

## Mind Tripping

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/451) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/451>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Multi</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Raptor-verse</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Twesata Glex/Rana Thanoptis</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Ensemble Cast - RAP</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Mass Effect Fusion</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 32 of <a href="#">The Raptor-verse</a>
Stats:	Published: 2023-06-30 Words: 8,355 Chapters: 2/2

## Mind Tripping

by [DavidFalkayn](#)

### Summary

Twesata and Rana take a trip through Dixie's memories and discover some unpleasant surprises.

## Act One

*FLASH!!*

The three women suddenly found themselves amongst ruins, the sound of fighting and explosions nearby. "Where are we?" Twesata asked as she recognized Dr. Treeya, Edi, and two men wearing what appeared to be uniforms.

"Fehl Prime." Dixie replied in a soft voice as the ghostly images from her past once again came to life.

*"You all right, Doc? Dixie called out.*

*"Dr. Treeya?" Reynolds shouted, rushing up to where the asari scientist stood in stunned silence.*

*Slowly recovering, Treeya took a deep breath before telling the three people with her what she saw. "I saw the Protheans. They fought the Reapers here. Those that weren't killed...they were turned into Collectors."*

*"It would appear that the Reapers had repurposed the Protheans into Collectors." Edi surmised.*

*"And the Illusive Man's wanting to do the same thing to us." Doris gasped, "Just like what happened to Jackson."*

*"No." Edi shook her head. "Not completely. Yes, the Illusive Man used much of the same genetic engineering techniques that the Reapers used, and yes, he did use Reaper cybernetic tech. But...there is another technology and another form of genetic engineering."*

*"Borg?" Doris questioned, "You think they're talkin' about some sorta cyborg?"*

*"That would be a logical deduction." Edi responded as they heard the sound of movement on the other side of the door.*

*"Shepard." Doris exclaimed, "She's here. We gotta get out—Now!"*

"Shepard would be that clone—right?" Twesata inquired as the images faded away.

"Yeah." Doris replied, "At least we think she's a clone. When me and Edi hacked into the Cerberus data banks, we went looking for info on her, but even Edi ran into a brick wall once she got to a certain point. What we did find out was that Cerberus had a couple of programs going at the same time: Project Lazarus and Project Rebirth."

"Okay." Twesata prompted, "What were you able to find out about those programs?"

Doris explained, "Cerberus had managed to get hold of Shepard's body after she was supposedly killed when the *Normandy* was destroyed by the Collectors. The files we downloaded say that they had planned on bringing her back to life. That was what Project Lazarus was supposed to be about. The lead for the project was Miranda Lawson. She was in tight with the Illusive Man..."

"Illusive Man?" Twesata chuckled in amusement.

"That is the name given to the head of Cerberus." Rana interjected, "No one knows his true name or appearance. I have my doubts that there really is just one Illusive Man."

"A committee or something like that maybe?" Twesata speculated, "Could be. Can you tell us anything about who or what this Illusive Man is, Doris?"

"Not really." The Alabama born engineer replied with a shake of her head, "I heard his voice a few times and saw his image on a few training vids, but I couldn't describe him." Concentrating for a few moments, she shook her head, "Sorry...my mind's a blank."

"Hmmm..." Twesata murmured, "Curious. You thinking what I'm thinking imzadi?"

"Maybe." Rana nodded, "It would fit in with Cerberus's M.O."

"What are ya'll talking about?" Doris pleaded her expression a worried one.

Speaking kindly to her tormented patient, Twesata explained, "We think that it's very likely that Cerberus deliberately erased any sort of definitive knowledge of the Illusive Man from your memories."

"Can you get them back and what else did they do to me?" Doris begged plaintively.

"That's what we're going to find out and fix." Twesata declared emphatically. "But before we can do that, we're going to have to do some more digging. This Illusive Man might not even be a real person. He could be an AI for all we know."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, *siha*." Rana cautioned, "What more can you tell us about Project Lazarus, Doris?"

"Hmmm...I told you the idea was to bring Shepard back to life, right?" Continuing as the two telepaths signaled their agreement, Doris explained further, "The files that we were able to hack into said that Miranda Lawson wanted to implant a behavioral chip, but the Illusive Man overruled her. That he wanted Shepard as she was. Why would he want her back as she was knowing that she was an enemy of Cerberus? That don't make a lick of sense."

"No. It doesn't." Twesata agreed, "Not from what Ashley's told us about this Commander Shepard. She makes her out to be some sort of goddess. Rana? You had dealings with her, what do you think?"

"I only ran into her once." The asari geneticist replied, "And I was scared shitless at the time. But..." she paused for a moment before continuing, "She did spare my life when she could have just as easily killed me. From what I've read about Shepard and from what Ashley has told us, I can't see her joining up with Cerberus voluntarily. Not unless there was a damned good reason to do so--and even then, she'd do everything she could to make life miserable for the Illusive Man behind the scenes."

"What was Project Rebirth?" Twesata asked Doris.

"That was cloning project." Doris replied, "They intended to grow a clone in case Shepard needed limb or organ replacements. Edi and I think that the Illusive Man switched the clone in after Shepard was killed."

Shaking her head, Twesata mused, "Maybe--but I don't think so. Not if they were planning on using it just for spare parts. Contrary to popular belief..." the Betazoid science officer explained, "Clones are not completely identical."

