

Howdy, all. This is the next chapter of my Mass Effect/Ranma crossover. I hope you all enjoy it. I sort of shift away from Herb after the first scene here, and the next few chapters will concentrate on Ranma and *Deleted to Halt Spoiler* For at least two chapters.

This has been edited by Hiryo.

Chapter 10: Sharing Drinks and Headaches are Not Equal

How long Herb had been drinking across from the ancient krogan, Herb didn't know nor care. She had hidden it before this, but a part of Herb was fascinated by the krogan. First, they were lizard people. As the descendent of dragons, Herb had a vested interest in any species that could be called lizard-like.

And no, the salarians did not count. They were frogs. Nor did the turians. They were birds. Birds with scales, to be sure, but still, **birds**. Comparing them to krogan was like comparing a pteranodon to a dragon. It just was not the same thing at all.

Then there was also their healing ability, which Ranma had confirmed had something to do with ki. All the krogan he had fought on Omega had some measure of ki healing. Uncoordinated and slow, to be sure, but it was there. This was coupled with a lifespan that could, despite their race coming to maturity in a matter of years rather than decades, match the asari.

Sitting across from Wrex, who, if a few of his stories were to be believed, was one of the most battle tested and oldest living Battle Masters, Herb could tell much the same as Ranma had. Krogan had ki. It was somewhat more than the ki of a common asari, even after training, and it seemed tied to their bodies to an even greater degree. Yet it was there.

At first, because she had been buying the alcohol, Wrex was more than willing to answer questions. But eventually, as the drinks kept on coming, and the questions turned more to his own people, his eyes narrowed a bit. "Why so interested in my race, human? Since most of those stories aren't worth a pimple on a pyjak's ass, I don't like talking about them in the first place. My race..." the krogan scowled, shaking his head, one hand going up to a long scar that ran from the top of his head and over his eye. "The drinks aren't gonna be enough to keep me from walking off, or trying to punch your head in, if I don't like why you're asking 'em."

"Explaining my interest is somewhat complex," Herb answered readily. Information gleaned from a willing source was much better than trying to trick the information out. "First, do you know that we humans have nuked ourselves several times? My companion, Ranma, comes from the nation, which saw the first use of nuclear weapons in our history. Against it," Herb added dryly.

Wrex started at that, cocking his head thoughtfully, but Wrex allowed himself to be led down this side trail for now. "I know something of human history, but the actual weapons and stuff like that, I haven't studied. You haven't used nukes since getting to the stars, I know that at least."

"Not on other planets, no. But there have been a few instances where they were used on our mother planet. Including what is called the Unification." That was a time of human history that was quite muddled from what Herb had been able to discover. It had seen the use of multiple nukes across the planet including within China and America's borders. Which, frankly, considering what Herb knew of relations between those nations before he and Ranma had been sent to this world in their own galaxy, probably said all you needed to know about what they felt about Unification. "So you might say that I respect that your race survived even if your planet didn't. The turians are different. Their nukes only flew after they were already on multiple planets, so they didn't have to deal with the danger of wiping themselves out, as your people and mine apparently did."

While wondering about the term 'apparently' there, Wrex snorted, leaning back in his chair and downing the rest of his drink before slamming it down empty on the table. "Bah, respect, what is respect worth? Especially when you're asking me to tell you stories about my fucking race, most of whom I ain't got the time of day for, these days."

"Buying you drinks?" Herb asked, raising a hand and gesturing at a local waiter. That caused Wrex to snort again in laughter, but his eyes didn't leave Herb, and she shrugged her shoulders. "Admittedly that's only part of my reasoning. The other aspect is something my traveling companion and I have discovered of your people."

Wrex twitched. "Feh, if this is a question about you wanting to get some hands on experience about how your species and I mate, I'm going to..."

Wrex paused as Herb's glass smacked into his face, surprisingly not breaking. It had been hurled at just the right angle for the martini glass to bounce off of Wrex's forehead, before it flipped through the air, to land lightly in Herb's admittedly dainty hand. "It most certainly isn't, and if you even attempt to flirt or say something like that again, I am going to see precisely how your healing factor deals with having your arms torn out of your sockets."

"Good to know." Wrex chuckled at that, uncaring of the threat.

Yet Herb could tell that the ancient Battle Master had taken in the act of extreme control as his eyes narrowed for a moment. *This fellow is quite a bit different from the Battle Masters Ranma dealt with. It make me wonder if the Blood Pack have somewhat diluted the term. I am getting the impression that even I would rather not face Wrex when he has time to set up the battle on a field of his choosing. He is hiding far too much intelligence beyond his gruff exterior, and I well recall my father's injunctions on fearing an old warrior more than a younger one.*

As she watched, Wrex's gaze shifted to the side, where O'taku and the other asari maidens that had come in with Usagi were lounging in a nearby booth. Inu had pulled up something on her omni-tool that they were examining. Nearby, Usagi was apparently showing a few of the bar's dancers how to do a specific kind of move, which dealt with raising her leg up and maybe hooking a foot around something from what she was doing.

Herb knew Usagi enough to know that she was also probably plying them for information. Despite her unusual attitude and personality throwing other asari off, Usagi could still get the lay of the land faster than anyone Herb had ever met by ingratiating herself with asari maidens or humans, or even, though Herb had only seen this once on Omega, with turians.

"What's the deal with the girls, by the way? They flitted off earlier before I could ask, but are you all a unit or something? Heh, that'd be living the dream, woman or man when it comes to asari."

