan Alenko on one side of her and another Romulan, a male, on the other. "Is that her?" Admiral Hackett whispered.

"Yes." Anderson whispered back and then, turning his attention back to the subcommander, smiled, "Greetings, Subcommander. This is Admiral Hackett, Commander of Fifth Fleet, and the Galactic Council."

"Admiral. Councilors" Kaidan came to attention and saluted as the subcommander inclined her head once in respect.

"Admiral. Councilors. Greetings from the Romulan Republic." V'lana formally stated.

"Subcommander." Admiral Hackett returned the greeting and Kaidan's salute, "Staff Commander."

"We look forward to our meeting and learning more about your people, Subcommander." Councilor Tevos politely replied.

"We are ready to meet whenever you wish, Subcommander." Councilor Anderson said.

"Would thirty minutes be acceptable?" V'lana inquired.

"That would be fine, but wouldn't you like more time to clear docking?" Tevos asked, "We can also arrange an appropriate greeting if you'd prefer."

"Thank you, Councilor, but I would prefer that we make this initial contact as the humans say, low-key." V'lana smiled, "Also, don't worry about docking. We'll have no problem making the meeting on time."

"I can vouch for that, Admiral...Councilors." Kaidan interjected.

"Very well." Anderson replied, "We'll meet you in my office in half an hour."

"We look forward to meeting you." Councilor Tevos said. "Until then." With that, the transmission cut out.

Turning to Admiral Hackett and his fellow councilors, Anderson inquired, "Well...what do you think?"

"I'm not sure." The admiral replied, "She seemed awful young to be commanding any sort of warship. Hell, David...I've got a granddaughter her age...apparent age...attending college!"

"Don't let her apparent youth fool you." Councilor Tevos advised. "Her species could be long-lived like mine. We generally do not like to discuss this..." The asari matriarch said hesitatingly, "But we asari tend not to show our age until very late into the matriarch stage and when we do show it, it proceeds rapidly. Her species could be similar."

"Possibly." Anderson replied, pondering over Tevos' remarks.

"What I am curious about." Valern interjected, "Is their ship. Where is it? Citadel Control has not reported any unknown or unidentified traffic."

"May I?" Admiral Hackett asked, inclining his head at the communications console.

"Be my guest." Anderson responded.

Activating the console, Hackett made contact with his ship. "Hannah?"

"Sir?"

"Are you detecting any unidentified ships in the area?"

"No sir." Captain Hannah Shepard replied. "Just the usual Citadel traffic—busy—but nothing out of the ordinary."

Shaking his head, Hackett declared in a gruff voice, "David...Councilors...either we're the victims of the most elaborate practical joke I've ever seen pulled, or these people have one helluva stealth system and I'm not sure which I'm hoping for the most."

"Well, Admiral..." Anderson replied, "We'll find out soon. The half hour is almost up."

As the half hour ended, the councilors and Admiral Hackett faced towards the door, expecting it to open only to remain disappointed as first one, then two, then three minutes passed. "It looks like we've been..."

Before the admiral could finish his words, everyone in the room heard a noise coming from behind them. Turning around, they saw two columns of green light coalesce into flesh and blood beings. "Admiral Hackett...Councilor Anderson...Councilors." Kaidan Alenko snapped to attention and rendered a crisp salute.

"Councilors." A young woman, with pointed ears and slight brow ridges, and wearing a short mesh skirt with maroon trim and boots, brought her fist up to her heart and then down. "I am Subcommander V'lana Avesti, commanding the Romulan Republic Warbird *Gallena*."

"What the?" Anderson exclaimed.

“How?” Tevos started.

“Where did...” Hackett shook his head

“Who?” Sparatus gulped.

“Matter dematerialization and rematerialization.” Valern blinked rapidly as he exclaimed excitedly, “Teleportation. While theoretically possible, it’s very difficult. Requires tremendous amount of energy. You’ve apparently solved that problem.”

“Wait...” Hackett stammered, “You’re saying that these people are able to teleport...”

“Teleport from one location to another.” Valern nodded his head, “Yes.”

“This is...” Tevos gasped in awe.

“Astonishing.” Anderson finished.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Kaidan whispered to V’lana.

“Yeah...a little...” Seeing the doubting look the human biotic gave her, she confessed, “All right...A lot.”

“Gentlemen...madam.” V’lana inclined her head at the councilors and Admiral Hackett. “We have much to discuss.”

“Indeed we do.” Anderson replied, addressing his next remarks to Kaidan, “You’ve been to Freedom’s Progress.”

“Yes, Sir.” Kaidan replied, “When we arrived, the entire colony had vanished. We encountered Tali and some quarians who were searching for a quarian who was on pilgrimage. We found the quarian, Veetor, who recorded everything that happened. I’ll sync my omnitool with your console.” The Alliance officer said. Soon, the entire Council watched a replay of the taking of the colonists.

“Collectors?” Tevos inquired.

“That’s our guess.” Kaidan replied.

“What’s your interest in this, Subcommander?” Sparatus inquired.

“My people’s colonies are also being attacked—apparently by a race we call the Elachi.” Pausing for a moment, V’lana activated her communicator, “Tovan? Play the recording from the freighter.” The subcommander explained, “We boarded a Cardassian freighter we suspected was transporting as prisoners people taken from one of our merchant ships. This is what we took from the freighter’s logs.” The councilors then looked on in rapt interest as strange humanoid aliens were being literally fed into a black anomaly.

As his eyes fell on the feet of one of the aliens feeding the humanoids into the anomaly, Admiral Hackett gasped, “Those feet and legs look almost salarian.”

“Are you accusing my people of participating in this?” Valern exclaimed angrily.

“No one’s accusing anyone of anything Councilor.” Hackett quickly backpedaled. Turning to the subcommander, Hackett asked, “Were you able to record any entries showing these aliens’ upper bodies.”

“Unfortunately, no.” V’lana shook her head. “We have not been able to attain any evidence of what an Elachi looks like. From the attack on my home colony of Virinat, we know that they use cybernetic constructs—like spiders—to grasp their prey and take them away.”

“Your home colony was attacked?” Tevos asked.

“I originally came from Nimbus III, but, yes, I considered Virinat my home.” V’lana affirmed, “I was...you could say I was a junior security officer. Virinat was a pleasant place.” The subcommander’s lips turned up in a sad smile, “We were farmers mostly. A few of us, like myself, did go out into space—mostly to find other refugees who had scattered after our home planet was destroyed by a supernova.”

“Your home world is...gone?” Anderson interrupted; his voice filled with sympathy.

“Yes, and with it the Romulan Star Empire. My people are scattered. Some of us have come back together...founded a new home on New Romulus and are rebuilding. Charting a new course as the Republic.” V’lana replied, “But I’m drifting. I was sent to the caverns to investigate what was going on with the Khellid, an insect species whose product we use to make Khellid nectar.”

“Like honey for mead.” Hackett noted.

“Correct.” V’lana affirmed, “While investigating, I found an Elachi device controlling cybernetic spiders that were making the Khellid violent. I deactivated it after taking out its protector and then the colony was attacked. I and Tovan got as many people on to the shuttles as possible and we made it to an old warbird where I took command and we escaped. We were rescued by a couple of Republic warbirds and after that, I was confirmed in command of the *Pharos* and have commanded ever since.”