"Right." Rana quickly affirmed, "The genetic makeup is identical, but a variety of environmental and other factors come into play. Cloning is also a very delicate process--a lot can go wrong. Even the Dominion, who are experts in cloning, make mistakes and produce defective clones at times. And I'm willing to bet that the Dominion is a lot more advanced than Cerberus--unless it's gotten outside help."

"True." Twesata nodded. "Someone more advanced could very easily have given this Cerberus organization the tools and knowledge necessary to pull this off."

Rana continued to speculate, "To do any of this would call for sophisticated bio- and genetic engineering. Not to mention a fair amount of cybernetic work."

"Those morons!" Twesata shook her head in disbelief. "If what we're all thinking is what I think we're thinking, then those idiots made this Shepard into some sort of cross between an augment and a Borg. Didn't anyone clue them in on how dangerous that was? Hell! They might as well have crossed a giant Dewan arthropod with a jackal mastiff! They would have to have those behavioral implants and most likely a fail safe as well in case she got out of line--which sooner or later she would--whether she was a clone or not. Hmmm...you know what we have to do, imzadi?"

"I do." Rana affirmed, "After we finish here, we need to talk to the girls, Captain Magnussen, Admiral Tuvok, and the Triad. If those dumbasses did what we think they did to Shepard was really fucked up."

"And I'm betting they did." Twesata agreed.

"Ya'll ain't talking about what I think you are? Are you?" Doris asked with a worried look on her face

"It's just a hunch for now and we could well be wrong." Twesata replied with a worried frown, "Besides, even if we are right, there's nothing we can do about it anyway--at least not right now. But assuming we do find a way to cross over into your universe, you might have just given us a key bit of intelligence." Before Twesata could say anything else, she took a deep breath as phantoms from her own past emerged.

*FLASH...*

*"Request for transfer denied."*

*"May I ask why, Commander?"*

*"No...you may not. Dismissed."*

Images from Rana's recent past also played out in the shared mindscape.

*FLASH...*

*"Log update...Subject 342...adult salarian...approximate age 10...human equivalent age...30. Rapid decrease in serotonin levels indicates advanced phases of indoctrination..."*

"What was that?" Doris exclaimed as that image and others of Twesata partying and getting stoned played out and then images of Rana conducting experiments on salarians captured by Saren and the geth. "That was you! You were experimenting on those poor salarians!" Doris mentally shouted, her anger threatening to sever their connection until Twesata took charge and calmed the distraught woman down.

"Yes." Rana in tears, confessed. "It was me. Saren hired me to study indoctrination. I didn't realize what I was getting myself into until it was too late. If I hadn't found that gateway and Shepard hadn't attacked Virmire, I would have been just like them." She sobbed as she pointed at

the indoctrinated salarions shambling about randomly in their cells, mumbling to themselves.

“You got a second chance!” Doris protested, “Why shouldn’t I?”

“That’s what we’re giving to you now!” Twesata declared in a firm voice.

“Like we told you...” Rana explained in a soothing voice, “You’re going to see things from our memories just as we see details from yours. We all have done things that we’re ashamed of later. Ashley almost shot me when we met in the tunnels underneath Saren’s labs. I think the only thing that saved my ass was that giant Dewan arthropod wandering about down there.”

“Right.” Twesata affirmed as the frozen phantoms began to move again, reenacting the events of Doris, Edi, and Dr. Treeya’s escape. Not finding what they were looking for, the Betazoid telepath concluded, “There’s no sign of deep conditioning here. We’re going to have to go deeper...”

“Where are we now?” Rana inquired as the images faded and reformed. They were in the corridor of a spaceship, crew wearing black, white, and gold uniforms walking by and through them.

“It’s the *Normandy SR-2*” Dixie replied, “That’s me!” She exclaimed, pointing at her image now moving at a brisk pace down the corridor. “This must be when Edi and I escaped. Before what happened on Fehl Prime. I told Edi to secure a shuttle for us and lay low while I took care of a few things.”

“Like what?” Twesata asked.

“Personal belongings and some OCDs that I burned with copies of what I downloaded from the computer—in case something happened to me and Edi. That’s when that snake Kai Leng called me into his office. I thought he’d found out what happened and that I was dead for sure.”

*FLASH...*

“*Specialist Whaley?*”

“*Sir?*” Doris turned about only to see one of the two people she least wanted to run into—Kai Leng. “*What can I do for you?*”

“*Join me in my office.*” The ship’s executive officer replied, “*There’s something I want to discuss with you.*”

“*Yes, Sir.*” Doris meekly replied with a lump in her throat. “*Right behind you.*”

Watching as the scene played out, Twes complimented Doris, “You did a good job handling that psycho.”

“Thanks.” Dixie smiled weakly, “A couple o’ times I thought I was gonna piss my pants. I’ve seen him cut someone’s head off with one slash from that katana of his.”

“There’s nothing here.” Rana shook her head. “I don’t think we’re going to find any sign of deep conditioning in any of her recent memories.”

“Probably not.” Twesata agreed, “Doris...we need you to take us further back. We need to go back to when you first joined Cerberus up to when you were assigned to the *Normandy*.”

“You think that’s when they might have done it to me? Doris asked.

“If they did anything at all...” Twesata concluded, “It would most likely be sometime within that period.”

“Early on was when you were most vulnerable and open to suggestion.” Rana pointed.

“Yeah.” Doris agreed, “I was a basket case after my brother died.”

“And they could easily have done it prior to your last mission under the guise of undergoing a physical exam or something similar.” Twesata added, receiving a confirming nod from the young Alabaman.