At first, Herb missed the implications of what the old krogan was asking, but then his use of the term 'unit' hit her, and she shivered. "No. For most of that crowd, suffice to say that there would be distinct complications involved in getting involved. As for Usagi, hell no. My father usually gave me advice in the form of parables, the kind that you would need to figure out on your own. However, one example of advice that he gave me that was clear of all such was do not stick your dick in crazy. Usagi is **crazy**." Herb shivered again. "Besides, Ranma was there first, and that is just not acceptable."

That caused Wrex to laugh shaking his head. "Damn, I can't remember a time when I ever wondered if the female I was with had been with a man before. I suppose though you are young, and young men and women always romanticize that kind of stupidity. And there's good crazy and bad crazy, too, you know. Some of my best lays have been crazy."

"It's your funeral if you want to try it with her." Herb shivered again picking up the second of the two glasses set in front of Wrex and draining it in one gulp. When she opened her eyes, it was with a grimace at the taste, but no apparent issue with the alcoholic aspect of the ryncol.

Wrex watched that, then shook his head from side to side. "You either have a stomach and liver of steel, or their watering the swill they're serving to me. No human can down ryncol that easily."

"Ki healing trumps alcohol," Herb stated simply at the question in Wrex's tone, shifting the conversation back to the original topic. "Something your people know about, which is another reason why I'm interested in you all."

"Our healing factor? You're saying you have something similar?" Wrex frowned for a moment, then nodded, his eyes sharpening as he stared at Herb. "I've heard a lot of stories

about you and your companion. That young pyjak who tried to convince me to join the blood pack earlier. He wasn't exaggerating your abilities, was he?"

"Considering that they didn't even get through Ranma's armor, let alone actually injure him, he probably never saw ki healing, nor would he recognize it. But as to exaggerating our abilities? Probably not. Ranma got the flashier assignment when we came to Omega," Herb grumbled, still sore about that. "All I got to do is kill a crime boss, while he gutted a mercenary outfit."

Wrex's eyes widened slightly, and he leaned forward over the table eagerly. "So, you took on Aria? That must've been a fight for the ages. I remember learning about how she beat old Patriarch, the form ruler of Omega. Tore out one of his hearts with her biotics and then crushed a few of his quads."

"Honestly, not so much," Herb answered with a shrug. "She kept on ordering her dancers and enforcers into the fight, and I had more trouble pinning her in place without doing too much collateral damage than anything else."

That caused Wrex to scowl, but he leaned back once more, a thoughtful look coming to his craggy scaled face again. "What does your healing ability have to do with my race's, then?"

"I believe it is the sign of the fact that you all have ki within you," Herb answered simply.

"Explain. What is ki?" Wrex grumbled. "Is that you're people's word for eezo?"

"Hardly." Thinking about it for a moment, Herb decided to explain, even if she found the process annoying. There was the mystery of how eezo and ki interacted, why none of the races here seemed to have any ki to speak of bar the krogan. To Herb's eyes, few of the aliens he had met, bar the asari she and Ranma had trained with anyway, had enough ki to live on. She also wanted to learn if there was anything, she could actually incorporate into her own understanding of ki from studying the krogan and their history, which tied into the second large mystery of this galaxy in her mind: why in the world was eezo and mass effect technology so central to everything in this galaxy.

Some of what Herb explained demanded an example, and eventually Herb held out her hand on the table, before slicing across it with the monomolecular edge of her omni-tool. Even with her natural toughness, such an edge could cut into her skin, although not very far.

Blood barely began to boil out of the wound before was already starting to close, beating out even krogan healing speed.

Indeed, Wrex internally acknowledged that even with one of the human omni-gel kits, a similar cut on a krogan would take at least a few minutes to heal, and if on its own, maybe fifteen minutes or so. In contrast, Herb's wound was closing as he watched, and was soon

completely closed within seconds. "That, all right, that sort of looks like our 'ki healing,' if you want to compare a mountain to a hill, anyway."

"Everyone has to start somewhere," Herb answered mock-philosophically, causing a light to rise in Wrex's eyes, as he understood what the young human girl meant.

"Now, can you tell me anything about your people's history? From before your nuclear wars or you went to the stars. Specifically, I want to know anything about your healing factor, and..." Herb scowled for a second, then took the plunge. "And anything to do with how your people discovered eezo and everything to go with it."

For a few moments, Wrex simply sat, drinking sips of his ryncol rather than the normal gulps. Then he snorted like a bull about to charge, slamming the once-more empty mug on the table hard enough to cause the stein to crack. "Bah. If you're asking about ancient history like that, I can't help you much. I know most of our history back to the Rachni Wars, but not before. Worse, we krogan never went into written records. We were always big on oral history"

"All of you?" Herb asked intently, wondering how a race that relied on oral history and information would ever be able to build up any kind of tech base, let alone go to the stars. "Really?"

"Of course, what else could I mean? We write down unimportant crap, like ship designs, gun designs, and so forth. But the important things, histories and such, are kept within clans, and never shared. I could tell you some of my own clan but... feh, they are worse pyjaks than the rest of my blasted race," Wrex answered, showing that his desire to learn more about ki healing was a personal thing.