“An interesting story.” Sparatus interjected, his voice filled with doubt, “But...difficult to believe.”

Her eyes flashing anger, V’lana responded, her voice low and dangerous, “Do you doubt my word?”

At once recognizing the warning signs given off by his Romulan friend, Kaidan moved quickly to intervene, “V’lana...I’m sure the councilor did not mean any slight on your honor—right, Councilor Sparatus?”

“Right.” The turian councilor, clearly seeing that he had overstepped his bounds, quickly apologized.

“No one is impugning your honesty.” Tevos quickly intervened, “It’s just that you have given us a lot of information very quickly. It’s very difficult to process it all. If I may...my species is telepathic...”

“I think I see where this is going.” V’lana sighed, “I’m a limited telepath myself.” Chuckling a little at the surprised look on Kaidan’s face, V’lana whispered, “I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m not scared.” Kaidan whispered back.

“Then that makes this easier.” Tevos replied, “I promise I will not go deeply.”

“Very well.” V’lana reluctantly agreed, “In the interests of full disclosure and to promote good relations.”

“Thank you.” Coming closer, Tevos instructed, “Relax and embrace eternity.” Images flooded through the asari’s mind: A childhood and adolescence spent on the streets and in the bars of a dingy, dangerous, desert world.

“Nimbus III.” V’lana appeared next to Tevos. “Not a very pleasant time in my life. We should go now.”

“I am sorry, young one.” Tevos apologized. “Please show me your true home.”

“Very well.”

Tevos then saw a peaceful farming colony with men and women and children all like V’lana, going through their routines. A festival... laughter...people talking and drinking. V’lana helping one of the farmers fix his pipes and, in the process, drive off a strange insect species.

“Khellid. This is Virinat.”

“It’s lovely.”

“It was.” Then the images changed. V’lana destroying strange, metallic, spider-beings with an energy weapon. Fighting a larger and more powerful creature. Returning home and then explosions. Romulans similar to her transporting down using that strange teleportation system and attacking the colonists while the metallic things literally snatched colonists away.

“Your own people?” Tevos asked.

“Tal Shiar.” V’lana responded. “They want to rebuild the old Empire.”

“Are they in league with the metal things.”

“I don’t know.” V’lana replied. “The Tal Shiar seek power for the sake of power.”

Tevos then saw other colonies attacked, strange ships fighting, V’lana ordering her ship through one of the anomalies.

“Why?” Tevos asked.

“I got tired of being on the defensive.” The Romulan replied, “I wanted to track down these invaders—find out where they were from.”

Tevos then saw even more fantastic images, strange aliens, blue-skinned, white haired aliens with antennae, reptilian aliens, feline, and, much to her astonishment...humans. But not like the humans of the Alliance. These humans were open to aliens...were part of something much bigger.

“The Federation.” V’lana explained.

“You’re from another universe.” Tevos concluded.

“Correct.” V’lana confirmed.

“This is...remarkable...fabulous...and...” Tevos admitted, “Frightening.”

“Yes, it is.” V’lana agreed.

“And you’re trapped here.” Tevos concluded, an aura of sadness emanating from her.

“For now.” V’lana agreed. “My mission is still the same. To find out who has been taking our people and stop them. I would like your help.” V’lana declared, “But with it or without it, I will continue my mission.”

“Our goals might be similar.” Tevos opined. “I think we can work together.”

“Good.” V’lana replied, “Perhaps we should get back to the others.”

As the pair broke from their brief meld, Kaidan turned to V’lana, “You ok?”

“I’m fine.” The Romulan smiled back. “I think Tevos was a bit more shaken up than me.”

“You are correct, young one.” The asari councilor smiled. Turning to the others in the room, she announced, “I think we should help the subcommander and I think the subcommander can help us.”

"I and my ship will help investigate what happened to the missing colonists at Freedom's Progress and elsewhere." V'lana declared. "I have a feeling our investigations into that will aid in my efforts to find out what happened to our colonists."

"How do you think we should proceed?" Anderson inquired.

"I think first, we should try to figure out who these Collectors are and what their goals are. Then, once we've gained enough intelligence, we move on them."

"Just like the hunt for Saren." Hackett observed.

"You'll need assistance." Tevos pointed out, "You're in...unfamiliar...territory."

"Agreed." V'lana acknowledged. "I would like to ask that Commander Alenko remain on board the *Gallena* as my liaison. We've worked together and have already built up a good rapport—provided the commander is willing, that is."

"I'm happy to volunteer, Admiral."

"Very good." Admiral Hackett nodded his head, "I hereby assign Staff Commander Kaidan Alenko as liaison to the RRW *Gallena*. Anything else, Subcommander?"

"Yes...it might be a good idea if I had a doctor assigned familiar with the races in this...sector. My doctor is a good doctor...but for the most part, his experience has been limited to Romulan and Reman patients."

"Dr. Chakwas." Anderson proposed as Hackett nodded his head. "You might also want a helmsman who's familiar with the local space and mass effect relays. I know the perfect man if you're interested. He's a crackerjack pilot—the best—but he does have a bit of an attitude."

"I have an adequate helmsman, but it wouldn't hurt to have someone familiar with this area of space." V'lana replied, adding with a smirk, "And don't worry about him having an attitude, as you've seen, I have one myself." Pausing for a moment, she added, "I do have those Blue Suns prisoners we took..."

"We can take them off your hands." Hackett beamed, "Also, we can supply you with an Alliance shuttle and other personnel to help you...a couple of marines for ground missions and I've heard mention of an up and coming communications specialist you might find of assistance. She's currently in R and D, but her marks are high, and I've read only good reviews from her commanding officers."

"Thank you, Admiral." V'lana nodded her head, "We did take losses before coming here...not many, but some, and my science officer has been doubling as communications officer, I'd like to have her focus on her science duties. Please do make sure that they understand that as humans, they will be a minority on my ship. They will be treated with respect and courtesy, make no mistake about that." The subcommander made abundantly clear, "But my ship is Romulan and we have our way of doing things and they will have to adapt to it."

"Understood." Hackett nodded his head.

"There are others that you also might want to consider bringing in to help you." Anderson suggested, "They were a part of Shepard's team along with Alenko..."

"We've already met Tali and she's a no-go—at least for now." Kaidan interjected.

"That's too bad." Anderson shook his head, "But we have a lead on where Garrus might be as well as Dr. T'Soni—if you could get either or both of those to assist you, it would be most helpful."

Kaidan nodded his head, whispering, "You can depend on both of them."

"All right." V'lana agreed, "Give me their locations and I'll seek them out."

"There is someone else you should try to contact." Valern, the salarian councilor, spoke. "Mordin Solus. A genius. His specialty is xenobiology. He was also in the STG...Special Tasks Group. His skills could come in handy. He is currently on Omega running a clinic"

Chuckling, V'lana replied, "I happen to be short a xenobiologist and I have a feeling one will come in very handy in this. Give me his coordinates. Now, if you'd like...I'd suggest we make ourselves comfortable. We have a great deal to discuss before we all get to work."

Ilium

Matriarch Aethyta watched mournfully from behind the bar she tended as she observed the asari maiden sitting alone at a table, quietly making notes on her omnitool. "Darling..." She whispered under her breath, "You have no idea how much this hurts—me having to watch you when I'd rather give you a great big hug." Shaking her head sadly as the asari left the bar, Aethyta called out to her assistant, a chipper young human, "Ali...take over for a bit. I'm going on break."

