

The Next Step

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/791) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/791>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	Raptor-verse
Relationship:	V'lana Avesti/Kaidan Alenko , V'lana Avesti/Anaya , Satra/Samantha Traynor , Cilla Oudekirk/Liara T'Soni
Character:	Ensemble Cast - RAP
Additional Tags:	Mass Effect Fusion
Language:	English
Series:	Part 42 of The Raptor-verse
Stats:	Published: 2023-07-31 Words: 7,592 Chapters: 2/2

The Next Step

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Summary

This wraps up the last storyline of the "Odyssey of the Gallena" portion of the story. The stage is now set for the collision of universes.

Act One

SSV Orizaba—Admiral Hackett

“Both Parliament and the Chiefs of Staff have approved yours and David’s request, Steven. In fact, I think they were ecstatic when they received his offer to resign the Councillorship, and we’re only too happy for him to come back.”

Nodding his head knowingly at the holographic image of a female Alliance admiral, Hackett replied, “Udina and his supporters have been trying to get David removed ever since he got the position. And to be honest David’s been looking for an excuse to resign.” Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the admiral admitted, “While he’s done an excellent job as our representative to the Citadel Council, he hasn’t been very happy. He wants to come back to us and frankly speaking we need him back wearing Alliance blue. Especially now.”

“You’re preaching to the choir here, Steven.” The Alliance admiral chuckled. “This does seem to be an ideal position for him. It’s looking like this is going to be a win-win for everyone: for you...him...the Navy...Parliament...and even Udina. Everyone gets what they want. How often does that happen?”

“Not very.” Hackett laughed. “But yes, you’re right, Leora. Parliament gets the man they wanted as Councilor in the first place. Udina gets what he’s been itching for from day one. And we get back a good man who happens to be ideal for the task we’re going to give him.”

“And don’t think we’ve forgotten you, Steven.” The staff admiral declared, “I have your new orders too. I think you’ll like them.”

Citadel: Anderson’s Office

David Anderson smiled as he rose from his desk and walked over to greet the two humans who had just entered his office. “Ms. Afia... Admiral Kovac...welcome.”

“Councilor.” Ms. Dorothy Afia, Member of the Alliance Parliament from the African Confederation and chair of the Committee on Council Relations, inclined her head respectfully at the distinguished man standing before her as she handed him a sealed envelope. “Open it, please. Your request has been approved by both Parliament and the Alliance Navy. Congratulations, Admiral.”

Breaking the seal, Anderson took the letter out of its envelope and began reading. A smile appearing on his face, he exclaimed to his two guests, “Thank you.”

“Welcome back to the Navy, Admiral Anderson.” Admiral Kovac, a burly Slovak who had served at the Battle for the Citadel grinned, “It will be good to see you back in an Alliance uniform once more.” Activating his omnitool, he pressed a button. “Your new orders have been downloaded into your tool. Read them now, please.”

Reading the orders as they appeared on his display, Anderson’s smile grew even wider. “When do I go?”

“The *Gallena* is in route to the Citadel.” Kovac replied. “If we can get the Citadel Council on board, she will take you to the Farinata System where you will relieve Admiral Hackett. The Admiral has already received and acknowledged his orders. He will resume command of Fifth Fleet and will coordinate future operations.”

“Congratulations again, Admiral.” Afia said with a smile, “While I will miss you as Councilor, I and the others on the Committee realize that you would be far more effective as the leader of our taskforce to go into the other universe.”

“May you enjoy success on your mission.” Kovac grinned, “Now, I’m afraid we must go. You have much to do and the *Gallena* will be here soon.”

RRW Gallena

“Congratulations, Admiral Anderson?” V’lana said to the former Council representative, now wearing the uniform of an Alliance admiral.

“Thank you, Subcommander.” David replied with a big grin on his face. The grin fading, he assured the youthful Romulan officer, *“I’m very happy with my new job and I hope you will be as well because we’ll be seeing a lot of each other in the coming weeks.”*

“Yes.” V’lana replied with a grin, “Admiral Hackett informed me this morning. I look forward to you joining us.”

RRW Gallena—Sickbay

“We’ll be at the Citadel soon and have arranged for you to stay at the Federation legation until we can find you a safe place to live.” V’lana informed Oriana and her guardians and then asked, “Has Miranda explained everything to you?”

“She has.” Kenneth, Oriana’s adoptive father, replied.

“It’s a lot to take in...you understand.” Josie, the mother chimed in, “That we might have to make a new home in a whole new universe.”

“That’s assuming we succeed.” V’lana qualified, further cautioning, “There are no guarantees of that. This could well be what you humans

call a 'wild duck chase.'

Chuckling, Oriana corrected, "You mean 'wild goose chase'."

V'lana laughed, "That."

"We understand, Subcommander." Kenneth acknowledged, "And we still thank you."

Oriana echoed, "Thank you for everything you've done."

"You're welcome." V'lana smiled back. Then her attention drawn by Doctor Chakwas's gesture for her to come over, the subcommander politely excused herself, "If there's anything you need or that we can do for you..."

