



ROMANCING THE KROGAN

By Khee Hoon Chan



I've always been fascinated by the xenophilic romances in *Mass Effect*. Fans have fallen head over heels for its mesmeric aliens, picking their favorites among species that resemble peculiar, but somehow palatable hybrids of various animals. Turians? They're hawks, but without beaks. Drells? Toads and iguanas, but with ultra-plump lips. Asari? Probably covert members of the Blue Man Group, but with jellyfishes as hair. A staple of space opera, flings and relationships with exotic aliens – especially the fetishizing of alien space babes – are quintessential science-fiction affairs.

Yet even in the sphere of infinite space, we still somehow fall back to the same, nearly impossible standards of physical attractiveness, with romanceable characters in the series still passing as exceptionally attractive humanoids. Take for instance the monogendered Asari, whose race presents as females with voluptuous bodies. Coupled with her earnest vulnerability, the soft feminine features of Liara, your first Asari crew member, makes her conventionally attractive even by very human standards, despite her blue skin and crown of hair tentacles. The soft-spoken drell assassin, Thane Krios, is blessed with the ideal male physique: he's tall and lean, while sporting an incredibly chiseled chest that literally pops out of his bomber jacket. And while you can't see what's underneath the enviro-suits of the quarians, it's clear their build and sexual dimorphism are similar to humans –

with its female members are uniformly lithe and willowy. As one of the player's many potential love interests, Tali'Zorah is built the same way, while being both precocious and immensely likeable. And the humans? They are all physical manifestations of Adonis, the strapping young lover of the greek goddess Aphrodite: impeccably well-built and good-looking.

And then there's the krogans, a species that looks like a grisly amalgamation of bats and toads – creatures which, incidentally, are usually associated with witches as their macabre familiars of choice. Their faces are almost always scarred by years of harsh combat, and definitely not in a manner that will be perceived as roguishly charming. Plus, given their penchant for brutally painful head butts, being anywhere less than 100 feet near them would make even the bravest among us a little jittery. Even with a “quad” – yes, male Krogans have four of them balls – it's easy to see why they aren't making most people's lists of eligible bachelors.

But it's a damn shame we aren't given the option to love them anyway. When we meet Urdnot Wrex, a krogan bruiser and the leader of his clan, we discover his dedication to ending the genophage that plagues his people. He devotes his entire life to carving a future for his race, despite the falling odds and the profound mistrust from other galactic races. As a paragon of strength – both physical and mental – these are deeply admirable traits which, if injected into

someone as vanilla as Kaiden Alenko, would have made the human marine a genuinely compelling character. But Wrex is a krogan; a hulking, brutish warrior whose gruff exterior may mask a more contemplative side, but who also bears little resemblance to the beefcakes on board the starship *SSV Normandy* – so of course we can't express any romantic attraction towards him.

Sure, this may look like an unfair denunciation of BioWare, a studio that has admittedly made significant leaps towards embracing diversity in their games. I love that players can pursue romantic relationship outside of heterosexual ones in the series, but in some ways, it still reinforces unhealthy notions of attractiveness and sexuality. Plenty of characters in videogames, particularly female characters, are slender, lean and young, and even the most diverse of personalities aren't seeing parallels in terms of diverse body shapes and unconventional beauty standards. Romantic interests shouldn't be beholden to unrealistic beauty ideals – but in *Mass Effect* and other forms of pop culture, they still very much are.

Yet, I am dubious that a romantic relationship with Wrex would work out; with the survival of their race perpetually looming over him, it is probably rather out of character for him to pursue an interspecies relationship (what is the result of a krogan and human union, anyway? Will the babies look like toad-ish humans, or will they be completely krogan?). But when most romanceable characters in games ultimately give in to your courtship, by virtue of you saying the right things when it matters most, allowing Wrex to become a romantic partner offers him – and the cosmos of *Mass Effect* – a greater degree of self-determination. For a lack of a better word, it makes the universe seem a lot more human.

So let Shepard fall in love with Wrex. Let them pursue a relationship that may not end in a perfectly wholesome ending. Let Shepard grieve a little about the impossibility of their romance and then channel all these bittersweet emotions into blasting the Reapers into a burning pile of synthetic rubble. After all, it's an important step for diversity, and a crucial step for humanity. 🍷