"Right." The dark-haired human responded as she took the asari matriarch's place behind the bar. "See you in fifteen."

Going back into her office, Aethyta activated her omnitool and punched up a coded sequence. The omnitool then began to display all of the day's correspondence and communications sent and received by Liara T'Soni. One word, in particular, seemed to figure prominently in much of these communications. Aethyta pressed a button and began to record a message. "I want a search on all databases and communications for anything having to do with Romulan or Romulans."

Project Rebirth—Secret Cerberus Base—Undisclosed Location

“The project is ready for activation.” The head scientist announced as the Illusive Man and his bodyguard entered the lab.

“Excellent.” The Illusive Man responded, “And the safeguards?”

“The control chip and backup implants are all in place and working properly.” The scientist responded.

“You’ve done well, Henry.” The Illusive Man stated as another man entered the lab. “Our project seems to be a success. And don’t worry... Cerberus will assist you in your efforts to recover Oriana. And as for Miranda...”

“A failure.” Dr. Henry Lawson replied, adding, “We can only hope that her interference has not damaged Oriana’s potential.”

“And if it has?” The Illusive Man asked, his eyes gauging the scientist’s reaction.

“Then we terminate and try again.” Lawson replied in an emotionless tone. “We are seeking nothing less than the perfection of humanity. We cannot allow feelings or emotions to hinder our efforts—would you not agree, Jack?”

“I agree wholeheartedly, Henry.” The Illusive Man responded. “Now...” He said as the last of the nutrient fluid that had sustained their prize had drained out of the tube containing her, “Let us see our project.”

The two men watched as the glass tube opened, revealing a redheaded woman with freckles and green eyes. As the woman opened her eyes, The Illusive Man smiled, “Welcome back, Commander Shepard.”

Welcome Aboard

Chapter Summary

The Gallena adds to its crew roster as V'lana firms up her ties with the Citadel and the Systems Alliance. While this is going on, the Illusive Man isn't idle as he begins to put his plans into motion

Chapter Notes

This marks the end of the first story in the "Raptorverse" saga. There's a lot more to come and I'll be posting it in the coming days. I hope you're enjoying this tale. Until later.

Near the Charon Relay, Sol System

"We're not detecting anything on our sensors, Ma'am." The SSV *Orizaba*'s sensor operator reported.

"Are you sure they're going to be here?" Captain Hannah Shepard asked the admiral standing next to her.

"They'll be here." Admiral Hackett replied. "Just remember the standing orders: Under no circumstances are you to target or charge weapons. If you do, they will assume you are taking a hostile posture and react accordingly."

"These Romulans sound like a dangerous race." Captain Shepard stated, the note of suspicion clear in her tone of voice.

"You're right." Councilor Anderson conceded, "From what little I've seen of them, they do look like they can be dangerous. But they seem to want to be our allies and, after seeing a little of what they can do, I'd rather have them on our side than against us."

"Let's hope you're right, Councilor." Hannah replied grumpily. "For all our sakes."

Starboard Observation Lounge—SSV Orizaba

"So, Esteban..." Lieutenant James Vega jibed, gesturing with his hand holding a beer bottle at the large panoramic window, "You know what's going on here?"

"No, Mr. Vega. I do not." Esteban Cortez shook his head, "I was getting ready to ship out to Ferris Fields..."

"That's right!" Vega interjected with a big, toothy grin, "You finally got a posting where you and your husband can be together."

"Right." Cortez nodded his head, "And then I got orders to report here. What about you, James?"

"Same thing." The burly marine responded. "I was on my way to Fehl Prime and ordered here instead. What about you, Doc?"

"Joker and I were on Mars..." Dr. Chakwas responded, "I was getting ready to retire, but just as I was about to sign the papers, I got orders to report here."

"So...why didn't you just go on ahead and retire?" Vega asked, his curiosity aroused. "Did they tell you anything about what was going on?"

"No explanations." Karin shook her head, "But the orders came straight from both Admiral Hackett and Councilor Anderson and that got me curious. I had to find out what was going on."

"That's funny my orders did too." A young brown-skinned officer with short black hair and brown eyes interjected, speaking in a posh English accent. "I had reported in for my shift at R and D back at Arcturus Station and was told to report to the *Orizaba*, that I was being reassigned—special assignment."

"And you are..." Vega smiled.

"Oh...I'm sorry..." The young woman stammered an apology "I'm Samantha...Specialist Samantha Traynor..."

"This is weird..." A man with a scraggly beard, wearing a ball cap and leg braces, commented. "All of us here called in for this special assignment."

"I heard through the grapevine that you were about to resign, Joker." Vega interjected, "What happened?"

The flight lieutenant confirmed with a nod of his head. "I was pissed off at the way they treated all of us *Normandy* vets after...well...you know."

"We didn't just lose the *Normandy* that day." Dr. Chakwas declared in a sad and gloomy voice, "We lost our heart and soul."

“Just as I was about to quit...” Joker recounted, “I was told by my new potential employer that they didn’t need me after all and then the orders to report here came in.”

“Same thing happened to us.” A man speaking with a Scottish brogue joined the conversation. “Sorry...name’s Donnelly, Ken Donnelly, I’m an engineer.”

“And I’m Gabrielle...Gabrielle Daniels.” The perky dark-haired woman standing next to the red-headed Scot introduced herself. “We were both on the *Perugia* and were set to quit and go to a new job and then we were told by the people who were going to hire us that we were no longer needed.”

“So...who was it? Who wanted to hire you?” Steve inquired.

“You’re not gonna believe this.” Joker smirked, “Cerberus.”

“Shit!” Vega whistled.

“They were the ones who wanted to hire us too!” Donnelly exclaimed, “Said they were gonna kick the Collectors in the daddybags.”

“They told me that they needed me for a special project and that Joker had already signed on.” Dr. Chakwas recounted, adding, “Once I heard that, they had me hooked. Now, I’m wondering what their real agenda is.”

“Yeah.” Joker gravely nodded his head, “I’m thinking that maybe it was a good thing that we didn’t take that job now.”

“Well...Karin...Joker...I’m just happy to see that both of you didn’t sign on with those terrorists and are still in Alliance blue.” Lieutenant Gregory Adams grinned.

“Thanks, Greg.” Dr. Chakwas smiled back. “Good to see you here too. So...how did you get roped into this?”

“I was on leave awaiting reassignment orders and got called in.” The engineering chief responded. “I couldn’t resist.”

RRW Gallena

“That must be the Alliance ship.” Tovan remarked as the large dreadnaught appeared on the *Gallena*’s viewscreen.

“That’s the *Orizaba*.” Kaidan confirmed, “Hannah Shepard’s ship.”

“The mother of your old commanding officer?” V’lana inquired as Kaidan nodded his head in confirmation.

“Their weapons are off-line and their shields down.” Tovan reported.

“Good.” V’lana nodded her head. “Keep our weapons and shields off-line as well after we decloak.”

“Ready for the show, Staff Commander?” The Romulan subcommander grinned as she looked up at the Alliance officer standing next to her.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Kaidan grinned, “You realize that when you come out of cloak a whole lot of people on that ship over there are going to crap their pants.”