Herb could understand that, but what Wrex said about his race showed once more, one issue she had with in this galaxy. "That is part of the problem I have with every race I have encountered in this world. You are all too monotheistic. Except for the asari and their various republics, and even they are more alike than not, I haven't read about any real internal societal differences among you all. Even the alliance tries to downplay the differences between the various human societies, which is just strange to me. I know from my readings on it that there are billions of people who fight that aspect in the Alliance, who do not wish to give up their uniqueness. Are you saying that there was no such movement among you krogan, no differences among your clans? Not even from before you went to the stars?"

That seemed to stun Wrex for a moment, and he stared out into the distance. Herb would have been content to let him to his thinking, but at that point, Usagi came over, about to say something to Herb only to pause staring at the faraway look on Wrex's face. With a smirk, she slapped him upside the head. He came out of his sudden introspective mood with a growl, turning and reaching to grab her, but Usagi skipped away, shaking her head with a laugh. "This is a bar, why are you thinking deep thoughts here!? And Herbie, you might want to keep your head on a swivel. I just saw something with your face on it on the local news."

With that, she hopped up onto the dance floor, and began to dance. Uncaring of what trouble might be coming their way she danced around opposite another younger asari, who gaped at her for a second before continuing her routine. The pair of them almost instantly drawing a crowd, and not entirely from the clientele either.

Wrex looked after her, and then looked back at Herb, who was staring at him deadpan, ignoring Usagi's warning. That had been bound to happen, after all. "Crazy, right."

Wrex shook his head, trying to think of how many people had gotten away with smacking him upside the head like that since he had been a child. The answer was not many at all, but then he shook his head, and concentrated back on Herb. *Feh, I could wish the youth of my own race was as thoughtful as this girl. Even if her questions are taking my mind to places I'd rather it not go.*

The young girl couldn't understand what her questions meant to Wrex personally. Very few people alive could know about how he had attempted to bring his people together, to fight against the nihilism that had colored the entire race since the genophage and the end of the Krogan Rebellions. How his own father had betrayed their sacred rites and set up a massive ambush, which cost the lives of every krogan who had stood with Wrex and nearly Wrex himself. All because he had been trying to change their society, to create a group that didn't act like the animals most believed the krogan to be.

Moreover, here was a young human girl saying that there had to have been similar divisions in the past, similar differences on the societal level. That maybe he hadn't been the first to understand that a bloodthirsty need for war and conflict wasn't all the krogan had to be. A large part of Wrex wanted to reject that, to simply wipe his hand of his race and go his own way as he had centuries ago. Weighing that against the allure of learning how to direct his healing ability, of making it better, was something he couldn't ignore.

"There...there might be a few legends, a few stories about a doomed clan that was wiped out by its competitors. A clan or maybe even more than one, from before the war that shattered Tuchanka. They were apparently big on written records, big on notetaking, and that weakened them in front of the hordes of their enemies. But... my people built stuff to last. If they left their writings in stone, if there are records of my people having something like that, I'd have to go to Tuchanka to search for it."

Wrex glared at Herb. "Thinking about this, thinking about going back there is opening up old wounds, you pyjak! But... but the idea of being able to heal myself is too much for me to ignore. So if you're serious about wanting to learn about my people's past, we'll need to make a deal."

"Helping you in terms of figuring out how to manipulate your ki to better heal you and in other ways for your aid in getting to Tuchanka and help when we arrive?" Herb hummed, then nodded. "That sounds like a good deal to me."

Wrex grumbled, still not happy about the idea of going to Tuchanka after so long, but before he could say anything, a group of Citadel Security came in. Heavily armed and armored, there were twelve of them, and they came through the door like they were expecting trouble, and a quick shot to the bouncer by the door hurled him off his feet and captured the man in some kind of fast hardening foam. Three of the others trained their guns on the nearest bartender. While the others fanned out, covering the whole bar with their guns. "There is a wanted fugitive here, wanted for questioning on an attack on important government officials! Give them up or there will be..."

That was as far as he got before Herb was off. She and Wrex had been sitting at a table rather than in a booth to let her have more immediate range of movement. Now she came blasting out of her chair, smashing the table up into the air with a knee jab, ignoring the fact that it been nailed to the ground. The chair flew up over Wrex, intercepting the first shots coming their way, and then a foot flashed past Wrex's head, smashing the table towards the group of security officers, flat side towards them like a battering ram.

This caused them all to duck and cover or just twist back outside, screaming into their pickups. "Fuck, Herb's here, in his female form! Fucking get us some backup! Switch to lethal!" an officer shouted from where he had ducked out of the door, switching from calling it in to shouting from one sentence to another.

"Wait, what about the bystanders?!"

"Fuck 'em!" the officer shouted, which, considering he was doing so in the open rather than through microphones set into their helmets, was remarkably stupid.

Well, so much for using my female body to blend in. Bah, I was never good about that in the first place, Herb reflected as she rolled to the side, and lashed out with a ki blast towards a group of turian and human guards as they tried to get under cover in a booth near the door. The wide-angled blast, not very powerful but covering a few yards lengthwise, slammed into the guards.

Still more flowed into the bar, firing as they came, while Usagi raced into contact with several, a biotic shield around her smacking bullets out of the air. The rest of the patrons also began to respond as the Security officer's words penetrated their mostly inebriated minds.

The asari who had arrived with Usagi didn't join her, simply staying where they were, ducking behind the cover the booth gave them, which, in Chora's Den, was quite a bit. From there they watched with doleful gazes. "Oh God, the abbess is going to hold this against us, I just know it!" O'taku whimpered. "Or worse yet, the Justicars are going to be after us!"

