

# MASS EFFECT: AGE OF DECADENCE

*By Zaftig Industries*

*CW: Overeating, weight gain, corruption, burps, flatulence, mind-meld eroticism.*

## PART 2: THE BETRAYAL



“What do you mean, you don’t have those records?”

The short, squat Asari behind the Galactic Customs desk steepled her fingers, leaning back in her chair. She eyed Ma’kima with clear and obvious suspicion.

“All the shipping records are sealed, ma’am. I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“Sealed by whom?”

The customs official tapped at her console, skimming through dozens of shipping manifests.

“By the order of the Sian Republic.”

Ma’kima cursed softly, pacing in front of the Customs desk.

*Of course that’s who she sold the Drives to... May the Goddess curse you, Tevura!*

Of all the Thessian city-states making up the Asari Republics, the Sian Republic was by far the most corrupt. If the Drives had mostly been sold to Sian, there was little chance of recovering them--they would already be passing through the hands of dozens of black-market dealers. She would have to find another way to expose Tevura, and quickly.

Already, the Drives were undergoing “stress testing” in laboratories all across the Citadel, with a few already in public use. Seeing the monetary and PR applications of near-infinite food replication, the Asari government had taken all the remaining Drives out of Ma’kima’s hands.

Her research project had been mothballed, all her fellow researchers re-assigned to other areas of the Citadel.

And although she couldn't prove it, Ma'kima sensed Tevura's hand in this. Her devious partner had made friends in high places, and now she was moving to protect her "investment," locking Ma'kima out of every laboratory with a functioning Drive. Already there were rumors of a "public food program" supported by use of the Drives... a program that had been approved for field testing by the Republic Council itself.

The worst part was, Ma'kima could understand why the government was rushing to exploit Drive technology--importing food to the Citadel was absurdly expensive, and yet the Council wanted the Citadel "fully populated" within a year. The Drives had given them a way to fast-track the process... but at what cost?

Every complaint she'd made to the Council had been ignored. Her requests for appointments with government officials had been politely declined, her objections lost in a sea of red tape. And of course, Tevura wasn't returning her calls--on top of the Drive crisis, she had the emotions of being "ghosted" to deal with, as well.

She'd considered going to the press with her info, but there wasn't enough proof to bring Tevura down--at least, not yet. Her studies had confirmed the Drive food stimulated biotic powers, but beyond that, she had very little to go on.

But her instincts told her she was right, that the Drives were dangerous. Tevura had begun acting strangely after "testing" the food, which couldn't be a coincidence. Even Ma'kima herself had noticed strange changes in her own mood and behavior, after eating food made by the Drives.

She'd found herself snacking relentlessly, always hungry even when she'd just eaten. She was irritable, overly emotional... and her libido had skyrocketed, something that both confused and embarrassed her. Previously, her experience with Tevura had been the most erotic experience of her life, but now she was scrolling the Holonet looking for deviant smut every night. She couldn't help it--her body's needs were escaping her control, and she couldn't help but think that it was related to the Drives somehow.

And that wasn't all that was escaping from her. Her waistline had continued to balloon, her stomach bulging out of every new set of clothes she purchased. She didn't have access to Drive food anymore, but she was constantly grazing on ordinary snacks, and couldn't resist ordering delivery each night. It was frightening--her body's lust and hunger was startling, almost like she was transforming on a cellular level. Mutating...

Things were escalating, and she needed help. But from whom? Tevura had already bribed or bought off the government officials newly appointed to the Citadel, and Ma'kima's attempts to contact Thessian officials had gone nowhere. No, the standard routes wouldn't work to resolve this--she needed to think outside the box.

And that was how Ma'kima found herself getting coffee with a Justicar.

They were sitting across from each other at a small cafe on the Citadel, one of the new restaurants that had cropped up overnight as the Asari moved into the ancient structure, making it their own. The cafe was trendy, upscale... and to Ma'kima's concern, there was already a Cibus Drive behind the counter, churning out pastries and breakfast foods by the dozen, its power cables pulsing with energy.