“That’s what makes it fun.” V’lana replied with a devilish grin, “Tovan...decloak.”

SSV Orizaba

“Should be any time now.” Hackett observed as he glanced down at the chronometer.

As he gazed out the observation window, Vega thought he saw a shimmering. “Did anyone see that?” He called out, pointing at the window.

“See what?” Samantha replied and then she saw it, a form taking shape.

“What the...” Hannah Shepard cried out as she glanced down at her monitor.

“Damn...” Cortez gasped as the object solidified, “It’s a...”

“Unidentified ship off our starboard!” The *Orizaba*’s executive officer called out, “Weap...”

“Belay that order!” Admiral Hackett quickly countermanded, “Keep weapons and kinetic barriers off line.”

“What the hell?” Joker exclaimed as his eyes took in the sight before him: A beautiful, yet also menacing winged space ship with what looked like a long midsection and a head appeared from seemingly nowhere. Gazing at the bottom of the ship, the flight lieutenant swore he could see something painted, “Is that a...”

“Bird of some sort?” Dr. Chakwas finished, “Yes. It is.”

“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” Cortez exhaled.

“Madre dios.” James whispered, “I hope these people are on our side.”

“The energy output.” Adams mused, “It has to be humongous to render a ship totally invisible.”

“So they do have a means of making an entire ship undetectable.” Hackett whispered in an awestruck voice.

“That’s how they were able to arrive at the Citadel undetected.” Anderson replied. “This is way beyond any stealth system we have. Captain?” The Councilor inquired, “Were your sensors able to pick up anything before that ship appeared?”

Receiving a shake of the head from her sensors specialist, Captain Shepard replied in a grim voice, “No Councilor. Nothing.”

Hackett muttered, “Let’s make sure we keep them on our side...shall we?”

RRW Gallena

“Their weapons and shields are still off-line, Subcommander.” Tovan noted, nodding his head in satisfaction.

“I told you they would be.” Kaidan remarked.

“It looks like we have allies, Centurion.” V’lana smiled. “Satra...open hailing frequencies.”

SSV Orizaba

“Sirs...Ma’am...” The *Orizaba*’s communications specialist spoke up, “We’re being hailed.”

“Play it on all speakers ship-wide. The entire crew should hear this.” Admiral Hackett ordered, “Captain...” He smiled as he turned his head the *Orizaba*’s skipper, “Your ship...your honor.”

“Open channel.” Hannah ordered. “This is Captain Hannah Shepard, commanding the *Orizaba*.”

“Greetings, Captain.” A female voice answered as the entire complement of the dreadnaught, especially those in the starboard observation lounge, paused in their duties to hear the next words spoken. “I am Subcommander V’lana Avesti, commanding the warbird *Gallena*. I greet you as a friend and ally of the Romulan Republic.”

“Thank God!” Cortez sighed in relief as the subcommander’s words came through the speaker.

“On behalf of the Systems Alliance, I greet you as a friend and ally as well.” Captain Shepard replied after receiving nods from both the Admiral and Councilor to continue.

“May this be the first of many fruitful exchanges.” V’lana diplomatically replied, “We are ready to receive your personnel and transfer our prisoners to you whenever you wish. I would also like to extend a personal invitation to you, Admiral Hackett, and Councilor Anderson to take a tour of my vessel.”

Again, taking the two men’s head nods as an unspoken command, Captain Shepard responded positively, “We thank you and look forward to seeing you and your ship.”

“Our personnel will be ready and we should be on our way to you in half an hour—is that acceptable, Subcommander.” Admiral Hackett inquired, smoothly taking charge of the conversation.

“That is most acceptable.” V’lana replied. “I look forward to meeting you then.”

“They’ve terminated the transmission, Ma’am.” The communications specialist reported.

Activating her intercom, the Captain ordered, “The following personnel are to report immediately to the hangar deck with their full kit and gear: Doctor Karin Chakwas, Lieutenant James Vega, Lieutenant Gregory Adams, Flight Lieutenant Jeffrey Moreau, Lieutenant Esteban Cortez, Specialist Samantha Traynor, Lieutenant Kenneth Donnelly, Lieutenant Gabrielle Daniels...” She then named a few more sergeants and privates.

“Full kit and gear?” Vega exclaimed, “Does that mean what I think it means?”

“I think so, James.” Esteban replied as he pointed at the warbird, “Looks like that’s going to be our new home.”

First to spot the approaching dignitaries, Lieutenant Vega called out in a loud, clear voice, “Admiral on deck!”

As the assembled Alliance officers and men came to attention in front of the two Kodiak shuttles, Admiral Hackett, Councilor Anderson, and Captain Shepard approached. “Stand at ease.” The Admiral commanded. Clearing his throat, the Admiral then spoke, “You have been chosen for an important mission. You will be representing both the Alliance and the Council to the Romulan Republic. All of you have been chosen because of your qualifications. We’ve only had limited contact with the Romulans, so...be careful. Watch what you say and what you do. We do have a liaison on board the Romulan ship to help out with any difficulties, but the best way to avoid problems is for you to think before you speak or act. Above all, remember that you are on their ship and bound by their rules. Any questions?”

“Do we know what they look like, Sir?” Kenneth Donnelly asked in a thick Scottish brogue.

“They look a lot like us.” Councilor Anderson answered, further explaining, “In low lighting, if one of them were wearing a hood or a cap, you probably wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between a human and a Romulan. We’ve only seen the subcommander, but if she is indicative of her people, then expect them to have slight brow ridges and pointed ears and a slight green tint to the skin, but otherwise, as I said, indistinguishable from humans.”

“Space elves.” Joker chuckled.

“Are there any races other than Romulans on their ship?” Specialist Traynor quickly asked before any of the senior officers could address Joker’s barb.

“Yes, there are.” Anderson replied, giving Samantha a smile of gratitude. “There are Remans—they are an offshoot of the Romulans and are a former slave race. There are also other races, but I’m afraid their identities will have to remain classified until we reach the warbird. There, you will find out everything. I can’t tell you much now...” Anderson apologetically concluded, “But I can say this—once you arrive on the *Gallena*, your views of the universe and our place in the cosmos will change forever.”

“Damn.” Vega whispered under his breath. “Now I’m really curious.”

“So am I, Lieutenant.” Doctor Chakwas agreed.

“Shuttle Two will be used to ferry the prisoners back. Prisoner escort contingent will take that shuttle. Shuttle One will be for everyone else and will remain on the *Gallena*.” Captain Shepard ordered. “If there are no further questions—mount up!”

“Damn...that’s a big ship.” Joker gasped as the shuttles drew closer to the warbird.

“We’re being hailed, Sirs.” Cortez called out from the Kodiak’s pilot’s station.

“Put it on monitor.” Captain Shepard ordered as a Romulan woman with short black hair appeared on the screen.

“Greetings Alliance shuttles.” The woman announced, “I am Sublieutenant T’vena. Please cut your engines, we will tractor you into our hangar deck.” Her lips then turned up into a slight smile, “As you humans say, just sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“Do as she says.” Admiral Hackett ordered. As both shuttles depowered their engines, a blue beam coming from the warbird captured them. “What the?” Cortez cried out in alarm as he reached for the control console.

“Do not be alarmed.” The Romulan flight controller stated through the speakers. “That is merely our tractor beam. We use it to bring objects in closer. As you are unfamiliar with our procedures, we thought this would be a safer means of bringing you aboard.”