"There, there," Inu answered, "I doubt that even any of the Justicars would think that we would ever be able to stop Usagi from doing whatever the hell she wants to."

“Just because that’s the truth doesn’t mean it’s going to be believed,” another one of the Ardat-Yakashi retorted tartly, watching Wrex, a bit slower to charge than Usagi, do so with style now. The old krogan bellowed with laughter as he covered the distance in a Biotic Charge, slamming into a group of three turians with heavy armor as they attempted to flank where Herb had landed in among some of their fellows. He hit like the fist of an angry god, scattering the trio and coming out of his charge on a dime, grabbing one of them out of the air by his leg. Before the C-Sec officer could do anything, he was used as a flail to one of his fellows, before Wrex stepped on the other man, his foot cracking the armored shell the turians had.

At that point, it became a free for all. As those not armed, shrieked and dived for cover or used biotics to defend themselves in the case of the asari, the bar goers fired at everyone. The bouncers around the area fired at anyone armed, and the guards laid down a hail of both lethal and nonlethal fire. Herb had long since slipped on her armor, and thus even the heaviest rounds bounced off her like it would the biotic shields of Usagi and Wrex. The sole asari among the guard had been dealt with, rather amusingly, by getting shot in the back as the locals responded to the shouts about the guard going nonlethal before she could have any impact on the battle. The other asari were all on the side of Chora’s Den or Usagi, and all were more worried about protecting themselves and any nearby coworkers.

When the dust settled, all of the invading Citadel Security folk were down, as were a goodly number of their patrons, knocked out, trapped in foam for the main or dead if they were unlucky. While Usagi and Herb had started the fight just against C-Sec they had expanded into the bar’s other inhabitants when they were shot at by them, and Wrex had only ever bothered to make certain he wasn’t about to shoot someone who wasn’t armed. Here in Chora’s Den, that meant he had been spoiled for choice. Thankfully for them, the bar’s owner knew shootouts were common and the tables, booths and bars were reinforced with metal under the expensive-looking wooden veneer which had saved the majority of the patrons who didn’t decide to get involved in the fighting.

“Wrex! I know that is you out there, you old bastard! What the fuck?! I thought we were good! The Shadow Broker’s going to hear about this!”

“I’ll tell him myself. I’m not the one that started this fight, Fist. I just joined in because it was fun! And you need to get better security. Not only better, but smarter,” Wrex replied, snickering slightly, a horrible sound from a krogan as he poked at some of the holes that had been made in him, standing over two krogan who had charged out of the back room. Both were still alive, but would have their own scars to remember him by. As for Wrex’s injuries, several were already starting to close, he could feel it but it would be at least another twenty-to-thirty minutes or more before they closed entirely. Like he had said to Herb, the human’s healing factor was simply far better than his own. “Me, I’m going on a vacation for a bit. The Shadow Broker can find some other enforcer for a while.”

Usagi stretched happily from where she had been fighting, grinning cheerfully over at Herb. “Well, that made my day. I’ve been in a kind of bad mood since I realize all of us were

gassed. Cold cocking those C-Sec guys when we first woke up didn't make up for it, but now I'm feeling much better."

Herb rolled her eyes and looked between her and the rest of his slowly gathering asari, most of whom were bowing and apologizing to their fellows or the other survivors as they came towards them, and Wrex. "Two questions and an observation. I would observe that these Citadel Council Security Guards rarely come down here. They did not seem at all surprised when the clientele of the bar open fire on them and turn and barely put up even token resistance at that one officer's command to go lethal."

The officer in question was one of the few outright dead on the guard's side. Herb had snapped his neck and much of his collarbone with a kick.

"Bah, you've seen how filthy it is down here, how many people there are. Is it any wonder that the C-Sec pretty boys don't come down here? They'd need an army to even try to keep the peace. You've been on Omega, think of the lower levels here as even worse in a way. On Omega, you've got a lot of people who want some kind of order and law, just not the governments they or their parents fled from. Here, right under the eyes of the government, you've got a lot of people who don't want anything to do with them, or law and order at all, but can't or won't leave."

Snorting at that, Herb patted her stomach. "Well, as my first question, do either of you know where we could get some actual food rather than more drink? Just because I can metabolize that alcohol you were drinking earlier doesn't mean I'm actually getting anything good out of it, Wrex."

"I'd say there's never ever been anything good about ryncol, even to my folk, but I suppose that would be stating the obvious," the older krogan answered with a chuckle. The fact he would be leaving with the multi-haired girl wasn't said aloud but it was heavily implied.

"I knew a place. Follow me," Usagi said cheerfully, heading towards the door before pausing and looking over at her quizzically. "What was your second question?"

"I had decided not to go the full route and release... an incriminating set of pictures of the Council in the hopes that they would, as logical, intelligent individuals, know I could do so if they continued to come after me. Apparently, I vastly underestimated their intelligence, or overestimated their self-preservation." Herb smiled thinly and popped up his omni-tool, showing one of the images he had taken of the staged orgy of horrors he had created in the Council Room after the battle there. "Seeing as I am no good at bartering, could you tell me which rags would be interested in this picture, and for how much should I charge them?"

Usagi took one look at the image being displayed by his omni-tool and turned to the side, screaming theatrically holding her hands up over her eyes while the rest of the asari behind her all gaped, stared, then twisted around, blushing or looking green. Or, as green as

blue-skinned individuals could anyway. “My eyes! My eyes! Excise them! There’s a reason I’ve never slept with a turian or salarian, ugh!”