"So... You're telling me there's a conspiracy underway to spread these 'Drives' across the galaxy, for profit and criminal gain. Do you have any *proof* of all this?"

Ma'kima squirmed, conscious of the woman's eyes on her body. The Justicar's name was Fayette, and she stood out like a sore thumb in her gleaming red armor--but not as much as Ma'kima did. Easily a hundred pounds heavier than any other Asari in the room, Ma'kima was painfully conscious of every curious eye and stifled chuckle around her... and there were plenty.

"I don't have *conclusive* proof, no. But all my research indicates the Cibus Drives are unstable and dangerous--not only does it affect biotic energy, I've also found traces of nanotechnology in the food, perhaps left over by faulty Drive components. The nanotech might be causing an addictive feedback loop, perhaps a shift in mitochondrial--"

Fayette held up a hand.

"Enough, enough. It sounds like you've done your homework. But if these Drives are so dangerous... Why is no one else sounding the alarm?"

"I told you. My former part--er, my colleague Tevura, she's sabotaging all my attempts to tell people. And the content of the food isn't the only problem. I'm also worried about certain... Cultural effects."

"Cultural?"

Ma'kima nodded at the Asari patrons around them, enjoying coffee or breakfast before their morning shifts on the Citadel.

“These Drives have spread across the entire Citadel by now. They’ve been plugged into the station’s power conduits. They’re already becoming a part of daily Asari life... and they’ve only been exposed to the public for a *few weeks*. And yet, already...”

She nodded at one Asari girl in the corner, a rather plump young woman who was enjoying a heaping platter of wheat-cakes, slathered in a syrupy concoction.

“Things are changing. It happened to myself and Tevura as well--this food induces a hunger you can’t quite satisfy, no matter how much you eat. Trust me... I’ve tried to fill that void. But I can’t.”

Fayte nodded, her eyes running up and down Ma’kima’s portly body.

“I can see proof of *that*, at least.”

Ma’kima blushed, her pride stinging, but she pushed the insult aside. This Justicar was her only hope--if she couldn’t convince Fayte that Tevura was violating the ethics of the Justicar Code, this whole meeting would be a waste of time. So she persisted, even in the face of the Justicar’s flinty stare.

“I’m being serious. Tell me, what is the average main street like on Thessia? What kind of businesses do you usually see?”

Fayte shrugged.

“Omnitool shops, clothing stores, a holo-vid theater or two. Maybe a temple. Why?”

Ma’kima pointed at the street outside the tiny, cramped cafe.

“This street has a pastry shop, a cafe, a bar, two bistros, and down at the end, something called an ‘all-you-can-eat’ buffet. Notice any *trends* here?”

Fayte squinted at the hovering, neon holo-signs of the businesses outside.

“So... Our first arrivals to the Citadel wanted a taste of home. I don’t see the danger in that.”

Ma’kima threw up her hands, exasperated. To her humiliation, she could feel her own arm-fat jiggling, while she gestured at station blueprints on her omni-tool.

“It’s just like this on the next street. And the next. And the one after that... I’ve checked the public records, Fayte. Over eighty percent of the Citadel’s new business applications are for eateries, or bars, or even hookah lounges. And it makes sense--if you can get ahold of a Cibus Drive, you can generate any food or beverage you want, all with zero overhead for your business. And Tevura is giving them out like *candy!*”

“What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying is, this station will become a deep-space pleasure cruise soon, if we don’t get the Drives banned. Asari society isn’t ready for this kind of excess--we aren’t prepared to live in a post-scarcity galaxy. The Drives must be banned before they can damage our culture... And our waistlines, any further.”

Over at the next table, the Asari woman with the wheat-cakes had finished her meal, wiping her mouth and belching loudly. The two of them watched in horror as she opened her omni-tool... and immediately ordered more breakfast, her eyes wide and glassy with bliss.

Fayte winced as the woman began plucking crumbs off the swollen dome of her belly, and devouring them eagerly, sucking on her fingers like an overgrown, spoiled child.

“I think... I see your point. I will aid you in this quest. But you must make a vow of fealty, and aid me in my mission. This path is treacherous, and I will need your help.”