“Sirs?” Cortez asked, his hand still hovering over the console.

“Relax, Lieutenant.” Hackett commanded. “Just do as she says and enjoy the ride.”

“Yes, Sir.” Cortez responded in a quiet voice as the shuttles were drawn towards the open hangar deck where, much to the surprise of everyone in the shuttle, they saw beings walking about, carrying out their duties, without apparently wearing any form of armor or environmental suits.

“How are they able to function?” Dr. Chakwas asked.

“Yeah.” Joker exclaimed, “Why haven’t they been sucked out by the vacuum?”

The shuttles then seemed to pass through an invisible barrier. “I don’t believe this...” Dr. Chakwas cried out, “But there’s a breathable atmosphere!”

“They must have some sort of barrier that can maintain pressure and atmosphere on a large scale.” An excited Samantha Traynor declared, “Do you have any idea of how advanced this is? What we can do with that if we can get them to share that technology with us?”

“Glad they’re on our side...” Vega whispered as both shuttles touched down. The door opening, the marine lieutenant exclaimed as he picked up his gear, “Well...here we go.”

Councilor Anderson exited the shuttlecraft first, flanked to his right by Admiral Hackett and his left by Captain Shepard with the rest of the crew trailing at a respectful distance behind. As he approached the subcommander, the councilor immediately noticed a male Romulan wearing what was apparently a uniform with red trim standing to the subcommander’s right and slightly behind. Another Romulan woman, this one wearing blue trim on her uniform, stood to the left and slightly behind the subcommander, and a bald, apparently female figure with pointed ears wearing gold trim stood directly behind the subcommander.

However, it was the figure standing next to the subcommander that immediately attracted Dr. Chakwas and Joker’s attention.

"Is that who I think it is?" Dr. Chakwas whispered, gesturing with her head at the human wearing Alliance dress blues standing next to the subcommander.

"Sure is!" Joker replied with a broad grin.

"Now we know what Kaidan's been doing." Chakwas whispered.

"Or who he's been doing." Donnelly quipped as his eyes drifted momentarily to the attractive subcommander, earning in response a slap to the back of the head by Gabrielle.

"Ouch!" Donnelly grumbled as he rubbed the back of his head, "That hurt!"

"Pig." Gabrielle retorted in a low voice.

Coming to a halt before the subcommander, Anderson bowed, "On behalf of the Council and the Systems Alliance I thank you for your hospitality."

Inclining her head at the councilor, Subcommander V'lana responded, "Welcome aboard the RRW *Gallena*. Gesturing towards the male Romulan, the subcommander began introducing her senior staff. Centurion Tovan Khev, my first officer. This is... She gestured towards the Romulan woman on her left, "Lieutenant Satra, my science officer. And this is..." She then turned towards the other woman and introduced her, "Lieutenant Veril...chief engineer of the *Gallena*. And I'm sure you're all familiar with Staff Commander Alenko?"

"Staff Commander." Anderson grinned as he nodded his head at Kaidan. Turning his attention back to V'lana, the councilor continued, "It is an honor to meet you again. You have already met Admiral Hackett." V'lana then brought her fist to her chest.

"Must be their form of a salute." Adams noted.

Returning the Romulans' gesture of respect, Hackett brought his hand to the tip of his hat, rendering a crisp salute. "Subcommander? I'd like to introduce you to Captain Hannah Shepard, commanding officer of the *Orizaba*."

"Captain." V'lana nodded her head respectfully.

"Subcommander." Hannah also nodded her head as the two ship captains exchanged gestures of mutual respect.

"I'd also like to introduce you to Dr. Karin Chakwas...one of our best physicians."

"Doctor." V'lana inclined her head, "I look forward to your impressions of our sickbay. My ship's doctor is looking forward to meeting you."

"Flight Lieutenant Jeffrey Moreau." Joker's hand came up in a slightly irreverent salute as his name was mentioned.

"Flight Lieutenant." V'lana nodded her head, "I'm sure you'll find conning a warbird a unique and different experience from what you're used to."

"Lieutenant James Vega...a fine soldier and marine and Lieutenant Esteban Cortez, an excellent shuttle and fighter pilot."

"Fighter pilot?" V'lana raised an eyebrow as she addressed the pilot, "Lieutenant? I'd be curious to hear about your take on our Scorpion fighters once you've had a chance to get settled in and more familiar with how things work here."

"Looking forward to it, Ma'am." Cortez responded; his curiosity aroused by the mention of the alien fighters.

Turning her attention to Vega, V'lana smiled, "Lieutenant? You'll work with Sublieutenant Solana. She's in charge of what you would call the ship's 'marines'."

"Ma'am." Vega nodded his head.

"Engineers Gregory Adams, Kenneth Donnelly, and Gabrielle Daniels." Admiral Hackett introduced as a man with close cropped brown hair and craggy facial features, a ginger-haired man and a dark-haired woman all came to attention, "And finally, I'd like to introduce you to Specialist Samantha Traynor—one of our brightest young up and comers. She's an expert in communications and computer hardware and software."

"Engineers." V'lana grinned, "Veril will help you get settled in and Specialist Traynor, you'll be working closely with Lieutenant Satra."

"I look forward to it, Ma'am." The eager communications specialist responded.

"Well..." V'lana gestured, "Shall we commence our tour? This, of course, is our hangar deck."

"That...barrier...we passed through." Gabrielle inquired, barely containing her enthusiasm, "It keeps the bay pressurized and maintains the atmosphere?"

"Yes." V'lana grinned, "It's actually common technology where we're from."

"That's common technology?" Donnelly exclaimed in a hushed voice, "If that's their common tech, I'd love to see what they consider exotic."

"Tell me about it." Gabrielle whispered back.

"Where are you from?" Hannah inquired as the group walked out of the hangar bay and into a turbolift.

“That’s rather complicated to explain.” The subcommander replied. “In short, we’re from a parallel universe.” Seeing the looks of shock, disbelief, and amazement on the faces of all her guests with the exception of the councilor, admiral, and Kaidan, V’lana let out a breath. “I know it’s a lot to take in right now. I’ll let my science officer walk you through the details after our tour. But for now, suffice it to say that while similar in many ways, there are some very important differences such as…”

As the turbolift door opened, Vega gasped in surprise as he saw a male human wearing a gold and black uniform walk past them, “That’s a…”

“Human?” V’lana nodded her head, “Yes. That’s one of the similarities… and differences between our universes. As in your universe, humans are a major species. In fact, they—along with the Vulcans, Andorians, and Tellarites, are one of the founding races of the Federation—a major power. For a long time, we Romulans were… you could say rivals… of the Federation.”

“What happened to change that?” Vega inquired.

“The Hobus supernova.” V’lana responded in a somber tone. “Commander Alenko can fill you in on that later.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” James replied, seeing that his host did not wish to continue that line of conversation.

“When we finish the tour…” Kaiden smoothly interjected, “I’ll be happy to go over things with you. Subcommander?”

“Thank you, Commander.” V’lana smiled as she continued the tour, “This ship has allied itself with the Federation and so we have some exchange officers serving aboard just as there are Romulans serving aboard some Federation starships.”

“So… where are we going first?” Dr. Chakwas asked as V’lana led the group down a corridor.