Wrex guffawed, staring at the most unholy orgy that he had ever seen. “I can give you the names of a few, a few of the more salacious rags out there, and even a few of the regular news agencies might run with that. For a few minutes anyway. Before they get a cease-and-desist order. As for how much to charge them, well, I think any money problems you might have are going to be solved in the near future...”

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere on the Citadel, in his private office, Udina leaned back as he began to compose a report on Herb to be sent to the Alliance High Command and in particular, a few of the politicians in the parliament.

After some rather angry thinking, after coming too naked on the council floor, Udina had concluded that Herb was not someone they would ever be able to work with in the future. Certainly not after that disgusting way he had left their bodies and the battle itself. No, Herb was very much a staunch nonconformist, he would never work with anyone in a position of authority. It was better to kill him somehow and examine the body for the secrets to how he could do what he and his companion could do. A fact that he made very plain in his report.

This was a similar to what was going on with the Salarians, although there, unlike Udina, the salarian councilor, Valern was reporting real time. Complete with video recordings of what had occurred in the Council up until the end of the battle.

“Kill him or capture him. He must be brought to us here on Sur’Kesh,” one of the Matriarchs, a member of the Dalatrass who truly ran her people behind the scenes stated firmly. “If there is any chance of us figuring out a way to lengthen our lives, to stop the cellular deterioration that comes to our people all too quickly with age, we must grasp it. Put a Spectre on it, one of ours.”

“Herb and his companion Ranma seem capable of fighting Spectres, I would rather we figure out a way to follow them, to observe them at all times. We need more information,” Valern cautioned.

“Perhaps. But we need that information from this individual, not just what he is doing,” that Matriarch shot back, before another Dalatrass interrupted.

“We must have a sample of him at the very least. Figure out a way to get one. Sexual, blood, hair, it does not matter. Find a way to get us that sample. From there, we can perhaps create a means to control his mind or at least inhibit him from lying to us during questioning. Drugs have proven to be helpful in containing this human once. It will be again.”

Astonishingly, the salarians were the only ones thinking in terms of brute forcing their approach to Herb and Ranma and the possible solutions to their aging problems that the two represented. The turian councilor, Sparatus, had decided that these two were loose cannons, who could never be truly brought to heel. While it went against the grain, though, there were ways of working with such people. Or rather, directing their energies. Several Spectres had been found among such people.

That, and he could not overlook the fact that they had been willing to work with the joint turian/human mission to Omega. Sparatus didn't like it, but in this instance, it truly appeared that strong-arming the pair really wouldn't amount to much. Except in the way of broken landscape anyway. That, and he wasn't nearly as furious as Udina was, nor as interested in what the pair's 'ki' could do for his people as Valern.

Similarly, Tevos had reached the same conclusion. Trying to bring either of the two super-humans to heel was worth far more in the long run than they would gain on a personal level. The only one of the three who understood that Herb had probably taken pictures, she in no way wanted the pictures of the horrid orgy-type setting she had found herself waking up in made public. Tevos also understood that Benezia had already found a way to start bringing some of the pair's strange abilities to her people, if on a very small level. Still, considering there were only two of them, it couldn't be any other way. She could only hope that deal would continue forward, and that Herb's hatred for the Council would fade, satisfied by the tremendous amount of injuries that he had dealt Vasir, who would not be leaving the hospital anytime soon.

Unfortunately, Valern had not been entirely in his right mind, and worse, he had been the one to wake up first of the three Councilors. His first thought was to try and capture Herb again, so when told C-Sec had already put out an APB on Herb, he did not countermand it.

While slower to recover from her injuries than the others since she had taken a larger amount of pummeling, Tevos was the first to realize that this might have been a mistake as someone had begun to release a certain image, all over the Extranet. And for once, her habitual cool control failed her as she began to curse in every language known to the Council, her head in her hands and as she wondered quietly if perhaps, just perhaps, she should resign. "Anything would be better than dealing with this..."

OOOOOO

Matriarch Benezia had been in hundreds of libraries in her time belonging to practically every race known to the Council. All of them were a little different, and showed the normal architectural style of their race. Few races had multiple architectural styles. Volus and humanity were the only ones that she could point to and say that they had true different styles that had been carried forward from their pasts as a single-planet species. The elcor built huge on the exterior, but with hundreds of small, personal rooms inside for one or two elcor at a time. The

turians built equally heavily, but with an almost militaristic bent to their interiors, with lines of fire, separate zones for different types of knowledge, and more.

For their part, Benezia's people preferred open, airy areas, merging libraries with gardens, farms or parks, or at least they did when dealing with digitized data. Which was, honestly, a lot more than most other races, given how long the asari had been technologically advanced. When it came to ancient writings, those were kept in separate museums along with historical artifacts, or temples depending on the nature of the writings. The most famous such was the Temple of Athame on Thessia, which housed nearly every important artifact or writing about the goddess which had originally brought the disparate asari together. While Siarism, or the concept of 'All Are One' had come to dominate asari culture, Athame still held a major place to her people and history.

Currently, the elder T'Soni was in a lesser temple devoted to Athame on Thessia. Rather than being the center of the then-world spanning religion, this temple was the oldest contiguous temple libraries on Thessia, and thus, by definition the oldest in the galaxy. It had been built up over time, and traveling through it always fascinated Benezia, as it had her daughter at one point, when she was just getting into archaeology. Watching her Little Wing flitter about, staring at where one architectural style faded into another had been quite a lot of fun, especially when she tried to follow one mural only to find it ending abruptly along one wall then starting up again elsewhere.