“That’s right!” Dixie exclaimed, “They did order me to report for an exam before reporting to the *SR-2*. Said it wasn’t anything to worry about. Just routine before going on a sensitive shipboard assignment.”

“I’m willing to bet my entire stash of prime tellaweed that’s when they did it.” Twesata remarked, “But let’s be sure and start from the beginning. Concentrate on when you were first approached by Cerberus and the time immediately after that. If we don’t find anything there, we’ll move forward.”

“Okay. I had just graduated from Bama with my degree in computer engineering and was just about to go home. My friend, Zara’ Arosa, and I were kinda having a combination celebration and goodbye dinner at the Galactic Food Court in Tuscaloosa—it’s in the Bear Bryant Mall an’ they got food stalls and all for both levo- and dextro- species. Anyway, I was plannin’ on doing graduate work in computer science at Purdue an’ she was going to the Palaven Astrophysics Institute for her doctorate. She wanted to specialize in cosmology—she was really interested in dark matter and dark energy when I got an emergency call from my Momma...”

FLASH...

"So what will you be specializing in?" Zara asked as she purchased a tube of nutri-paste that was supposed to replicate the taste of a common, yet tasty, traditional quarian meal.

"Virtual intelligence science an' programmin'." Doris replied as she eyed hungrily the veggie burger and fries on her plate.

"Touchy subject these days." The young quarian woman commented, "The line between virtual and artificial intelligence is a fine one."

"Tell me about it!" Doris sighed, "You wouldn't believe all the screenings and interviews with all sorts o' people I had to go through before they even considered me for a slot. What about you? Isn't grad school gonna delay you getting done with your Pilgrimage?"

Zara responded with a brief chuckle. "I'm not sure I'll ever finish it."

"Why not?"

"You know that we're supposed to bring a gift back for the captain of the ship we want to join—don't you?" Taking her friend's head nod as an affirmative, Zara continued, "One thing you have to understand about my people—because we don't have a settled home and most of our ships are several centuries old and those that aren't come from almost every race and in all shapes and sizes, we quarians tend to focus more on applied disciplines and pragmatic pursuits like engineering or computer science. You know I tend more towards the theoretical side of things—like cosmology."

"Okay...you like using your head instead of your hands...nothin' wrong with that. I'm sure your people wouldn't hold that against you."

"Oh no! Of course not!" Zara exclaimed, "But the theoretical knowledge you learn is expected to lead to something that benefits the Flotilla in a concrete way—like for instance something that might give us an edge on the geth or to improve the efficiency of our engines or ships' systems. Knowledge for pure knowledge's sake while not discouraged, isn't actively encouraged either. Those quarians who do go into fields of pure knowledge like philosophy, comparative theology, and cosmology tend to leave the Flotilla and take positions at universities like Serrice or Palaven."

"So you think that's what you're gonna do?"

"Probably." The young quarian nodded her head. "Although I do want to return to the Flotilla after I finish school—if for no other reason than to see my parents and friends."

"We were halfway through our meal when I got a call from home. That call changed everything." Doris remarked with mournful sigh as the memories from her past played out before her and the two telepaths linked to her.

"Excuse me, Sugar." Dixie apologized as her omnitool signaled an incoming transmission. "It's Momma and it's beeping urgent. I better answer it."

"Go on ahead." Zara replied as she ate more of her nutripaste.

"Hi, Momma! Is everything okay?"

Doris could hear her mother sobbing as she gave her daughter the bad news. "It's about Jerry, Sugar."

"What about him? Is he okay?" Doris asked with a tremor to her voice.

"A man from the Alliance marines came over." Dixie's mother cried, "He gave me a disk and told me that your brother was killed in action."

"No!" Doris cried out, drawing the attention of her fellow diners.

"Is everything all right, Dixie?" Zara asked, her voice tone reflecting her concern for her friend.

"You know Jerry...Gerald...my brother..." Doris stammered as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"He's the one in the marines—right?" Quickly putting the pieces together, the young quarian said in a quiet, gentle voice, "Something happened to him..."

"Baby?"

"I'm still here, Momma." Doris replied through her tears, "Did they say how it happened?"

"He was fightin' batarian terrorists in the Traverse." Her mother responded, "The disk I got said that several slugs got through his armor when his kinetic shield went down. The damage was too severe for the medigel in his suit and by the time they got to him, it was too late. He was already gone."

"Did they..."

"He's comin' home, Sugar." Doris's mother replied, "The marine who gave me the news told me that they never leave anyone behind. He should be home in a couple of days and we're plannin' on having his funeral on Monday. Reverend Prescott's gonna perform the service. He and the some of the ladies choir I sing with at church are with me now. They're the only things keepin' me from fallin' apart."

"I'm on my way, Momma." Doris promised, "I'm gonna get on the first transport maglev available and be right over as soon as possible."

*"Thanks, Sugar. I'll have your room ready for you when you get here. Love you my baby."*

*"I love you too, Momma. Bye."*

*"Zara?"*

*"Go." The quarian astrophysicist urged, "You've got someone who needs you now."*

*"You comin' to the funeral?"*

*Nodding her head, Zara replied, "Yeah. I'll be there. Now...go...you don't want to be late for the maglev."*

*"Thanks, Zara." Dixie said through her sobs as she gave her quarian friend a hug, "You're my best friend."*

*"I'm sorry, Doris." Twesata said, offering her condolences as the mental image froze, as if put on pause. "I lost family during the Dominion War."*

The mental images changed, now becoming starships engaged in a fierce battle. "Wow!" Dixie gasped in disbelief as she witnessed the destructive power of phasers, compression beams, quantum torpedoes, and polaron beams.