“Engineering.” The subcommander answered back, “I thought you might like to see what powers this ship.”

“We sure would.” Gabrielle and Donnelly exclaimed in unison as Adam’s face broke out in a wide grin.

As the door slid open, V’lana ushered her guests in. “It’s always busy here, so follow me.”

She led them to a large sphere. “Is that what I think it is?” Adams gasped in a mixture of astonishment and disbelief, “A singularity?”

Nodding her head, the subcommander responded with a smile, “Yes, it is. Romulan ships are powered by artificial singularities.”

“Damn.” Anderson exclaimed in amazement. “How did you… that’s…”

“Remarkable.” Hannah whispered.

“The power output!” Donnelly exclaimed, “It must be astronomical compared to what our engines could generate.”

“What about the other powers in your universe?” Admiral Hackett inquired, “Do they use artificial singularities as well?”

“No.” V’lana shook her head. “They use warp cores powered by matter-antimatter engines.”

“Matter-antimatter?” Gabrielle gasped. “How do they keep from blowing up? For that matter, how are you even able to contain that singularity?”

“I’m no engineer.” V’lana replied apologetically, “But magnetic containment and other methods are involved.”

“In other words…” Anderson interjected with a knowing smile, “You know, but it’s classified, and you don’t want to be rude by telling us that.”

“Very perceptive, Councilor.” V’lana winked in response.

“I’m curious…” Captain Shepard inquired, “Where does a subcommander fit in your chain of command?”

“Our command structure probably works a bit differently than yours.” V’lana responded. “In our service, a subcommander can be anything from an executive officer to a commanding officer of a shore installation or a commanding officer of a cruiser or smaller sized warship.”

“And the *Gallena*?” Shepard asked.

“Is a *Valdore*-class warbird.” V’lana responded, “Roughly matching what you would call an attack cruiser.”

“So… you’d be the equivalent of a Captain in our service?” Hackett surmised.

“Probably.” V’lana conceded. “A commander in our service would be the equivalent of a senior captain, commodore or rear admiral in yours. A commander could be in charge of anything from a *D’Deridex*-class battlecruiser to a major shore installation to serving as a planetary governor or commanding a squadron of ships.”

“To be so young and have risen so fast…” Hannah began only to be interrupted by Kaidan.

“The subcommander explained that the Romulan Republic tends to promote qualified officers as quickly as possible to make the most effective use of them.”

Councilor Anderson remarked, adding, “We’re not that much different. Your daughter was on a fast track. She’d have made Captain in another year or less.”

“And we...I...” Hannah choked up momentarily, “... lost her because she didn’t have enough time to learn on the job.”

“We do lose people because they were thrown into battle too early or simply because of misfortune and yes...” the Romulan admitted, “... some officers who shouldn’t have been promoted are promoted too early. But my universe is not a place where we have the luxury of lengthy apprenticeships—not anymore. Besides us, the Federation and Klingon Empire are also forced to place individuals who just twenty years earlier would have been nothing more than junior officers into positions of command. You have to understand; my universe is wracked by several wars and they have taken their toll. The Federation and the Klingons were fighting a major war each other until recently, our time, with the Republic caught in the middle of both of those powers while at the same time having to fight the Tal Shiar and what’s left of the old Romulan Star Empire both of which want to subjugate us.”

“Sounds like a free-for-all!” Cortez whistled, shaking his head.

“Pretty much so.” V’lana agreed, “And all of us are fighting the Borg, the Undine, the different Mirror Universe Terran Empires, the Tholians, and other threats that have been popping into our universe recently. And then there’s the Elachi...”

“Sounds like hell.” Vega shook his head.

“It’s not all bad.” V’lana responded, “There are bright spots and moments of beauty that you take when and wherever you can. Risa’s lovely and, I have to admit, I have a soft spot for a few places on Earth. I love sipping coffee in the piazza in Florence and sunbathing on the beach on the French Riviera.”

“So Earth exists in your universe?” Samantha inquired. “London? Big Ben? Oxford?”

“Yes.” V’lana replied with a smile. “Some of the buildings have been rebuilt though. Your 21st century was a rough one for the Earth in my universe because of the Eugenics Wars and all, but you humans are a remarkably resilient lot—you get knocked down; you just get back up again and rebuild. You never give up and you have this way of bringing diverse cultures and races together...including mine—and we Romulans are a particularly stubborn and arrogant lot...no easy accomplishment.”

“So how did this clusterfuck in your universe get started?” Joker, silent until now, asked.

Shaking her head, V’lana answered honestly, “You could say it began when the Empire...”

“The Romulan Empire?” Hackett interjected.

Nodding her head, V’lana affirmed, “Yeah. When the Empire began to teeter. The usual internal backstabbing and politicking that we Romulans are known for—I won’t bore you with the details—combined with skirmishes with the Klingons and the Federation and rebellions as lower caste Romulans, Remans, and other subject peoples decided enough was enough laid the groundwork for what was to come. Then the Hobus supernova and the shit hit the fan shortly afterwards when the Klingons came to pick on our bones and the Federation intervened.”

“Damn.” Joker shook his head. “Guess wherever you go there’s always someone pissing in your soup.”

“Yeah.” V’lana agreed as the tour reached its next destination, sickbay, “Doctor? Here’s our sickbay. I’ll leave you to get better acquainted with the doctors and nurses you’ll be working with.” The subcommander directed, “Councilor, Admiral, Captain, if you’ll accompany me to the bridge and then my ready room, we have much to discuss. Lieutenants? Specialist? If you’ll accompany Sublieutenant Solana and Lieutenant Veril, they can show you where your quarters are and help you begin to get acclimated to your duties here. Tovan? Satra? I’d like you to attend the meeting in my ready room as well.”

“Thank you.” Dr. Chakwas responded as she was quickly introduced to Aven and the Romulan nurses currently on duty.

“Ma’am.” Lieutenant Vega replied, bringing his hand up in a salute for himself and the other officers.

“Flight Lieutenant?” V’lana addressed Joker, “If you’d please remain here, our doctor might have some ideas regarding a possible cure for your affliction...”

“I doubt that.” Joker responded in a morose tone. “I suffer from Vrolik’s Syndrome—brittle bone disease. There’s no cure—not even with genetic engineering.”

“Still...” The subcommander urged, “You might want to let our doctor consult with your doctor to see what they can do. While Aven doesn’t usually deal with humans, we do have access to much of the Federation medical database on our ship’s computer—their medical sciences are quite advanced. They might very well have a cure.”

“It’s at least worth a try, Joker.” Dr. Chakwas pleaded. “From what little I’ve seen so far; I’d say these medical facilities are the most advanced I’ve ever seen.”

Heaving a dejected sigh, Joker reluctantly agreed, “All right...I’ll give it a try...but I’m telling you right now, they’re not going to be able to do anything.”

“She might be young...” Councilor Anderson whispered to the Admiral and Captain, “But she knows how to command.”

“It appears she does.” Hannah reluctantly agreed. “Still...I’d like to see how she does in a crisis situation. Maybe we can set up wargames sometime.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Hackett whispered back.

“Oh...this is rich...” V’lana whispered to Kaidan as she and the Staff Commander walked ahead of the others, “Your Captain Shepard wants

to test us in a wargame...she's not sure I can handle myself or my ship in a fight."