“No problem! I’d be happy to help!”

Ma’kima was overjoyed--at last, someone finally believed her. But the Justicar’s next words took the wind out of her sails.

“We’ll have to get your armor custom-made, of course...”

“Armor? What armor?”

“Your Squire armor. Every Justicar who takes a Squire on her journey towards justice must attire them properly--haven’t you read your history books?”

Ma’kima glanced down at herself, wincing. The newfound softness of her frame would not be easily stuffed into a suit of armor like Fayte’s.

“If... If I must, I suppose. Although... I also have a favor to ask.”

“Speak.”

Ma’kima steeled herself, her bitterness filling her, chubby fists clenched on the table.

“If we catch Tevura... *When* we catch her, don’t harm her. I want to look her in the eye and ask her why she’s doing this. Why she thinks money and fame are worth betraying the woman she claimed to love.”

Fayte nodded slowly.

“So be it. I had not planned to hurt her--she has not done anything to merit death under the Code, as of yet. We will deliver her to the authorities, and you will get your justice. That, I can promise you.”

Ma’kima felt tears coming to her eyes. Reaching across the table, she clasped Fayte’s hand, her soft digits shrouding the Justicar’s scarred knuckles.

“Thank you, Fayte. This means... Everything, to me.”

At the next table over, the pancake-gorged Asari belched, slumping in her chair... and wearily ordered another round of breakfast. Fayte shuddered, watching the woman struggle to sit up in her chair, her swollen gut dragging her down.

“If you’re right, Ma’kima... we’d better hurry. Before this problem gets too big to stop.”



Shiza felt her consciousness detach from Ma’kima’s. Rising, floating past other “bubbles” of memory crowded with images, she glimpsed strange sights: vast seas of bluish flesh, crackling biotic energy, the looming hulls of Asari fleets floating in the void.

And then she was herself again--Shiza W’lode, investigative historian and amateur sleuth. The Merge was over. But her surroundings were... unfamiliar. They had moved during the Merge, perhaps walked somewhere else. She’d never heard of such a thing, but it wasn’t impossible--when two Asari’s neural systems became one, strange things occasionally happened.

It was a restaurant--an all-night 'greasy spoon,' from the looks of it. Aethyta was nowhere to be seen. Across from her in the restaurant booth, Ma'kima was digging into an enormous burger, a Human delicacy dripping with grease and half-melted cheese.

Several empty plates sat in front of her... and to Shiza's concern, she *too* was surrounded by several demolished meals. And she felt full. Very, very full.

"What... *urrrp*... Ma'kima, what are we doing here? What is this place?"

Ma'kima took a moment to answer, setting down her burger and sucking the dribbled juices and grease off her fingers one by one. She seemed lost in a haze of greed, only gradually coming back to herself.

"Oh... I'm sorry. Sometimes when I'm stressed, I tend to overeat... and recovering these memories through a Merge is very stressful, for me."

"I see."

Shiza shifted in her seat, stifling another belch. Inside her body she could feel the heaviness of at *least* two or three meals digesting. She was stuffed to the gills, absolutely gluttoned. And yet... somehow, she still wanted more.

*Wait... Those aren't my desires. They're Ma'kima's.*

The Merge had left a lingering bond between them. Even now, flickers of biotic energy passed between the two of them. Like a completed electrical circuit, they were passing thoughts and impressions back and forth.

It was an unsettling sensation... But not unpleasant. Shiza felt her new friend's anxiety, but also the joy of her binge-eating, the almost sensual satisfaction of a full stomach. And this helped to ease her own discomfort, to a small degree. Although there were some embarrassments not even a Merge could alleviate.

***Pfrrrumptf.***

Shiza blushed as her body let loose a burst of sudden, rank flatulence. She'd always had a delicate stomach, and now that it was loaded with unfamiliar food, her digestive tract was announcing its annoyance. Loudly.

“Er, excuse me... I have a touch of, ah, irritability...”

## **FRRAPPPT.**

Ma’kima smirked as she dabbed her lips with a napkin. Even though the Merge was fading, Shiza could sense her amusement... and her admiration.