*"It was early in the war. I wasn't there at the time, of course...I hadn't even been born yet. But I remember what my parents and my grandmother told me." Twesata explained in a soft voice. "The Dominion had taken DS-9 and both Starfleet and the Klingons were taking a beating. There was a research facility located on an otherwise worthless hunk of rock called Korliss V. He was serving on the *Repulse*, the leader of the taskforce that had been put together to screen the evacuation of the scientists. It wasn't much of a taskforce—old ships...border cutters...a couple of runabouts. And they had to take on a Cardassian taskforce supported by Jem'Hadar bugs. The task force succeeded in holding off the Cardies and Jemmies until the outpost was evacuated, but..."*

*"The taskforce got wiped out?" Doris finished sadly. "Your uncle was one of the ones killed, wasn't he?"*

*Nodding her head, Twesata replied, "Yeah. I also lost an aunt and a couple of cousins in the war. My grandparents fought in the resistance when Betazed was occupied. The Cardies and Jemmies found out there what happens when you try to take over a planet occupied by pissed off telepaths and empaths."*

After several moments of silence, the image again changed, this time to that of a young man talking with Doris.

*"Zara was with me all during the funeral and after and only left when it was time for her to go to Palaven." Doris moaned, "She was a real friend and didn't deserve the way I shat on her. A couple of days later, another friend of mine, Kenny, came to see me an' Momma..."*

*"He's the one that led you to Cerberus." Rana prompted.*

*"Yeah." Doris sighed, "He gave me the pitch and I bought it hook, line, and sinker. Stupid...ain't I?"*

*"You've got nothing to be ashamed of." Twesata again consoled, "He caught you at just the right time—when you were most vulnerable."*

*"They must have had their eyes on you for a long time." Rana said, "He was probably picked to recruit you because of your close ties."*

*FLASH...*

*"Hey, Kenny! Thanks for helping out with everything." Tears came to the grieving woman's eyes as she hugged her friend close. "You don't know what it means to me and Momma."*

*"I was a friend of Jerry's too." Kenny said as he helped Doris dry her eyes. "How's Momma Whaley holding up?"*

*"Better than yesterday. I guess we both are." Doris replied as she slowly recovered, "We've been going through Jerry's things deciding what to keep...what to give away to charity...you know..."*

*"Yeah." Guiding his childhood friend to the sofa and sat down next to her. "So how are you feeling."*

*"Pissed off." Doris growled, "I found out from the news that the Alliance wasn't gonna go after the terrorists who killed him. Said going into the *Traverse* in force would increase tensions at a bad time. It's always a bad time for them. How many marines like Jerry and colonists like those poor people on Mindoir have to die before the Alliance gets off its lazy ass and does something about those batarian murderers!"*

*"You know..." Kenny said, setting out his lure, "There is an organization that makes it their business to protect human lives like Jerry and those colonists."*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"It's a secret organization founded a few years ago dedicated to protecting human lives and human interests." Kenny explained, "I belong to it. That's one of the reasons why I'm often gone for several weeks or months."*

*"I thought that was just part of your job as a sales rep." Doris replied, astonished at the revelation.*

*"The sales rep. position is a cover." Kenny smiled, "It makes it easier to explain why I'm gone so long or have to leave all of a sudden. But I've been working for the past couple of years doing what I can to help humanity. Cerberus thinks you can help too. That's why they said it was all right for me to tell you about them. They want you to join them. They can give you all the training that you'd have gotten at Purdue and then some. And you'll get the chance to make sure that those batarian terrorists and anyone else who tries to hurt or kill innocent humans never does it again. So you want me to get you in touch with them?"*

*After several moments of careful thought and consideration, during which she could hear her mother sobbing as the older woman apparently found another valued keepsake of her brother's, Dixie's grief and anger overcame her initial hesitancy. "Tell them I wanna talk to them. If they can promise me that they'll help me get back at those bastards who killed my brother and make sure something like this never happens again, I want to join 'em."*

*Nodding his head, her old friend replied as he gave her a goodbye hug, "I'll let them know. Someone will contact you in a day or two. I'm sorry, but I gotta go now. Take care of yourself Doris and tell Momma Whaley I came by and asked about her."*

*"I will." Doris sobbed as she gave Kenny a goodbye hug, "An' I'll be waiting for your friend's call."*

"Sure enough." Doris sighed as the memories once again paused. "A couple o' days later, someone called me and asked to meet with me at the diner in town. We met and she backed up what Kenny told me. She said that the school I'd be attending would give me a graduate degree in computer engineering. When I told her I wanted to help fight the batarians, she said that the school would also give me combat training as a field engineer. I was hooked. I had enough time to say goodbye to Momma and then they shipped me off world to what they called their training center."

Images of her training passed as Twesata queried, "Other than engineering, what courses did you take?"

"I had to take a lot of what they called comparative cultural and social studies, especially recent history. They put a lot of weight on the First Contact War and later the Alliance signing the Treaty of Farixen."

"All races joining the Council have to sign that treaty." Rana explained to her lover.

"Yeah." Doris agreed, adding, "Having to sign it really sticks in the craw for many humans."

"What are the terms of the treaty?" Twesata inquired, her lover responding to her query.

"It's an arms limitations pact that limits the number of dreadnought class ships Council races can possess." Rana explained, "In theory it's supposed to limit destructive wars by limiting capital ship production."