"How do you know..." He then held back a chuckle as she gently tugged her ear. "That's right...your hearing's a lot more sensitive than ours..."

"And don't you forget it." V'lana whispered back with a playful smirk. "Still...Captain Shepard's idea does have merit. I'd like to get a handle on your ships' fighting capabilities if we're going to be doing joint operations and you should have a feel for how we do things. Won't be much of a fight though..."

"You're awful sure of yourself." Kaidan whispered.

"It's the simple truth." V'lana whispered back, shrugging her shoulders. "The technology difference is just too great. I'll tell you right now what my plan of attack will be, and you can go ahead and tell them—it won't make a difference. Cloak, attack, take out a ship or three, cloak, and, as you humans say, rinse, lather, repeat. I haven't seen anything you have right now that can stop that. It's not a matter of courage or skill or ability." V'lana declared, "It's technology. On the ground..." She murmured, partly in an effort to soothe wounded pride, "It's a bit more equal. Our energy weapons give us an edge, but not by much when you take into account things like cover, shields, and barriers. Like I told you a while back, your mass accelerated rounds and heavy munitions in ground combat are nothing to take lightly—we saw that on Freedom's Progress. Also, your biotics give you rather unique tactical options. I have a feeling Lieutenant Vega and his friends are solid troops and will get along fine with Solana's assault troopers."

"Which means we'll have to break up a few brawls." Kaidan whispered back, his lips turning up in a crooked grin.

"Of that, I have no doubt." V'lana grinned back as the turbolift door slid open to reveal the bridge. "And here..." She announced, raising her voice, "Is the main bridge."

"Damn." Admiral Hackett whistled.

"That's a sweet setup." Captain Shepard agreed.

"Thank you." V'lana replied, acknowledging the Alliance humans' praises, "If you'll come this way, we can go to my office. We have much to talk about."

"Yes, we do." Admiral Hackett nodded his head only to be once again flabbergasted as his eyes fell upon the spacious office. "Damn. This is at least three times the size of my office."

"Makes that little cubbyhole I used to have on the *Tokyo* look like a closet in comparison." Anderson shook his head in amazement.

"You should see the size of the ready rooms on Federation ships." V'lana chuckled as Satra and Tovan joined the group.

"I can't believe this is a warship." Hannah exclaimed, "It's more like a...pardon me for saying so...a yacht or cruise ship."

Her smile disappearing, V'lana replied, "You should have been on my first command, the *Pharos*. An old *T'liss*-class warbird." She then called up an image on the monitor. "You want to talk about cramped. The *D'helan* I commanded afterwards wasn't much roomier."

"Being given command of a *Valdore* is no small honor." Tovan added, coming to the defense of his commanding officer and friend. "And this ship and crew are more than capable of fighting."

"I meant no disrespect." Captain Shepard quickly backtracked.

"I'm sure the Captain didn't, and no offense was taken." V'lana diplomatically interjected. Nodding her head, satisfied that the human captain had received and understood her unspoken message, the subcommander turned to her first officer and smiled at him, "Tovan? Would you provide our guests with refreshments? I think this qualifies as a special occasion—you know what to break out." As her first officer handed glasses full of a blue liquid to her human guests, V'lana gestured towards the couch and chairs as she took her seat behind her desk, "Romulan ale. Breathe it in first to take in the aroma and then gently sip it."

"Just like you would cognac." Hackett noted as he followed the subcommander's advice. Taking a sip of the ale, he practically gushed in praise, "This is...this is remarkable."

Smiling, V'lana replied, "While many have tried, it can't really be replicated—much like your single malt scotch or Andorian ale—amongst other things. I have a private stash I take with me on voyages for special occasions such as this." Shaking her head, she remarked somberly, "Looks like I'm going to have to make it last for a while."

"So...there's no hope for you to return to your home?" Hannah inquired.

"There's always hope." V'lana responded with a note of optimism in her voice. "We could find a wormhole or we might run into the Elachi or something similar...anything can happen."

"These Elachi." Hackett queried, getting down to business, "What can you tell us about them?"

"Not much more than what I already have." V'lana ruefully admitted. "We were just beginning our investigations when we entered that anomaly."

"What about your experiences when you were captured by the Tal Shiar that time?" Kaidan gingerly inquired. "Didn't both Sela and Hakeev use the phrase indoctrination?"

"Yes..." V'lana nodded her head, "They did."

“Could I ask you to fill us in?” Hackett interjected. “This could be important.”

“Sure.” V’lana replied, “We were ordered to infiltrate the Tal Shiar—to find out what Sela and Hakeev were up to and we were making progress. We found out that the Tal Shiar were salvaging Borg tech...”

“Borg?” Anderson interrupted.

“A cyborg culture...” V’lana explained.

“Like the Geth?” Hannah interjected.

“Hmmm...not really. Not from what I’ve been told about your Geth.” V’lana replied.

“The Geth are purely artificial.” Satra politely interrupted, “While the Borg are a true fusion of organic and cybernetic.”

“Damn.” Anderson shook his head.

“They’re rather difficult to describe in a few short words.” V’lana continued, “I’ll explain more about them later—but for now, I think you wanted to hear about my experience with the Tal Shiar?”

“Right.” Hackett nodded his head as he took another sip of the heady liqueur.

“They attempted to reprogram me into working for them, but it wasn’t your standard type of brainwashing.” V’lana recalled. “They had me do things...” She shuddered uncontrollably, “I fought it the best I could...did everything the opposite of what they wanted me to do.” The humans listened quietly and politely as she explained, “They had a subject...” V’lana remembered as she fought back her tears, “A Romulan. They forced me to put Borg implants into her. I...I...literally tortured that poor woman to try to fight the indoctrination. In the end, I put her through more pain than what she would have endured had I just done what they wanted.”

“And you would have lost yourself in the process.” Kaidan gently interrupted as Tovan nodded his head. “Which was exactly what they wanted.”

“Commander Alenko is right.” Tovan declared, “Don’t forget, Little Sister, I read your report afterwards. You won—you defeated them.”

“Cybernetic implants...mental reprogramming...” Hackett mused, “Sounds a lot like something Cerberus would do.”

“From what I’ve heard about your Cerberus...” V’lana said, “They are very similar to the Tal Shiar.”

“This situation could be far more dangerous than we realized.” Anderson mused, “If her ship made it into this universe, who’s to say other ships might not follow—or might already be here.”

“Or vice versa.” Captain Shepard interjected, “Cerberus might already be in the other universe.”

“And they would have willing collaborators both in the Tal Shiar and a Federation black operations group we only know as Section 31.” V’lana agreed, explaining, “Normally the Federation is bound by its Prime Directive regarding noninterference with other cultures, but that directive has been taken rather liberally on more than one occasion and Section 31 has no problems with outright breaking it.”

“Not to mention the Klingons, the Tholians, the Orions...or even worse—the Borg or Elachi.” Tovan added. “If any of them find their way here...”

“Your Reapers will be the least of your problems.” V’lana emphatically warned her human guests. “No offense to your capabilities...” The Romulan subcommander stated matter-of-factly, “But imagine what a fleet of Klingon battlecruisers or Orion pirates or just one Borg cube can do.”

“What can they do?” Hannah challenged.