The rooms here truly lent themselves to that concept, the idea of wandering from one age to another through various rooms, discovering new things as you went. Some were lined with murals, others containing wooden pyramids to hold ancient stone statues or paintings. Still more were built around little meditation rooms lining the walls of main rooms which themselves centered around dozens of large bookcases. It was a place the young could get lost for days, and come back the wiser, as Liara and before her Benezia had.

However, Benezia wasn't here for fun. Well, curiosity **was** fun in a way, but it wasn't the kind of fun that a lot of people would have understood. Indeed, when Benezia first discussed her idea of looking into Bera'van'Tuwan among the records here as well as mentioning offhand her desire to learn more about the years before Athame, the temple's head abbess had looked at her as if she had said something blasphemous.

Nor was that the first such look that Benezia had gotten since coming back to Thessia. Some of her allies among The Twenty-Nine had given her similar looks. Yet with the truth of Ranma and Herb's abilities shown in her own training, none could gainsay her sudden interest in the ancient past. Even if it had taken her off the hunt of a possibly duplicitous, possibly even traitorous Spectre in the form of the turian, Saren.

She had even gotten some pushback from the abbess, and a call from the high priestess of the Athame religion, a Matriarch N'Vola. Not a member of The Twenty-Nine, she was still quite influential, and the discussion had been somewhat probing, and very frosty when Benezia

admitted to some concerns about how alike asari mass effect technology was to everyone else's.

Why, it was almost enough to make someone think that there was something to hide. In point of fact, Benezia was **certain** there was something to hide.

It was a common misconception that the asari people came together in a peaceful coalition under the goddess over the decades, the other asari tribes coming to be in awe of the sheer knowledge Athame and her sword and shield, Janiri and Lucen, provided them to the point of uniting under Athame's rule. Yet while they were in no way as warlike as the humans, let alone such extreme examples as the turians or krogan, her people were still firm individualists... especially when young. Anyone believing that they could be brought into a single unified whole without bloodshed was foolish in the extreme. Benezia had told such to the high priestess, saying she was in no way trying to find fault with the goddess. Simply wondering about the technology she had helped to propagate, and how it interacted with the decline of Bera'van'Tuwan. Benezia had admitted some of her reasoning might ruffle feathers, but she was not interested in doing so on purpose, or sharing anything untoward she learned.

Yet despite having made that plain several times, Benezia was not surprised when the lights went out above her. *The religious always seem to be reactionary, regardless of race*, she mused as the light above her shut off with a popping noise.

There was no hesitation then. One moment, Benezia was sitting, calmly going through scrolls using a translation software on her omni-tool to translate from ancient asari to the present day tongue. Then even as she mused on the fallacy of the overly religious mind, Benezia was flipping backwards out of her chair, staring around her.

Complete darkness fell through the room as all of the lights in the room went out. Elsewhere, the door leading out to the rest of the library temple slammed shut on some order, cutting off Shiala and the two commandoes she had chosen to accompany her today.

As the last flicker of light was cut off, Benezia twisted to the side, staring at where she had heard a sudden hissing noise, her arm flashing with biotic energies, lighting up the area once more. There, she saw a grate in the wall, something almost unseen hissing out of it to join the normal air. *Gas!*

Action following thought instantly, Benezia raised a biotic shield over her head, breathing in deeply before it was in place, keeping the gas from getting to her lungs. Her other hand thrust forward, creating a burst of flame, a technique she had come up with after watching her and Ranma and Herb spar occasionally. In essence, the technique basically used her biotic powers to ignite the air via friction in a small area.

Now, the flame burst, searing into and through the vent, and the hissing instantly stopped.

Quickly, she looked around, but it seemed as if whoever was trying to kill her only used that one device, or at least, she couldn't hear anymore hissing in the darkness. The only light that she could see was her biotic powers, but the ongoing fire in the vent helped.

No, that might have been the assassin's first bullet, but even if this attempt was set up quickly, no asari would not have others ready. With that, and with her lungs burning, Benezia released her biotic powers, letting the darkness fully subsume the room, concentrating on her ears for a moment.

Over the sounds of the crackling fire in the vent, Benezia heard the distant sounds of fighting, which signified another aspect of this ambush, but one that had either been picked up by her bodyguards or perhaps centered on them. *To keep Shiala and young Efari and Sola from interfering?*

Feeling more than hearing movement behind her in the darkness, Benezia tucked her head and rolled forward. An omni-tool blade went through where her neck had been a moment ago, and Benezia kicked the ground hard, coming to a stop and coming around in a blazing kick, her limb lighting up with Biotic energy.

The assassin tried to fade back into the black but was forced to bring up her own biotics in response. Biotic Shield and Biotic Kick slammed into one another, and to Benezia surprise, the assassins shield didn't shatter instantly. "Very well done!" Benezia said, honest praise in her tone even as she shifted into a series of strikes and biotic pulls. .

The assassin, wearing all black save for a stark blue blank mask that gave off no reflected light didn't reply, simply taking a stance, her arms now gleaming with biotic energies, as she summoned up a singularity to one side, then bolts from the other. Benezia shattered the one technique with her own singularity, the two techniques cancelling out. Then she rolled and flipped between the others as the bolts zoomed through where she had been standing, lashing out with a Biotic Push, then a Charge. The Push was blocked, but the Charge, a technique Benezia had learned ages ago from a krogan, took her assassin by surprise. The woman's eyes widened above her mask but was once more able to bring up her own biotic energies.