The plump Consort liked Shiza, admired her for her determination. And Shiza found herself returning that respect. They were sharing a bizarre and somewhat frightening experience together... but like all Consorts, Ma’kima was a gentle and patient teacher.

“Don’t apologize--it’s fine. On some planets, that’s a compliment to the chef, you know.”

“If you say so...”

Shiza scanned the room, recovering her bearings. According to her omni-tool, it had been several hours since she’d first merged with Ma’kima. Had they just been... Eating, that entire time?

*If this happens every time we Merge, this investigation is going to be hell on my insides. Not to mention, my waistline...*

And yet, she couldn’t simply stop here, not this close to the truth. She was getting an insider’s scoop on the first weeks of Citadel settlement--and the corruption and chaos that had ensued. Already, she was starting to see why the Asari government might not want these events widely known...

Trying to maintain professional composure despite her swollen stomach, Shiza pulled up her research notes on her omni-tool.

“I think I’m starting to understand. So your lover, Tevura...”

“Ex-lover.”

“Your ex-lover, she sold these Drives to the highest bidders she could find. And soon they found their way into public use. Meaning this tainted, addictive Prothean food became widespread across the Citadel--and elsewhere.”

“Yes. That’s correct.”



Ma'kima adjusted herself in the booth, her enormous belly oozing over the table. Shiza found herself fascinated by the Asari's bulk--she was much bigger than she appeared in the old memories they'd explored together. At some point over the centuries, Ma'kima had *really* let herself go. Shiza allowed herself a moment of 'schadenfreude' as she watched the obese Consort pick up fallen chunks of burger-beef and pop them into her mouth.

*Addictive Prothean food or not... I could never let myself get **that** fat. Poor thing--I almost feel sorry for her...*

"You pity me, don't you? I can feel it."

Startled, Shiza composed herself--she'd forgotten the Merge was still sharing thoughts between them.

"I... I'm sorry. That was cruel of me. You've been through a lot--it's not for me to judge how you deal with it, or how you look."

Ma'kima shrugged one meaty shoulder.

"Some of it is stress weight, yes. But some of it... Well. Temptation is a powerful thing. You'll see just how powerful, very soon."

She took another massive bite of her burger, eyes flaring with biotic energy, and Shiza actually *felt* her pleasure as the fat Asari chewed and swallowed.

The sensual, almost erotic bliss she took, in eating as much as she could... It was a strange sensation, like riding in someone else's head as a voyeur. Shiza felt her cheeks grow hot as she saw Ma'kima smiling at her.

"You can feel it, can't you? The hunger. Your whole life has been spent in a repressed, restrained society. But under the surface... We hunger."

She hiccuped softly, using her forearm to wipe a smear of grease off her cheek.

"For all our talk about being open-minded and accepting, we Asari are... **URRP**, still very buttoned up. We hide our ravenous desires behind a facade of high-minded civilization, but deep down... We're just like every other spacefaring species. Animals with fancy tools, not very distant from our animal nature."

She took another bite, bigger this time, and Shiza's whole body shivered as the overweight Consort chewed... swallowed... belched, and licked her lips, sauce running down her double-chin.

"We feel jealousy, hatred, lust... And greed. Just like anyone else. Denying that reality was what made the Cibus Drives so dangerous to our civilization. A species determined to suppress its darker nature, will always be vulnerable to temptation. Just look at the Krogan--they know how to embrace their inner animal. But the Asari... We were vulnerable, all of us so tightly wound, so ready to give in to pleasure at the *slightest* excuse. And the Drives gave us that chance."

Shiza nodded, suddenly aware of how heavily she was breathing, how warm her body was. The pleasure-signals from Ma'kima's body were flowing directly into hers, from the conduit between them--and she found she didn't *want* it to stop.