"We'll be fine." Oriana answered back with a smile, "Miri's taking us to dinner at the...what did she call your lounge?"

"The Raptor's Nest." Josie interjected, adding "And then she said something about going on the holodeck."

"Don't worry about us. We'll be fine, Ma'am." Kenneth assured.

Grinning, V'lana replied, "Enjoy yourselves and again...if you need anything..."

"We'll let you know."

"How are..." V'lana stammered slightly as she gazed down at the two humans enclosed in their stasis tubes.

"I'm sorry but there's no change in either Staff Commander Alenko's or Shepard's status." Dr. Chakwas ruefully responded. "As you probably already know from your basic biology..." the physician explained as she called up a picture of the human brain on her computer monitor, "the hippocampus is the part of the brain responsible for the retention of memory. There's only the most minimal activity in the hippocampi of either Kaidan or the clone."

"What are you saying?" V'lana choked out in response. "Are they?"

"No." Dr. Aven declared with a shake of his head, "Neither one is clinically dead. They're both still exhibiting brain activity. It's just that it's been for lack of a better word, suppressed."

"In other words..." Dr. Chakwas interjected, "We have no idea how much of their memories they have retained."

"So they might remember everything..." V'lana drawled only to be interrupted by the Alliance doctor.

"Or nothing." Dr. Chakwas cautioned, "They could completely recover or..."

"They might just retain memories of basic functions such as speech and language and have limited or no memories of their past experiences." Dr. Aven chimed in, also projecting an air of warning.

"So..." V'lana sighed, "Where do we go from here?"

"A skilled telepath might be able to bring back some of their memories." Dr. Aven averred with his colleague nodding her head in agreement, "but it's doubtful even the most adept telepath could restore them all. They will not be the same as they were before their injuries. I'm sorry."

"Once they're fully conscious again..." Dr. Chakwas opined, "They could be retrained and reeducated. While their old memories might be gone, their capacity for learning should still be intact."

"Making them essentially entirely different people." V'lana somberly declared as the two doctors nodded their heads.

Her eyes filled with sympathy for the young Romulan woman standing before her, Dr. Chakwas consoled, "I'm sorry, V'lana...truly...but you can take some solace in the fact that Kaidan will still be alive. As for Shepard..." the doctor finished on an optimistic note, "she'll have a chance for a new life. They both will."

"And where there's life, there's hope." The subcommander responded, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I know. And I am grateful for all you both have done for him...for both of them." As she turned to walk away, Dr. Chakwas called out to her.

"If there's anything we can do..."

Her lips turning up in a sad smile, the subcommander replied, "I'll let you know. Thank you."

RRW Gallena—Kelly Chambers' Office

Seated behind her desk, Kelly flashed a warm smile to her guest as he entered the office, escorted by a Starfleet security officer. "Good afternoon, Rupert." The redheaded counselor called out in greeting, "Come in and have a seat."

"Not like I have any choice in the matter." The Cerberus mess sergeant grouched as he glanced at his guard.

"Of course, you do, Rupert." Kelly responded, deliberately repeating his name as she kept the smile on her face. "I thought that you might like to stretch your legs and maybe chat for a while. It's been a while since we've talked."

“What about the others?” Gardner asked, still refusing to budge from the entranceway. “Do they get a chance to stretch their legs too?”

“You bet they do.” Kelly responded. “In fact, I’ll be seeing both Hadley and Matthews after we finish talking.” Her smile now replaced by a look of concern, she implored, “No one’s going to hurt either you or anyone else, Rupert. You have my promise.”

“What about Hawthorne and Markham and Jackson?” The grizzled former miner challenged as he sat down, “Did you make them the same promise?”

Shifting uncomfortably in her chair as she remembered Markham and Jackson’s interrogations at the hands of Neilana, Kelly responded in a soft voice, “All three of them are safe in Alliance custody and they’re all going to receive a fair trial. But you have to remember that Markham and Jackson are looking at both treason and war crimes charges. They hurt and killed a lot of Alliance soldiers and civilians on Ferris Fields and Fehl Prime and in a few other places. They have a lot to answer for. Surely you understand that.”

“They didn’t kill those people!” The old man protested, “It was the Collectors that did it!”

Shaking her head, Kelly let out a dejected sigh, “I’m sorry, Rupert, but it’s true. Besides our interrogation records, we’ve got physical evidence that it was them with Shepard and Kai Leng leading them. I know you don’t want to hear this—but it’s the truth.”

“So...what’s going to happen to them?” Gardner pressed, “Are they just going to be stood up against a wall and shot?”

Kelly replied with a shake of her head. “Both the Federation and the Romulan Republic are filing pleas for mercy, and Hawthorne’s only facing conspiracy and collaborating with a hostile organization charges. I’ve got a feeling that he’s looking at a light prison term at most. As the other two...I’m sorry, Rupert, but at best they’re looking at life terms. Those two are accused of some serious crimes.”

“And what about Shepard?” Gardner demanded, “She saved us all from Sovereign. Are they going to thank her with a firing squad or a life term too?”