"But in actually it's a way for these turians to maintain naval dominance...right?" Twesata asked as both Doris and Rana nodded in agreement.

"It's a ratio favoring the turians." Rana explained. "For every five dreadnoughts the turians have, the asari and salarians are allowed three, while associate races like the hanar, elcor, and humans can have only one."

"Yeah." Doris affirmed, adding further, "The Alliance found a way to get around that though by constructing carriers instead 'cause they're not included in the treaty."

Chuckling, Rana interjected, "Once the turians figured that out, they hit the ceiling, but there wasn't anything they could do about it because whenever the turian councilor motioned to amend the treaty, the asari and salarian councilors shot him down because they were building carriers of their own too."

"I'm betting that Cerberus used these courses as indoctrination tools—stressing how humans were being slighted and put down by the other races." Twesata postulated, getting ready agreement from the Cerberus defector.

"You got that right." Doris confirmed, "The lecturers also really went after the quarians—blaming them for the AI rebellion and creation of the geth and said that their pilgrims were nothing but thieves, spies, and saboteurs. I knew that was a lie cause o' Zara." Doris sobbed, "But they kept repeating and stressing it. The teacher would tell me that the reason Zara was going to school on Earth was because she was waiting for the right opportunity to steal some o' our technology and bring it back to the Flotilla. When I went to bed at night, I could hear the teacher's lecture while I slept."

"Hypnopedia." Twesata concluded, "It's a form of learning while you sleep. The instruction works on your subconscious. That, combined with repeating the propaganda over and over again and using subliminal imagery will get you to believe almost any bullshit they decide to shovel out to you."

"It worked." Doris sighed, "By the time I finished training, I hated Zara." The tormented engineer then asked in a halting voice, "Is this the conditioning?"

"It's a form of conditioning." Rana affirmed, "But not what we're looking for."

"Right." Twesata agreed, "What they did here was really more a form of intense indoctrination than anything else. You probably overcame it before you made your escape—most likely you were already on your way to breaking the conditioning once you started going on missions."

"Yeah." Doris nodded her head, "I remember when we went to get Jack..." Different images—of a gunfight between Doris's team and another group over the unconscious form of a shaven-headed young woman played out as she spoke. "Shepard..."

"That's her?" Twesata asked, freezing the images as she pointed at a female wearing Cerberus body armor taking her helmet off, apparently to

parley with the other side. Her red hair clearly distinguishing her.

“That’s how I remember Shepard from Vir mire and a couple of times on the Citadel when she was there the same time I was.” Rana affirmed.

“Yeah. That’s Shepard.” Doris echoed as the images once again moved, “Jack...” she pointed at the unconscious woman, “was a powerful biotic. Our orders were to get her out of a maximum security prison and bring her back to Cerberus. One of those fightin’ us must have recognized Shepard and knew her. I think he was part of Shepard’s old team. Anyway she used the distraction to catch him off guard and wounded him when he walked out in the open to talk to her and then Shepard told his friends that they could either continue to fight it out or let us get away with Jack and save their friend.”

“They chose to save their friend.” Twesata concluded, Doris nodding in agreement.

“Somethin’ seemed wrong about that, but I didn’t say anything at the time. Instead when we got back to the ship we all celebrated getting the mission done. But while I was drinkin’ my beer and jokin’ with Benji and Jason, I kept askin’ myself what did Cerberus want with that poor girl. It just didn’t sit right with me, but...” She shook her head.

“It’s all right.” Rana consoled as new images appeared, this time it was Rana speaking with a turian.

*FLASH!*

*“Your task will be to investigate Reaper indoctrination.” The turian declared, “I want to know how it is done...its short and long term effects...and...whether there is any way to counteract or mitigate it.”*

*“What do you have on file?” Rana inquired, “DNA and RNA samples would also be very helpful as would any scans of brain and neurological activity.”*

*Escorting his new scientist into a cell block, the turian gestured at a variety of inmates, “You have your choice of test subjects to examine. You may begin with this one...” He stated as the pair stopped in front of a cell housing a mumbling salarian. “He was your predecessor. I trust now you’ll understand now how speed is of the essence...”*

*Looking up at the imposing sight of the turian spectre, Rana gulped, “Yes, Saren.”*

*“Good. Then get to work.”*

“That was when you started working for Saren.” Doris concluded, the asari nodding in confirmation.

“Yeah. He recruited me on the Citadel. My fellowship had ended and I was running out of funds when he approached me with this too good to be true job offer to, in his words, carry out independent innovative research and that I would be very well compensated. Like I said, I was short on funds and couldn’t find work so I took him up on the job. It was only when I got to Vir mire, saw the cells, and saw what happened to my predecessor that I realized how big a mistake I had made. Fortunately, I found the hidden tunnels under the research lab and the gateway—otherwise...” the asari neurologist shook her head, “I’d either be dead—incinerated in the blast of that nuke Shepard set off or simply gunned down as a loose end, or I’d have ended up another indoctrinated drone like those salarians.”

“That’s why you’ve been...” Doris began before Rana finished her thought.

“Yeah. I got a second chance. First, when Shepard let me go instead of just killing me, and later when Ashley didn’t shoot me. Coming here gave both me and Ashley a chance to start over. I figure you deserve the same thing.”

“You were probably already well under way to breaking your indoctrination when you began working on Edi.” Twesata told the blonde defector. “All that time you spent in your lab working by yourself away from the influence of your teammates, not to mention Shepard and that psycho, weakened the conditioning even more, and then when you cracked into their files...”