This time, Benezia's was the winner, slamming into and through her opponent's shield, sending her hurtling into the far wall. The assassin though rolled midair, bringing her legs into contact with the wall first, grunting heavily at the impact but deadening much of the momentum as she tried to leap away.

Before she could, Benezia was on her, lashing out with punches, kicks and biotic flares. The assassin attempted to use biotic grenades, but Benezia encased them in biotic shields, letting the technique explode harmlessly even as an elbow caught the assassin in the chin as Benezia ducked into guard. A biotic assisted headbutt timed almost perfectly in defense flung her arm backwards a second later, then the assassin pushed Benezia's head down into a knee via her own biotics, but the Matriarch was able to get one hand in between them, blocking the

knee and then sending a chop into the center of the assassin's chest. Air whooshed out of the woman's lungs, but a Biotic Push of extreme power flung Benezia away.

Biotic orbs followed up, but each of them was punctured instantly by Benezia's own, the shape of the orbs that she was using markedly different from the regular sort, more daggers than orbs. Benezia then launched a biotic singularity at the woman's feet, causing her to leap away. She took advantage of this, landing on top of one of the nearest bookshelves, where she rained down biotic orbs.

Dodging wildly, Benezia leaped upwards too and the two of them meeting in midair, the room lit by the dueling biotic energies. Yet while the assassin had started with the high ground, only one of them had ever fought Ranma. Fighting Ranma in the air was an insanely difficult task but it had trained Benezia for this.

The two of them bounced up and through the air off of the bookcases for only a few seconds before she was able to get in a grab, which pulled the other woman in into another elbow blow. This one nearly dislocated the woman's jaw, causing her to cry out in pain for the first time in the fight. Then Benezia was ducking under a return blow, sluggish now. Grabbing the woman around the waist, Benezia twisted in midair, performing a trick that Ranma had not done on her but on Herb when he had been particularly annoyed with the prince.

It was a pure human-style wrestling trick Ranma had called a suplex, and was such that no asari would ever have thought of using it. It was simply too barbaric and frankly a little too silly. Yet even so, it was immensely gratifying to feel her enemy slamming into the ground headfirst a second later.

"GAhh..." The body of the assassin went limp instantly, and Benezia twisted around, quickly kneeling beside her to check for a pulse. After a second, she breathed in relief, then hoisted the... younger woman she was guessing, but it wasn't much of a guess... onto her shoulder, heading towards the doorway.

The doorway burst open under a tiny, shaped charge around the lock and one of her commandos, Sola, raced in, her omni-tool having created a light that she used to light the way forward. "Matriarch! We were under attack..."

"I know. I imagine that only three of them attacked you, Shiala and Efari, correct? They were but diversions for the one that was intended to clean up if the gas did not get me," Benezia shook her head. "I wonder how they were going to explain all this away? Well, I suppose I will just have to ask."

To that, her young bodyguard had no answer, only gaping at the body of the assassin over Benezia's shoulder. At that, Benezia chuckled a little to herself before tossing her unconscious attacker to her bodyguard, who caught the other woman easily, putting her in a fireman's carry. "I hope no one actually died. This was an example of jumping to conclusions,

and not something that should truly lead to deaths on either side. Well, since I myself was able to live through the attempt on my life, anyway.”

Stepping out into the corridor, which led off into several different rooms like the ones she had been in a moment before, Benezia allowed her smile to widen at the sight that greeted her. In the middle of the hallway, Shiala stood, holding one assassin against the wall with one hand, choking the life out of her despite the woman’s best efforts to try to concentrate enough to use biotics, while standing with one foot on top of the chest of another unconscious assassin. Both of them wore the same matte blue mask as the one Benezia had dealt with, although they looked far younger in build. A third lay slumped nearby, having probably been teamed by the other two, equally younger members of her current bodyguard detail.

Shiala looked over at Benezia, a smile of relief at seeing their charge alive and unhurt appearing on her face. “Matriarch! I didn’t think that any of them had gone past us. I’m sorry, I didn’t honestly think that any attack would come at you from within that room. I should have argued about us staying out here!”

“Do not apologize for things beyond your control. A fourth attacker hiding somewhere within that room would not be something that I would have anticipated either.”

Asari commando teams usually worked in teams of two or three, relying on stealth, their biotic powers and teamwork against their habitually numerically superior opponents. Here, playing against one another like this, the attackers would’ve tried anything to give themselves an advantage.

“The gas was probably their real trump card,” Benezia decided. “Something they set up quickly, on the fly as the humans would say. And the individual who attacked me was the desperate backup plan, coupled with the group that pinned you three in place. Despite that, I see that the three of you were able to deal with them quite easily.”

The smile on her face had both of the younger bodyguards blushing happily, while Shiala, always harder on herself, snorted. “It pains me to admit this Matriarch, but all of that training against Ranma and Herb, has truly paid off. They were moving so slowly in comparison!”

At that, Benezia chuckled, but Efari asked hesitantly, “Matriarch, what was this was all about? It isn’t exactly normal for groups of asari commandos to attack one another like this, let alone attempt to murder members of The Twenty-Nine.”

While politics among the asari republics were quite often extremely contentious, it very rarely broke out into true physical conflict like this. And Matriarch Benezia, regardless of her importance as a member of The Twenty-Nine had hardly made the enemies that one would need to have made to bring such a response down on her head. This left only one real conclusion, one that all of her bodyguards reached just as Benezia had earlier.