Heaving a sigh, the ginger-haired counselor responded, “You’re right. It’s a hard call. I can’t go into details partly because I don’t know much myself yet, but I do know that there is a lot going on and the situation is constantly changing. I hope that answers your question.”

Shaking his head, Gardner murmured, “Not really. I don’t know what to think, Kelly. Cerberus was there when I lost my family to those batarian slavers. The Alliance didn’t do squat.”

Kelly responded sympathetically. “You were alone and drowning and someone offered you a hand. You had no way of knowing what was going on behind the scenes. Neither did I when I joined. I thought I was doing something to help humanity—not hurt anyone else. Then...I found out different.”

“I need time.” The old man sobbed, “I have to think.”

“Of course, Rupert.” Kelly replied with a warm smile, “I’m here whenever you want to talk to me.”

Nodding his head, the old janitor requested in a tired voice, “I better get back to my cell now before the others miss me.”

“Don’t forget what I said, Rupert.” Kelly called out as her old friend rose from his seat and turned to walk away. “Anytime you want to come up and see me, just let the guards know and I’ll make the time. Same thing goes for Hadley, Matthews, and anyone else. My door is always open.”

The Raptor’s Nest—later

“Rough day at the office?” V’lana asked the redheaded ship’s councilor sitting at a corner table nursing her drink.

“Oh! Subcommander!” Kelly exclaimed as she began to rise to her feet only to be halted by a gesture.

“Please don’t get up on my account.” V’lana smiled as she inclined her head at an empty chair, “Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all.” Kelly responded with a wan smile.

“Wanna talk about it?” V’lana gently prompted as the Bolian waitress handed her a Romulan ale. “I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

Heaving a sigh, Kelly sipped her drink. “Without violating confidentiality...” she shook her head, “it’s the prisoners.”

“Your session didn’t go well, I take it?”

“Better than I thought it was going to go, but not as well as I’d hoped for.” Kelly let out an ironic chuckle, “It’s the Cerberus indoctrination. It’s so insidious and difficult to break through. So far the only ones I’ve heard of who more or less succeeded are Hawthorne and the one who defected—Doris...I believe was her name...Doris Whaley. An engineer on Shepard’s ground team.”

“What about yourself?” V’lana inquired, “Didn’t you go through their training too?”

“No.” Kelly shook her head, “At least not the complete program. I went to a few new recruit orientation sessions where we got fed a little of the bull, but they hold off on the heavy stuff until training school—I found out that’s when they cram the hardcore crap at you. I was slated to go to their training school when it looked like I was going to the *Normandy 2*, but when that got cancelled, I was given the option to continue or resign. I chose to resign.” Her lips turning up in a slight smile, she remarked, “I think I made the right decision.”

"I think you did too." V'lana smiled back, "So...what are you going to do?"

"Keep trying." Kelly shrugged her shoulders, "It's all I can do. Rupert and the others aren't bad people. They're not the same as Kai Leng and the hardcores. I think they can be reached—I think I made a start with Rupert. At least I got him thinking about it"

"Well, that's something." V'lana nodded.

Heaving a sigh, the counselor lamented, ending on a positive note. "It's still going to take some work to break through that conditioning. But it's worth it. They're worth it." The waitress bringing both women fresh drinks, Kelly smiled at the Romulan woman seated across from her, "Okay...your turn. What's bothering you? Kaidan—right."

Inclining her head, V'lana replied with a sigh. "Assuming we can get him to a telepath who knows what they're doing, we don't know whether he'll come back or not or what memories...if any...he'll retain. There's a chance he could lose everything: his memories of Shepard...me...everything. All gone."

"So..." Kelly inquired, "What are you going to do?"

"What else can I do?" V'lana sighed, "Let him go. If...when..." she quickly corrected herself, "he recovers, he might be an entirely different person. Possibly a blank slate. Regardless, he deserves a chance to choose his own path in his new life. As does Shepard should she recover as well. If she has few or no memories of what she did, then should she be punished for it?"

"A moral dilemma." Kelly opined sympathetically.

"Tell me about it." The subcommander shook her head. "Shepard was such a symbol for your people. To see her put on trial for war crimes and murder..."

"It would damage morale." Kelly agreed, "And probably rally more people to movements like Terra Firma."

"Which is probably what the Illusive Man is counting on." V'lana stated, wryly commenting, "If that man isn't Romulan, he should be." Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the subcommander concluded, her tone still ironic, "I guess all we can do is let the future take care of itself and worry about the now—right?"

"Right." Kelly acknowledged as she held up her glass and offered a toast, "To a brighter future."

"I'll drink to that." A voice answered back with a chuckle.

"Anaya." V'lana exclaimed as she looked up at the asari ex-detective, giving her a welcoming smile, "Ready for dinner?"

"Famished." Anaya answered back with a grin of her own.

"Join us." V'lana declared as the waitress approached to take their orders. "We're just about to order. You've met Kelly?"

"Thanks." Anaya replied with a smile, inclining her head at the redheaded counselor. "We've met, but there are just so many people on this ship. I'm still trying to get to know everyone."