“Yeah. It felt like being whacked by a two by four.”

“Exactly.” Rana replied, adding, “So we now know that your time in training was not where the deep conditioning took place—if you were conditioned.”

“The only other possibility...” Twesata concluded, “would be after you graduated your training school and just before you reported aboard the *Normandy*. Let’s go to the time when you found out that you were assigned to your ship and proceed from there. I have a feeling that’s where we’re going to find it.”

“And once we find it.” Rana vowed, “We’re going to get rid of it.”



## Act 2

### Chapter Summary

Rana and Twesata continue their journey through Dixie's mind.

*FLASH!*

*"Hey, Doris! Wait up!"*

*Turning at the sound of her name, Doris greeted the woman approaching her with a smile. "Hey, Jackie! What's up? I heard you got picked for a special assignment."*

*"Yeah." An auburn haired woman with freckles replied with a wide grin. "I wish I could tell you more about it, but you know..."*

*Recognizing at once one of the Cerberus base's ever-present surveillance devices, Doris nodded her head, "Yeah...operational security."*

*"Exactly." Jackie responded, "I hear you graduated tech training top of your class. Congratulations."*

*"I got lucky on my finals." Doris modestly replied, "To be honest, I thought I'd screwed up the combat tech practicals but I ended up acing them."*

*"That's great! You're probably going to get your choice of assignment. So have you decided on what branch you wanna go into?"*

*"I'm hoping to go into military ops." Doris answered back, "I want a chance at those four-eyed toads that killed my brother."*

*"Yeah...I hear you." Jackie responded sympathetically before saying her goodbyes. "Well...I gotta go now. Take care of yourself out there."*

*"You too!"*

*"I didn't know it at the time, but Jackie was one of the first they selected for the ETAP program." Shaking her head, the young engineer lamented, "You shoulda seen what they did to her—she was part human...part machine."*

*"Like a Borg drone." Twesata remarked, "Not a good sign."*

*"You don't want to go up against the Borg, Dixie." Rana cautioned. "We tangled with them once or twice and both times we were lucky to get away with our lives."*

*FLASH!*

*"Resistance is futile."*

*"If I hear that one more time, I'm going to fucking scream!" Twesata cursed as she fired her phaser at the drone only to have the beam deflect off its shields.*

*"Shit!" Ashley shouted as her fire was also deflected, "They've adapted."*

*"Change your frequency modulations!" Nelia commanded as a pair of phaser turrets materialized next to her.*

*"You got enough juice in you for a throw, Rana?" Shelana called out as her remodulated phaser beam impacted on its target, disintegrating it.*

*"Yeah." The asari geneticist responded. "You girls ready?"*

*"Body splat on Nelia's command."*

*"Gotcha!"*

*Nelia shouted instructions, "There's a node at your two o'clock, Rana. Aim your throw there. Ash...Twes...Shels...time on target on the node. We hit it simultaneously, that should crash it and take out those drones."*

*"On my mark!" Shelana shouted. "One...two...three. Now, Rana! Now, girls! Hit it!"*

*A Borg drone, caught by the asari's biotic throw, crashed into the node at the same time as the phaser beams struck, bringing it down in a*

*massive explosion.*

*“Damn.” Ashley swore, panting from exertion as she and her Andorian friend dispatched the last of the drones. “That was a helluva fight.”*

*“Let’s not do that again.” Nelia quipped as Twesata rushed to her staggering lover.*

*“You okay, imzadi?”*

*“Yeah.” Rana replied as she caught her breath, “I think my combat biotics are getting better, but goddess they take a lot out of me. I think I’m gonna sleep for a week or two.”*

*“That’s some of what they did with Jackie.” Doris said, shivering at her first look at the Borg. “Only worse. She looked almost like one of those husks that Shepard ran into.”*

*“Shit.” Twesata swore. “Take a bad situation and make it worse.”*

*“You don’t think they did something like that to me—do you?” Doris asked with a tremor to her voice.*

*“Nothing like that.” The Betazoid telepath replied in a soothing voice before cautioning, “But they might have done something more subtle. Didn’t you tell us that they made you go in for a physical or something similar?”*

*“Yeah. They told me it was routine—that I’d be in and out.”*

*“You thinking what I’m thinking, imzadi?” Twesata asked her lover.*

*Nodding her head, the asari scientist answered back, “If they did anything, that’s when they would have done it.”*

*“Okay, Dixie…” Twesata instructed in a level tone, “Take us to when you went in for your physical.”*

*FLASH!*

*“Specialist Doris Whaley reporting for physical.” Doris announced as she entered the room.*

*“Relax, Doris.” An elderly, father-like, grey-haired man wearing a standard medical jumpsuit smiled paternally as he greeted his patient. “I’m Dr. Welby. Just have a seat over there…” the doctor gestured at what appeared to be an examination chair with its back slightly inclined, “and we’ll get started.”*

*“I don’t need to get undressed or anything like that?”*

*“No.” Dr. Welby smiled, “This is just the standard exam we give everyone before they go on a mission. I’m just going to check your vitals and then give you a shot that’s a broad-spectrum vaccine. It won’t necessarily prevent you from getting sick…” he cautioned, “but it will help you from getting sicker.”*

*“All right. You’re the Doc.” Dixie exclaimed as she leaped up on the chair and settled in. “Ready.”*

*“First I’m going to check your temperature, blood pressure, and heart rate, and then I’ll inject you and you’ll be on your way.”*