Ma'kima was right. Shiza had spent her life trying to be a "good girl," trying to prove herself to her superiors. This investigation was the first time she'd truly questioned Asari society, and already she was beginning to come apart at the seams. All it had taken was one Merge with a partner who wasn't afraid of indulgence, and now strange thoughts whirled in Shiza's head, unfamiliar desires and urges she didn't understand... She wanted to eat. She wanted to strip off her clothes and go face-first into a platter of sweets. She wanted to--

*Control yourself... This isn't over yet. You can explore these feelings later--you need to dig deeper. Find the truth.*

"Maybe you're right," she said, unzipping her collar a little as the warmth of her own body made her a little dizzy. "Maybe we are just animals. But clearly we didn't give in to these Drives--today, the Asari are back to being trim and fit. We beat the temptation, right?"

"Yes... We did. But it might not be enough."

"What do you mean?"

Ma'kima sighed, setting down her oversized burger again. Shiza could sense that it gave her almost physical pain, to stop eating--the Consort's ravenous hunger was all-consuming. It was unsettling to think that Ma'kima just lived with those urges, every hour of every day.

"What I'm about to show you is our darkest hour, as a species. The Council and the Republics successfully covered it up... but it's ugly. Depraved and filthy. And that dark moment

can still come back. We haven't beaten our inner demons, Shiza--we've only kept them at bay. Come... I'll show you how we did it."

And she extended one plump, grease-stained hand across the table.

For a moment, Shiza hesitated. One Merge had been enough to infect her with Ma'kima's hunger, to make her gorge as if in a trance. What would another Merge do to her? And how many times would she have to dive into Ma'kima's strange, troubled memories for the truth she wanted so badly?

*I can't give up now. Mom never gave up on a story... She always got what she was looking for. And so will I.*

Feeling her guts churn ominously inside her, Shiza took the Consort's hand... and down she went again, into the depths of Ma'kima's thoughts. This time, the two of them spoke as one, eyes going black and skin crackling with biotic energy.

*"Embrace eternity..."*

From another booth nearby, Aethyta watched the two of them, shaking her head.

Many curious Asari had come to Ma'kima, seeking the truth of the "Decadent Age," as Ma'kima called it. And none of them had ever been able to see the journey through. Repulsed by Ma'kima's gluttony and the horrible depravity of her memories, they had fled from the truth, preferring the comforting lie of Asari "high culture" to the grotesque reality of their species' true past.

Maybe this one, this "Shiza," would finally be the one to see it through to the end... but Aethyta doubted that. The little historian had a long road ahead of her, filled with many, many meals. And Aethyta had never seen anyone able to keep up with Ma'kima's appetite.

This one would end up like all the rest--fat, disillusioned and disgusted. The search for truth would be abandoned, as it always was. But at least she was getting paid in the process. Ma'kima had offered her a small sum to "babysit" the pair during their Merges, and keep meddlesome onlookers away. It was an easy gig, if a little stomach-turning to watch.

Even now, the two of them were deep in trance, Ma'kima gobbling her burger while Shiza mechanically ordered more food from the diner's kitchens. Their conscious minds were gone, sunk deep into Ma'kima's memories... and this 'sleep of reason' produced demons. Hungry, hungry demons.

Aethyta sipped hard liquor from her hip flask, watching the two gorge themselves mindlessly, stuck in an endless feedback loop of greed. It was pathetic to watch... but at least she wouldn't have to watch very long.

Because someone else, someone anonymous and *very* rich, had offered her a queen's ransom to eliminate the pair, and make it look like an accident. Death by over-eating would take a long time... but for nearly a billion credits, Aethyta was willing to wait.

She and Ma'kima were friends--they'd been allies ever since her graduate research had uncovered the secret of the Cibus Drives, years ago. But the centuries had not been kind to Aethyta, and in the last few decades, Ma'kima had lost her friend's loyalty, calling in favors left and right and generally being a big, fat pain in the ass.

Now it was time for the last vestige of the Decadent Age to disappear... along with her newest binge partner and confidante. Aethyta watched, and waited... and whenever the pair's plates were empty, she re-filled them, ordering meal after meal for the two mindless, gorging blue cows.

Either they would simply explode from all their gluttony, or Aethyta would take care of them herself. No matter which way things went down, she was going to end up very rich... and the dark secret of the Decadent Age would never go public.

Some truths, after all, were best left forgotten.

~ ~ ~



END OF PART 2