"It takes a little time." Kelly responded sympathetically, "But everyone here is very helpful."

Nodding her head in agreement, the former police detective answered back, "Yeah, it's just that there's so much to take in."

With a smile on her face, V'lana responded, "Don't worry, Anaya. You'll get used to things pretty quickly. So...what's everyone having? I'm for the chicken cordon bleu myself."

Act 2

RRW Gallena—Samantha, Liara, and Satra

“So...” Samantha inquired, gently teasing her asari friend, “A little bird told me that you and a certain blonde ice queen were seen leaving the holodeck late last night. Wanna tell us about it?”

Blushing deep blue, Liara responded, “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Cilla and I were just taking a walk through Amsterdam and before we knew it...”

“Uh Huh.” Satra quipped, joining the good-natured razzing of their friend. “So why is it that when Samantha and I went there this morning to run some simulations we saw that the last program uploaded was the one for *Vaenia*.”

“Ummm...” Liara’s blush deepened, “Cilla was just curious about asari art.”

“And why, out of how many millennia of asari history, did you chose that particular work?” Satra teased with a smile, “As the humans would say, I’m calling bullshit.”

“All right! All right!” The lovely asari threw up her hands in resignation, a shy grin appearing on her face as well. “I said we’d see *Vaenia* together if she’d show me how far down her spots went.”

“So...” Samantha prompted with a grin, “How far down do they go?”

“I’ll never tell.” Liara responded coyly.

“Don’t worry, Li.” Samantha interjected with a warm grin, “We’re just teasing you. We promise that we’ll keep it quiet as long as you two want us to.”

“Of course.” Satra affirmed, “We’re happy for the both of you. Before you came on board, other than maybe myself until Samantha came here.” Grasping her girlfriend’s hand, she continued, “Cilla was probably the loneliest person on the ship. She rarely socialized with anyone other than us and almost never smiled. Since that time on the Citadel when the two of you became friends, it’s as if a light appeared. She’s smiling now and is even a little more outgoing.”

“Sat’s absolutely right.” Samantha declared. “You’ve been good for her.” Smiling at her lover, she added in a sincere tone, “And Sat’s been good for me.”

Relaxing a little, Liara confided, “She’s been good for me too. I was getting lost in my work...to the point of becoming obsessed until she pulled me out of it. And thanks for not spreading it all over the ship. It’s not that we’re trying to keep it secret...” the elegant asari explained, “it’s just...for a little while...we kind of want to keep this to ourselves...you understand?”

“Of course we do.” Satra replied as Samantha nodded her head in agreement, “Don’t worry. Our lips are sealed.” Turning her attention back to the computer monitor, the Romulan scientist sighed, “We better get back to work. Hopefully we’ll find something in the data you brought back.”

After what seemed hours of hard work with occasional breaks for meals, Samantha, spotting something suspicious on the computer screen, exclaimed, “Come take a look! Do you two see what I think I’m seeing?”

Carefully scrutinizing the alphanumeric sequences appearing on the screen, Satra turned to the asari standing next to her, “Do you see it, Liara?”

“Indeed I do.” The information broker replied, “Coordinates, frequencies, and resonances.”

“The key to opening the door.” Satra finished. “We need to notify the subcommander now.”

RRW Gallena—the Citadel

“C-Sec has granted permission to approach and Admiral Anderson is on the comm.” Samantha announced as the Romulan warbird took a parking orbit near the *Destiny Ascension*.

“Main viewscreen.” V’lana commanded as the Alliance admiral’s visage appeared on the screen.

“Welcome back, Subcommander.” Anderson remarked with a wry grin, “I have good news from Chief Adams. The *Normandy 2* has arrived at Arcturus Station. We’re sending it back to Earth for refitting and repainting in Alliance colors. Admiral Hackett and the Alliance Navy Staff and Parliament wanted me to convey their official thanks for taking the *Normandy*.” His expression now more pensive, the Admiral added in a softer tone of voice, “I’d like to extend my personal gratitude to you as well for returning and restoring that ship’s good name.”

“We were only too glad to do so, Admiral.” V’lana responded with a smile, “I take it the Chief and his people will be assisting in the refit?”

“Yes, they are.” Anderson confirmed with a twinkle in his eyes, “I’m sorry we can’t give them back to you, but we need their expertise. I promise we’ll give them back to you as soon as we can.”

“That’s all right, Admiral.” V’lana answered back with a chuckle before continuing in a more serious tone, “They’re good people and have

become part of our little family, but you need them more right now.”

“I understand you have some important news.” Anderson declared, “I’ve arranged with Councilor Udina for you to brief the Council when you’re ready.”

“I and my people can meet you in your old office in...would two hours be acceptable?”

“That’ll work.” The Alliance admiral affirmed, “I’ll see you then. Anderson out.”

The Citadel: The Human Councilor’s Office

“I assume you’re business is important.” Councilor Udina growled, “I’m a busy man and don’t have the time to waste.”