*As soon as the doctor injected her, Doris felt her eyelids growing heavier as she heard the doctor’s soothing voice, “Just relax. This isn’t going to hurt and you won’t remember a thing when you awaken.”*

*“That’s when they did it.” Rana exclaimed, “While you were on that examination chair.”*

*“The Tal’Shiar used something like that for deep programming sleeper agents.” Twesata pointed out with a grimace, “They like to do it while the subject is unconscious—it makes it easier.”*

*“Can you…” Doris stammered, “Can you fix me.”*

*“We’re going to do our best.” Twesata promised, Rana nodding her head in agreement. “To do this though…you’re going to have to trust me and Rana”*

*“What are you gonna do?”*

*“We’re going to deepen our bond with you even more than it is already, but it’s the only way to free you. So…”*

*“Go ahead.” Doris replied, “I just want that damned thing outta me.”*

*“Rana? Are you ready?”*

*“Yes.” The beautiful asari affirmed, “Are you?”*

*“Let’s do it.”*

"It's so foggy..." Doris moaned as a thick haze surrounded her and her friends, threatening to engulf them.

"Concentrate on clearing out a little space around the fog." Twesata instructed.

"But I'm not a telepath."

"You don't have to be." Rana encouraged in a soothing voice, "That fog represents the conditioning. We have to work our way past it to get to your subconscious memories."

"Take baby steps." Twesata advised. "Concentrate first on just clearing the space around you. We'll help you."

"All right. I'll try my best." Straining, Doris gasped the fog closest to her grew less opaque.

"You're doing great, Dixie." Rana exclaimed in praise, "Keep doing it."

"I'm trying, but it's like chipping at concrete with nothin' but a spoon."

"Keep pushing, Dixie!" Twesata urged as the faintest hints of daylight began to appear. "You're almost there."

"Just a little more, Dixie!" Rana cried out, mentally pushing the young woman forward.

"Hey..." Doris shouted as the cracks grew wider, allowing more light to come in and dispel the gloom. "Ya'll are callin' me Dixie!"

"Of course we are." Twesata's mental avatar grinned, "That's your nickname isn't it?"

"Yeah." The Alabaman girl replied, her mental avatar smiling, "Does that mean..."

"We believe you." Rana affirmed, "Yeah."

"What about..."

"Ash and Shels?" Twesata chuckled, "Don't worry we'll talk to them."

"Ash might grumble a little for a while." Rana joked.

"So will Shels." Twesata added as the light grew brighter. "I've always known her to be that way since we were together at the Academy. But don't worry. They'll come around. Just remember that with those two actions speak louder than words."

"I hear you." Dixie replied, "What about the green-skinned woman? Ya'll's leader?"

"Nelia?" Rana grinned, "Once we show her that we took care of the problem, she'll be all right."

"We're almost there." Twesata pushed, "Just a little more, Dixie!" Then, the last of the fog dissipated to once again reveal the examination room. "We're in your subconscious memories now, Doris. Just relax and let the memories come to you." Nodding her head in approval as the Cerberus defector followed her instructions, the Betazoid telepath praised, "Good...very good..."

"I hear the doctor talking with two men. I can't make out who they are...they're covered by shadows." Dixie said as she and her mental companions began to hear a low murmur.

"You're doing great." Rana exclaimed, "Focus. Use all of your senses."

"I smell something." Doris announced. "It's acrid...sharp...smells like cigarette smoke."

"Good." Twesata remarked, "We know one of the men is a smoker. Did you know anyone who smokes in your universe?"

"My grandpa used to smoke." Doris replied, "But he died a few years back—while I was still in high school." After a momentary pause, she continued, "I don't personally know anyone who smokes."

"Concentrate on the cigarette smoking man." Rana instructed, "Tell us about him."

"Tall. Thin. He's wearing a suit. No...can't be? Can it?" Dixie rambled, "He's the Illusive Man! That was him I saw on the training videos! He was wearing a suit like that—real expensive."

"Looks like you broke that part of the conditioning." Twesata praised, earning a bright smile from Doris in return. "Good job."

"I'm starting to make out words!" Dixie exclaimed.

"Good." Rana encouraged, "Now...relax...let your subconscious flow freely...give their words sound."

*FLASH!*

*The doctor reported to the cigarette smoking man and the other figure enclosed in shadows. "I was able to successfully implant the hidden*

*directive, but...*

*"But what?" The cigarette smoking man replied, demanding an answer.*

*"She has a strong will." The doctor cautioned. "There's a chance that her subconscious might rebel and break the conditioning—especially if she encounters a situation that conflicts with her moral or ethical values."*

*"That could be a problem." The figure in shadows warned.*

*"Not if we handle her correctly." The Illusive Man responded. Addressing the doctor, he inquired, "How can we subvert her value system?"*

*"It will have to be done gradually." The doctor replied, "I would suggest starting her off with a mission or two that does not conflict with her values and then slowly give her more morally ambiguous assignments. I would also suggest assigning her to a group that she can easily bond with and who would work to further erode her resistance."*

*"The Normandy under Shepard should prove an ideal opportunity to test her conditioning." The Illusive Man elaborated further to the figure in shadows. "Shepard will give her a strong and confident figure to identify with who is also completely loyal to our cause. Also, the team I am assigning Shepard is one that she should readily bond with. Further, her personality profile indicates a strong probability that she might form an even closer attachment to one teammate in particular."*

*"Specialist Markham." The doctor assumed, "His psychological profile also indicates that he would find her attractive."*