“Here...let me play some recordings of prior dealings with the Borg by my people, the Federation, and the Klingon Empire and you can see for yourself. Computer?” The subcommander ordered, “Play all recordings from all powers dealing with the Borg from first contact through the most recent.” Taking a deep breath, V’lana advised, “Make yourselves comfortable. This is going to take a while. One warning—after you see this, you’ll never have a complete night’s sleep ever again.”

As the video recordings played, Hackett, Shepard, and Kaidan’s faces all grew pale as Anderson watched, mouth agape at the destruction caused by just one cube. “This is...” Hackett stammered, his hand trembling. “How did you...how did you manage to defeat those...things?”

“We haven’t.” V’lana admitted, “The Borg are relentless. You defeat one cube...another will be back eventually. It’s a never-ending struggle. But what’s worse is the fate of those taken by the Borg. To become drones...” The Romulan woman shook her head. “I’d rather be dead.”

“And as the subcommander stated, the Borg aren’t the only threat.” Tovan pointed out.

“Do you think they managed to get into our universe?” Anderson inquired.

“There’s no reason to think they didn’t.” V’lana replied, “After all, we’re here and we have evidence that at least someone or something from your universe made it over into ours.”

“And you think the Borg and the Reapers are working together?” Shepard asked.

"It's not impossible." V'lana answered back, "Although I have a feeling the Reapers are the junior partners if they have teamed up. Hell..." She added, "The Borg might not even be calling the shots. It could be the Elachi or someone else."

"We need to find out what's going on." Anderson declared.

"Agreed." V'lana nodded her head. "And from what I've seen and read from the data you've given me after our meeting on the Citadel, I think the best place to start our inquiry will be the Omega system."

"Which means dealing with Aria T'Loak." Hackett declared, explaining, "Nothing happens on that station without her knowledge or approval."

"A dangerous woman." Anderson cautioned, "But if you can gain her cooperation, that would help you immensely."

V'lana grinned as she stood up, "It looks like Omega will be our first stop."

"We'll let you get to it, then, Subcommander." Admiral Hackett responded as he rose to his feet. "Councilor? Captain? I think we should let our new friends get to work."

"Agreed." Councilor Anderson responded as he gave the subcommander and Kaidan a warm smile, "If there's anything you need...you just holler."

"Will do, Councilor." Kaidan grinned back as V'lana nodded her head in reply.

"Councilor...Admiral...Captain. Until we meet again."

Omega

Zaeed Massani grumbled as he hefted the limp unconscious body of the batarian who he had been paid to bring in for 'reasons unspecified.' "Damn...you're heavy." As he made his way down Omega's alleys, the hardened mercenary lugged his prize, barely attracting a glance from those he passed by. Arriving at a locked door, Zaeed activated his omnitool and entered in a sequence of letters and numbers. Nodding his head in satisfaction as the door unlatched and opened, Massani entered the apartment. "Where do you want him?"

"Just dump him on the floor." A Turian wearing body armor responded. "Be the most comfortable place he's going to enjoy for some time."

"Here you go." Zaeed replied as he dumped his cargo on the floor.

"Still alive." Another Turian remarked as he checked the unconscious Batarian.

"I honor my contracts." The grizzled mercenary responded.

"So do we." The first Turian declared as he activated his omnitool. "The bounty has been transmitted to your account."

"Pleasure doing business with you." Zaeed responded as he turned to walk away.

"You up for another job?" The Turian inquired, "We're always looking for people who are reliable and know how to keep their mouths shut."

"Nah." Zaeed replied, "Got one more job here to do and then some unfinished business to take care of and then I'm retiring. Getting too old for this line of work."

Laughing, the Turian responded, "Enjoy your retirement, Old Man." He shook his head in amazement as his voice took on a respectful tone, "Living long enough to retire in this business...gotta be good and lucky."

"Goddamn right." Zaeed rumbled as he exited the room. Returning to the flat near Aria's nightclub, *Afterlife*, that he liked to rent whenever his business took him to Omega, Zaeed activated his monitor. "Seems simple enough." The old mercenary remarked as he examined the images appearing on his screen of a dark haired fair skinned woman and a dark skinned, well-muscled man—both human. "Take these two out and collect my fee." He then read the dossiers supplied by his new, nameless, employer. "Miranda Lawson and Jacob Taylor." His lips then turned down into a frown, "Both highly skilled and powerful biotics. Damn...I hate taking on bios." Massani grumbled as he continued to read. "So...they were last seen making their way to Mordin Solus's clinic. Can't hit 'em at the clinic. That salarian and his mechs will scrag me the moment I draw my weapon. Nah...I'll have to draw 'em out. But how? That area's under quarantine because of the plague..."

Aria T'Loak...the self-styled boss of Omega, sipped her drink in silence as she contemplated her realm from her luxurious couch at the center of her nightclub, *Afterlife*. As the music boomed and the dancers danced, the asari crime-boss read the intelligence intercepts from her pad. As she read, one word was repeated over and over again. "Looks like we might have a new player." Looking up, Aria addressed her Batarian aide and bodyguard, "Bray...I want to know who or what these 'Romulans' are—and I want to know five hours ago."

Cerberus Base—Undisclosed Location

"Welcome to your new command, Commander Shepard." The Illusive Man exclaimed as he gestured with his arm towards the galaxy display.

“The SSV-2 *Normandy*.”

“*Normandy*?” Shepard repeated, cocking her head to the left.

Nodding his head, the Illusive Man affirmed, “Yes. We thought that the name was fitting. Just as you once saved humanity aboard the original *Normandy*, you’ll now command its replacement on your mission to further the good of humanity.”

“I can’t do it alone.” Shepard declared, “I’ll need backup.”

“And you’ll have it.” The Illusive Man responded. “Your crew is one-hundred percent loyal to you and the mission and I’m giving you one of my best people as your XO. Commander Shepard, I’d like you to meet Kai Leng.”

A man with Asian features, wearing black armor approached, “Commander Shepard.” The man nodded his head in greeting.

“Mr. Leng.” Shepard nodded her head in return.

“You’ll find that Kai is a most resourceful man, Commander.”

“I’m sure he is.” Shepard answered back, “What are our first orders?”

Nodding in satisfaction at his puppet’s readiness to follow instructions, the Illusive Man advised, “This is to be a purely human undertaking for the benefit of humanity. We must show everyone that Cerberus is the only body interested in doing that—not the Alliance and definitely not the Citadel. Your first mission will involve the recovery of a Prothean communications device on Feh1 Prime that the Alliance has been safeguarding, but not foolishly not permitting us or anyone else to study. We need that device.”

“So you want us to go and get it.” Shepard concluded as the Illusive Man nodded his head in agreement. “Understood. We’ll begin immediately.”

“Good.” The Illusive Man smiled as he nodded his head, “Oh...one other thing...” He said, his eyes carefully gauging his puppet’s reaction to his next statement, “Alliance forces on Feh1 Prime will most likely resist any efforts to take the beacon.” He then paused for a moment, “That won’t present a problem for you—will it?”

“Of course not.” Shepard replied, “If the Alliance interferes, then they are not part of the solution—they are part of the problem. And I know how to deal with problems.”

“Good.” The Illusive Man smirked. “Then I will leave you to your mission. Good hunting, Commander Shepard.”

As the Illusive Man’s image faded away, Commander Shepard turned to the Cerberus assassin who was her new first officer, “Shall we begin, Mr. Leng?”

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