“That depends, Councilor.” V’lana replied, adding in just the slightest edge of sarcasm to her tone as she addressed the newly appointed human emissary by his title. “Do you think our discovery of the key to opening the door between our universes important enough or not?”

“Say again?” The startled Councilor bleated, his mouth agape on hearing the news.

“I said that we found a way to open a stable portal between this universe and mine.” V’lana responded, enunciating her words clearly so that the disbelieving diplomat was sure to have heard and understood her news.

“That’s excellent news, Subcommander.” Anderson exclaimed with a big smile on his face before inquiring, “Can you tell us more?”

“It might be better to wait and tell the entire Council as well as our legation representatives.” V’lana politely demurred.

“Agreed.” Udina nodded his head, “We cannot afford a diplomatic incident now. I will set up the meeting. Be at the Council chambers in two hours.”

“Buy you a drink in the lounge?” Admiral Anderson asked, giving the Romulan subcommander a grin.

“Lead the way.” V’lana smiled back, “I never turn down free booze.”

Embassy Lounge

“So David...” V’lana gently probed, “How are you...really? A Romulan...like me...would say you either took a demotion or were promoted sideways to get you out of the way.”

Chuckling, the chocolate-skinned admiral took a sip of his brandy before admitting, “You’re right. It was a powerplay by Udina and his people. But...the truth is that I never really wanted the job. Shepard kind of shoved it on me.”

“I wasn’t aware she had that kind of pull.” V’lana noted as she took a sip of replicated Saurian brandy, courtesy of a recent trade agreement signed between the extra-universal legations and the Citadel Council.

“It was more a spur of the moment thing.” Anderson recalled, “She, along with Alenko and Liara, had just beaten Saren while the Fifth Fleet had destroyed Sovereign. By pressing for the Fleet to attack instead of holding back, she also saved the Council so they were in her debt.” Taking another sip of his brandy, he continued, “That gave her a brief window where she had some political leverage. She used that to press for the Council to accept me as the human representative—even though I didn’t want the job.”

“That’s probably why she pushed for you to have it.” V’lana commented with a chuckle.

“That’s exactly the reason she gave me.” Anderson laughed, “I told her I was out of my element...that I was just a soldier, not a diplomat or politician.”

“So, what did she say?”

“She told me that was exactly what we needed—someone who wasn’t a trained diplomat or politician.” An embarrassed look on his face, he continued, “I’m sorry, ‘lana...I don’t want you thinking that I’m blowing my own horn.”

“You’re not.” The lovely Romulan encouraged. “Please...continue.”

“Well...she said that what we needed was someone who’d do a good job and not play political games.” Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the former Councilor admitted, “I did try to do my best, but I made some mistakes. Thankfully, Udina caught most of them and was able to minimize any damage. But the simple truth is that I was out of my depth. Believe me, ‘lana, I wanted this to happen. When Hackett told me what Parliament and the Navy Staff was planning and whether I was onboard with it or not, I jumped at it. This works out better for everyone—Parliament and Udina get what they want...Steven gets what he wants...”

“And you get what you want.” V’lana finished.

“Right.” Anderson grinned before taking on a more pensive expression. “Now...my turn. What about you? It’s been several months since Alenko’s...”

“Yeah.” V’lana replied, lowering her head. “I know what you’re going to say next and you’re right. It’s probably past time for me to move on.

Doctors Chakwas and Aven told me that even if we can safely bring him out of stasis, some or all of his memories will most likely be gone. There's a good chance that he won't even recognize me when he wakes up. It's just..."

"It takes time." Anderson interjected with a warm smile, "I know. Believe me I do. Want some advice from an old warhorse who's seen his share of shit in his life."

"Go head." The gorgeous Romulan smiled as a waitress freshened their drinks.

"You've mourned long enough. Don't put yourself in stasis with Kaidan. He wouldn't want you to do that. Live...love. That's what he would tell you to do."

"Thank you, David." V'lana responded with a sad smile. "I think I needed to hear that."

"Anytime." Anderson grinned as he looked up at the clock and sighed, "Time for us to go. The Council's expecting us."

The Citadel: Council Chamber

"I understand you have news for us, Subcommander." Councilor Tevos, standing behind her dais, flanked on either side by the human, salarian, and turian councilors greeted the subcommander and other officers and delegates gathered with her.

"We, do Madame Councilor...Councilors." V'lana diplomatically replied. "We were fortunate to obtain a great deal of valuable intelligence information from the downloads taken from the Shadow Broker's computers thanks to the efforts of a strike team led by Dr. T'Soni. Much of the information we have already forwarded to C-Sec and the intelligence agencies of each of your governments."

"For which we are grateful." The salarian councilor responded, "But please continue."

"Thank you." The subcommander acknowledged, "One piece of information that we also uncovered that has now been confirmed is that we have found the key to opening the door between our universes."

"Indeed." The turian councilor replied. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." V'lana affirmed. "All the computer simulations we've run confirm it. It will open a stable portal into our universe. With your permission, I'll let Lieutenant Satra and Specialist Traynor explain the details. They're far more versed in the sciences surrounding it than I am."