*"Can he be trusted?" The man in shadows inquired, "Is there a chance that he might come to her defense in the event of a conflict?"*

*"No." The doctor declared definitively, "He was already psychologically inclined to support our program even before his conditioning."*

*"Specialist Markham has had ample opportunity to betray us and so far has passed every test." The Illusive Man remarked, "I think we can trust that he will carry out our instructions to gain her confidence."*

*"That lyin' sack o' shit!" Doris mentally shouted, "Benji lied to me the moment we met. The Illusive Man ordered him to try to get into my pants..." her voice trailed to a whisper, "an' it almost worked."*

*"Don't feel bad, Dixie." Twesata consoled, "We've all been conned at one time or another by a smooth talker."*

*"I was taken in by Saren's charisma." Rana recalled in an effort to give the young human support. "He said all the right things to get me to sign on with him. When I finally found out the truth about what he was doing, it was too late."*

*Doris's avatar now taking on a pleading expression, she wailed, "But what was that hidden directive they implanted in me and can you get it out?"*

*"We're sure as hell gonna give it everything we've got." Twesata promised confidently. "Now we need you to relax and let your subconscious memories come to the surface again."*

*"Okay..."*

**FLASH!**

*"Under what circumstances will the hidden directive trigger?" The Illusive Man asked.*

*"Only when the combined verbal/aural code is used. However, once the directive is activated, there can be no recall. She will carry it out without question and once she either completes it or fails, she will commit suicide."*

*"Excellent." The Illusive Man exclaimed as he took a drag from his cigarette before turning to the figure in shadows, "Are you satisfied?"*

*"Very much so..." The voice agreed with a caveat, "provided your people are able to successfully reprogram her value system to make her more susceptible."*

*"She is not our only weapon." The Illusive Man declared, "Should she not work out, I have alternatives."*

*"Good." The shadowy figure replied, "We will see what the future brings."*

Ashen faced, Doris's mental image broken down sobbing, "They tampered with my mind. They wanted to use me as a weapon. Looking up at her companions, she cried, "Ya'll were right not to trust me. I won't blame you if you tell 'em to lock me up and throw away the key."

"We're not going to do that." Twesata compassionately stated, "We're going to remove that trigger and make sure there aren't any other hidden surprises. Then we're going let everyone know that you're your own person, and then we're going to find this Illusive Man and kick his bony ass out of both our universes."

"What my girl said." Rana declared. "You ready to help us take back your mind, Dixie?"

“Hell yeah.” Doris exclaimed, “Let’s get to it.”

“All right.” Twesata instructed, “Just relax. I’m afraid you’re going to feel pain, but we’ll do our best to try to keep it from being too bad.”

“How bad’s it gonna hurt?”

“Pretty bad, I’m afraid.” Rana replied. “Are you ready?”

Gritting her teeth Doris nodded her head, “Do it.”

Gazing into her lover’s eyes, Twesata asked, “You ready, imzadi?”

Nodding in return, Rana responded, “I’m ready.”

As the two telepaths began their mental surgery, Doris screamed—loud.

*FLASH! Back to the physical reality*

“Welcome back.” Twesata said in a strained voice as Doris struggled back to consciousness. “You had us scared for a moment or two.”

“That trigger…” Doris moaned weakly, “Am I…”

“Free?” Rana smiled, “Yes. We removed it and Admiral Tuvok melded with you just to make sure. You’re your own person again.”

“You and Edi have been cleared to join us for the mission.” Nelia declared, “If you still want to, that is.”

Dixie looked up at Ashley, her expression asking what she could not ask in words.

Nodding her head slowly, the former Alliance marine gave her assent, “You earned a spot on the roster. When you’re feeling better, Shelana and I are going to put you and Edi through your paces. Nelia is going to work with you on the engineering stuff. If you’re coming with us, we can’t hold your hands. We want you ready for what you’re going to be taking on.”

“Thank you.” Doris replied in a weak voice, “I won’t let ya’ll down. I promise.”

“We know you won’t, Dixie.” Nelia smiled at her team’s newest recruit. “Get some rest. Belen’s promised you something special for breakfast when you wake up. We’ll talk more later.”

“Biscuits and sausage gravy with fried eggs and grits.” Doris murmured, “And coffee…lots of coffee.” Looking again at Ashley, Dixie’s smile vanished as she asked the former marine in a pleading voice, “Are we good?”

“We’ll see.” Ashley responded, “A good woman gave me a second chance once. The least I can do is pay it forward. Ball’s in your court now. What you do with it is up to you.”

Her lips turning up in a weak smile, Doris, her eyes now focused on Rana and Twesata, regarded her two new friends, “Thank you.”

“All part of the service.” Rana joked as Twesata cleared her throat and spoke with rare gravity.

"Nelia? You and the others need to get on the comm to Admiral Tuvok, Captain Magnussen, the Trio, and anyone else who you think might be important enough to hear this."

"Hear what?" Ashley asked.

"It could be nothing." Twesata cautioned, taking a deep breath and exhaling, "Or it could be a game changer--provided we get to the other side. Get all the brass together. We'll talk about it then."

"We'll be ready once you two wake up." Nelia replied, further commanding, "Now go. Get some sleep. That's an order. You two look like shit."

“Thanks Momma.” Twesata sighed, smiling as Dixie drifted off into sleep. Taking her asari lover by the hand, the Betazoid telepath murmured, “Tired now, imzadi…wanna go to bed.”

“Me too.” Rana whispered back as the pair slowly made their way back to their quarters. “Sleep…need sleep.”

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