"Councilors." Satra stepped forward with Samantha by her side. "This will take some time and our discussion will, I'm afraid, get very technical."

"That's all right, Lieutenant." Tevos smiled encouragingly, "I promise we won't drift off to sleep."

After a long and detailed explanation involving concepts of dark matter and energy as well as wormhole physics and the mechanics of time and subspace travel, the two science officers finally concluded their presentation. Chuckling, the turian councilor joked, "You did not lie. I barely understood the smallest portion of it."

"Indeed." The salarian councilor grinned, "You lost me in several places. But your reasoning appears sound."

"I agree. It does." Tevos concurred. "How do you recommend we proceed?"

"I would suggest a joint fleet with representatives from all the Council races to make formal contact." Admiral Anderson proposed.

"Before we do anything like that..." Councilor Udina, sounding a cautionary note, turned his gaze to the Romulan and Federation delegates standing before him, "We need to know what sort of reception our ships would receive."

"A fair question." Tevos agreed as she inclined her head at the two diplomats standing with the subcommander.

"Thank Councilor." The Federation delegate responded with a smile. "By your leave, we'll permit Subcommander Avesti to address your question. Subcommander?"

"You have to remember, my information is a couple of years out of date. Things have probably changed somewhat during that time, but what I can tell you is that it'll depend on who we run into first." V'lana truthfully replied. "If it's Federation or Romulan Republic, your fleet will receive a good response. Klingons and independent Remans could be iffy—it all depends on their mood at the time and on how they're approached. Ferengi will try to sell you a planet." V'lana joked, receiving a chuckle from the councilors at her quip. Her humor dissipating, the subcommander sounded a cautionary note, "If we run into Tal'Shiar, Romulan Star Empire, Orions, Hirogen, or Nausicaans...there'll be trouble. Same thing if we run into Terran Empire intruders. Then there are the other powers such as the Cardassians and Dominion. With them it could go either way. Lastly, pray to whatever deities you might worship that we don't encounter the Borg. If we run into them, then it will be your worst nightmare."

"Thank you for your honesty, Subcommander." Sparatus responded and then spoke to the other councilors. "Yes. There is an element of risk involved." The turian councilor declared, "But the potential benefit is worth the risks."

"I concur." Valern declared, announcing his support for the plan. "The benefits from peaceful relations with another universe far outweigh any potential hazards."

"I still believe we should proceed cautiously." Udina advised, giving a contrary opinion. "The cultural shock would be enormous."

“That is a legitimate concern.” Councilor Tevos conceded.

“If I may...” The Federation delegate interjected, proceeding after receiving an affirming nod from the asari councilor. “While cultural collisions are inevitable, the Prime Directive will aid in ameliorating many of those conflicts.”

“While the Federation and the Romulan Republic might ascribe to your Prime Directive...” Udina countered, “What about the others? The Klingons? The Dominion you mentioned? Will they?”

“As I said earlier...” V’lana responded, “My information is a few years out of date. But when the *Gallena* passed through into this universe, the situation was in a fair amount of flux. The Republic was in the process of developing New Romulus and was officially neutral in the war between the Federation and Klingon Empire.”

“So we might be jumping into a war?”

“Maybe.” V’lana conceded, “However, because of a few developments that had taken place prior to our arrival here, an uneasy truce was beginning to take shape as both sides found that more and more they were dealing with common threats.”

“Like the Borg?”

“Exactly. It’s amazing how a common enemy that wants to wipe out both sides can bring former enemies together in common cause.” The subcommander affirmed. “Also, the Republic was, thanks to the support of both the Federation and the Klingon Empire, beginning to win its war of independence against Sela’s Empire and the Tal’Shiar. We had opened negotiations with the free Remans with many of them accepting Proconsul D’Tan’s offer to settle on New Romulus. It’s still just like here a dangerous universe though. I have no idea what we’re going to run into on the other side.”

“With all of the advances in your universe Subcommander: transporters, replicators, non-mass effect interstellar travel...what are we to you?” Sparatus inquired, “Is our universe an area for future conquest? Your people, Subcommander, have a reputation for ruthlessness and cruelty. And then there are the Klingons and Cardassians. What assurances do we have that you will not invade us?”

“I can assure you that neither the Federation nor Romulan Republic seek any territory or conquests in your universe.” V’lana reassured. “There’s more than enough room in our universe.”

“What about the others?”

“Yes. The Tal’Shiar and the Terran Empire and a few others could prove to be threats.” The subcommander admitted, “But we have also uncovered evidence indicating that incursions into your universe from ours and probably other universes are already occurring.”

“In other words...” Anderson stated, “The barn door is open and the horse has already gotten out.”

“Indeed.” The asari counselor affirmed, pointing out to her fellow councilors, “With formal diplomatic relations established, we can establish a framework for a wide variety of exchanges—diplomatic, scientific, cultural, economic...”

“Agreed.” The turian councilor inclined his head in acceptance, satisfied that his concerns, for the moment at least, had been addressed. “We should proceed with the fleet. Further, I would like to nominate Admiral Anderson as its commander.”

“I would have thought you would have insisted on a turian commander.” Udina interjected in a skeptical tone.

“There will, of course, be delegates and ships from all our species.” Sparatus responded, “But as humans exist in the other universe as well and...as far as we know...there is no turian, salarian, or asari presence, it would make sense in this instance to name a human as fleet commander and Admiral Anderson has proven to us to be a prudent and wise individual.”

“We concur. He will serve well as fleet commander.” Tevos and Valern agreed, turning to the human representative, “Councilor Udina?”

“Agreed.” Udina reluctantly conceded, “Congratulations, Admiral.”

“It’s settled then.” Tevos announced, “A joint fleet under the command of Admiral Anderson will set course for the Farinata system as soon as possible.”

“Anything you would like to add to this, Admiral?” The turian inquired.

“Yes.” Anderson replied, “I would like to request...with Subcommander Avesti’s approval of course...to make the *Gallena* the flagship for the fleet.”

“Subcommander?” Tevos prompted.

Inclining her head, the lovely Romulan replied, “Of course, we would be honored to have Admiral Anderson raise his flag on the *Gallena*.”

“Very good.” The turian councilor declared, speaking for the others on the Council. “We are decided on our course of action. Admiral Anderson...Subcommander Avesti...good fortune.”

RRW Gallena

“Welcome aboard, Admiral.” V’lana smiled as she welcomed the new joint fleet commander on to her ship.

"Thank you, Subcommander." Admiral Anderson smiled as he shook the auburn-haired Romulan's hand, gesturing to the pair of Alliance officers standing behind him, introducing them. "Thank you again for allowing me to transfer my flag to your ship and for making room for my aides."

"The honor is ours, Sir." V'lana responded before turning to business. "We are in the process of preparing to extradite the *Normandy 2* crew to Alliance custody. They are available if you wish to see them before they're transferred."

"I would. I very much want to understand why they made the choices they made." Anderson replied with a nod of his head, further requesting, "I also would also appreciate the opportunity to look in on both Staff Commander Alenko and Shepard."

"Of course." V'lana readily agreed, "Doctors Chakwas and Aven are at your disposal. Also...might I suggest that Ms. Chambers join you when you talk to the prisoners? She knows several of them personally and has some insights as to their conditioning that might prove helpful."

"Thank you, Subcommander. After you."

"This way, please." V'lana acknowledged as she fell in beside the admiral, serving as his escort as they made their way towards the first of their destinations.

Entering Sickbay, the admiral greeted Doctors Chakwas and Aven with a smile and nod of his head, "Doctors. It's a pleasure to see you again. I understand that there has been no change in the status of your patients."

Doctor Chakwas affirmed as she escorted the admiral to the stasis tubes, "Unfortunately, you're right, Admiral. Assuming we're able to bring them out of stasis in the first place, the odds are great that they will lose much, if not all, of their memories."

"Give me best and worst cases, Doctor." Admiral Anderson prompted.

"Best case..." the gray haired doctor responded, "Their memories will be complete or near complete. Worst case...we're talking completely blank slates that will have to relearn everything except for basic speech and bodily functions."

"I see." The admiral mused, "Part of me wants to say that this might be a good thing for Shepard—whether she's a clone, an alternate universe counterpart, or something else entirely. It'll give her a chance for a fresh start. But another part of me wants her to face justice for Ferris Fields and Fehl Prime. And as for Staff Commander Alenko..." Turning to the Romulan subcommander, the grizzled admiral offered his sympathies, "In the span of a couple of years, I saw a young officer and already fine young man who had lost the woman he loved transform into an even better officer and man who had found love again. I know I've told you this before, Subcommander, but I want to say it again, you have my sincere condolences."

"Thank you, Admiral." V'lana replied with a sad smile, "It means a lot."

After a momentary pause during which everyone gathered their thoughts, the admiral suggested, "Subcommander? I think we should leave the doctors to their work, don't you? Besides, I would like to see the prisoners."

"Of course, Admiral." V'lana replied after giving one last look at Kaidan lying peacefully in his tube. "This way please."

Entering the Romulan brig, Admiral Anderson was escorted by the subcommander and Kelly Chambers to the cells containing the *Normandy 2* crew, the admiral received a few words of advice from the redheaded counselor.

"Admiral?"

"Yes, Ms. Chambers? Is there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes, Sir." The former Cerberus worker replied, "I just wanted to remind you that these men have undergone intense indoctrination and conditioning. This conditioning is difficult to break. We only know of two examples...maybe three if we count Shepard...where that conditioning was successfully thrown off."

"Whaley and Hawthorne." Anderson nodded his head in understanding, "Whaley, unfortunately, is missing and presumed dead, while Hawthorne is cooperating with us in exchange for a lighter sentence."

"Correct, Sir." Kelly affirmed. "I've tried to work with the three men you're about to see. And while I've had some success with Gardner, I'm afraid I haven't been able to get very far with the others.. I'm sorry.-"

"I know you've done all you could, Ms. Chambers, and I appreciate it." Anderson replied warmly, giving the counselor a supportive grin."

"Aye, Sir." Kelly acknowledged as they approached the cell containing the Cerberus prisoners. "I was very fortunate to get out of Cerberus when I did. And I wanted to thank you as well." The redhead sincerely declared, "You took a chance on me and I want you to know that I'm not going to let you down."

"I appreciate that." The admiral responded as they approached the cells containing the Cerberus prisoners. Pausing in front of the cell containing Mess Sergeant Gardner and Crewmen Matthews and Hadley, the grizzled Alliance admiral cleared his throat.

"Look who's come to see the animals at the zoo!" Hadley snorted with derision on catching sight of the admiral. "Come here to gloat, Admiral? Or are you here at the bidding of your alien masters?"

"I understand you lost family to a Collector attack." Admiral Anderson responded with a note of sympathy in his voice. "I'm sorry for your loss..."

"I don't want to hear it, Admiral." Hadley bit back, "While the Alliance sat on their collective asses, Cerberus did something!"

“Hadley’s right!” Matthews spat out angrily, “Cerberus were the only ones ready to get their hands dirty while all you and the Alliance did was kiss the Council’s ass.”

“What about you?” Anderson asked, addressing the third inmate, an older man, practically bald with tufts of grey hair.

Mess Sergeant Gardner moaned, “The Alliance didn’t do squat when the batarians took my family away from me.” His voice now almost a whisper, the old miner somberly stated, “My grandkids are probably either dead or zombie slaves working in some batarian mine. What have you done for them or all the others taken by those four-eyed bastards?”

“I’m also sorry about what happened to your family, Gardner.” Anderson replied in a soft voice. “I’m officially declassifying what I am about to tell you. A few years ago...after the colony your family lived in was attacked, I received word about the batarian slave ring that carried out the attack and sent Shepard and her people to take out the pirates and rescue as many people as they could. While Shepard was able to wipe out the pirates, she couldn’t find any prisoners. They’d already moved them. I’m sorry.”

“So why doesn’t the Alliance just go ahead and take out the batarians once and for all?” Gardner answered almost pleadingly.

“I wish we could put an end to their piracy and terrorism, but we can’t.” Anderson explained. “Unfortunately, there are limits as to what we can do. A full-scale war with the batarians would be a disaster for everyone. It would ruin us along with them and in the end cause a lot more families to lose people they love.”

“So...” Gardner inquired, speaking for the other prisoners, “What’s going to happen to us?”

“You’ll be taken to a secure facility and detained.” The admiral responded, the rest of his reply cut off by Matthews’ angry retort.

“You mean before we’re brought up before a kangaroo court like Markham and Jackson and then stood up against a wall and shot.”

“Those men are facing serious charges and will receive a fair trial.” Anderson vowed, further declaring, his expression now taking on a stern look. “I’m not going to lie to you. Each and every one of you will undergo investigation and will most likely stand trial as well where a judge and jury will determine your sentence should you be found guilty. Those of you who merely served on this ship without engaging in any war crimes or other similar criminal behavior will be treated leniently. However...” the grizzled admiral further warned, “I also promise you that those of you who willingly and knowingly participated in either the Ferris Fields or Fehl Prime Massacres will, if found guilty, be punished to the fullest extent of Alliance law.”

“Ummm...Admiral?” Kelly whispered as they walked away from the cells.

“Yes, Ms. Chambers?”

“Sir?” The counselor pleaded, “I know it’s a lot to ask, but I was wondering if you could see your way to permitting Mess Sergeant Gardner to remain on the *Gallena* so that we can continue our counseling sessions? We’re beginning to see results with him and I’m afraid that if he were to be transferred with the others, all that progress would be wiped out.”

“What about the other two?” Anderson asked, “It doesn’t look like you’ve had much success with them.”

“No, Sir.” Kelly admitted, “I haven’t. I think the main reason for that might lie in the fact that Matthews and Hadley were trained to fill combat and command and control roles while Gardner served solely as janitor and cook. Because of that, I think his indoctrination wasn’t quite as deep or thorough as the others.”

“I see.” Anderson nodded as he pondered the counselor’s request before turning to V’lana. “Subcommander? Do you have any objections to Gardner remaining in your custody?”

“No, Admiral.” V’lana replied, “Of the *Normandy* prisoners we’ve captured, he’s been the most cooperative. I don’t think he’ll be a problem.”

“Very well.” Anderson decided, “Gardner will remain on the *Gallena* where he’ll continue to undergo therapy under you, Counselor. Once he’s completed his therapy, we’ll determine his disposition as to whether he stands trial or not.” Turning to V’lana, Anderson inclined his head, “I think we’re done here, Subcommander. We can proceed to the Farinata system whenever you’re ready”

“Aye, Admiral.” V’lana replied with a wicked grin, “If you’ll accompany me to the bridge, I’ll give the orders and we’ll get this party started.”

“Lead the way, Subcommander.” Anderson grinned back, “I’m looking forward to seeing your universe.”

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