“Could they really have been sent after us just because you were looking into ancient history? Why?” Sola added

“That is a question, isn’t it? It seems as if in looking at our histories, someone is worried about what I might find. It might be directly connected to Bera’van’Tuwan, although I doubt it. No, this has to do with the modern image of the goddess Athame as a benevolent teacher rather than anything else.”

As a pragmatist herself, Benezia had only ever given lip service of even the more modern Siarism, but she knew that belief in Athame’s goodness was a cornerstone of her people’s psyche and society. This attack on her person was obviously a result of her looking into her people’s past.

“I didn’t know if I am onto something truly, but I have annoyed people to the point where they are willing to lash out at us and that is almost as good. It certainly serves to fan the flames of my interest.”

She smiled then, and Shiala reflected that, as much as Liara might deny it given her distaste for her mother’s politicking, she and her mother had one thing for certain in common. They were people who were happiest when they had problems to solve, or in this case, mysteries to unravel.

The lights came on then, and Benezia chortled. “I think it is time that we speak to the abbess of this temple again. Come children and do bring our guests.”

Moments later, Benezia stood in front of the abbess’s desk, while her commandos laid out the unconscious attackers on a few of the nearby chairs and sofas. There’d been no flicker of recognition or even dismay as Benezia came through the door, but considering the number of librarians they had passed by at this point, that didn’t surprise Benezia at all. The abbess had time to understand what had happened, and even time enough, to put some kind of defense in place.

Thus when she spoke, her words held no weight to them. “I have to apologize for this. I do not know what kind of enemies you had made in the past Matriarch, especially ones willing to commit murder here in the temple to the goddess. Had I known that was even a possibility, I would’ve assigned some of my own sisterhood to act as a guide here within the temple. Yet you requested that there be no such.”

“I did. But you are saying that you do not know how these assassins gained access to your internal electrical system? Or the vents? In enough time to set up their gas attack, before I entered that room. In enough time to have some watcher already within the room hiding away?” Benezia smiled pleasantly, but each word was a barb hurled at the other woman.

They struck home, but the other Matriarch answered as best she could. "I realize that this looks bad for my temple and myself, but it is a purely security matter, **not** an internal one. No matter what you might be looking for, none of my sisters nor I would ever dream of attempting to get in the way of your research, not in such a final manner. You didn't even tell me about what you are looking for, only that you wanted to look at the archives from before the creation of the First Republic."

The First Republic was the name given to the era of asari history. It was used to describe the time between when the goddess appeared and helped to bring all the asari together into one republic and the time when the asari first began to colonize other worlds. It was seen as something of a golden age in retrospect and was certainly taught as such in modern schools. What that actually might entail though, especially near the beginning of the First Republic, was somewhat murky, a portion of asari history that wasn't really studied all that well. It was so far in the past after all, and also was well before meeting with other races and Siarism. Indeed, very few modern asari schools taught anything at all about the creation of the First Republic, even at the college level.

For asari, the college level went on for decades. It had to, in order to help asari finish shift from Maiden to young Matron. That was partly why Liara had such trouble getting herself taken seriously by other asari historians: she was still very much in her maiden years, and had rushed through her time at college.

Deciding she had played around to her satisfaction, Benezia held up a hand. Instead of glowing blue and creating a biotic technique, a ball of golden ki appeared over her finger. She couldn't sustain it for very long, but she had trained with Ranma and Herb to the point where she could consciously activate her ki, and after had not stopped until she achieved the result she wanted. "I was researching into Bera'van'Tuwan, the Soul Flame. I wanted to understand if there were any books or instructions on how to use it, as well as how to integrate it into biotic energy as well. I was truly hoping to find what we could do with both. What I had found, was the knowledge of it was suppressed during the time of Athame's rise to importance... to the point where I can only find the initial legends. Those made me think of it when I met two human acquaintances of mine, humans which seem to be able to use the Soul Flame to the point it makes biotics look almost silly in comparison."

The abbess stared at the golden ball and then Benezia's face, but Benezia did not let her speak yet. "Now, there could be many reasons for that. I am somewhat uncaring, however. I wish to understand Bera'van'Tuwan more than anything else." She then leaned forward, allowing anger to appear on her face. "Unless, that is, the reason it was suppressed has something to do with how alike our mass effect technology is to everyone else's. How our mass effect technology is so alike that of the protheans, and thus has not evolved beyond it."

Indeed, I am wondering about Athame at all. I am wondering about what my Little Wing said about our technology being so alike that of the protheans.

At those words, the abbess seemed to scowl, looking away for a moment, but her eyes kept tracking back to the golden ball until Benezia had to let the technique go, sweating and nearly exhausted from the ordeal of keeping it active. "I... I will take your words on, and pass them on to others who were concerned about what you were looking into here. I cannot promise more."

"And I will keep on looking for answers. Help me find the answers I was originally looking for, or else I will have to find my own." She let that settle in, and then turned, saying over her shoulder. "My research might be very important to the future of our race in many ways. But what I share from that research is also up for interpretation. Something you should also pass on to those bothered by my current interests."

With that, Benezia exited, leaving behind a very thoughtful and very worried follower of the goddess behind her, wondering if perhaps they had leaped to a solution to a problem that would not have otherwise existed and if so, what to do about it now.

As Benezia and her three bodyguards left the temple library and moved to where her car waited, she saw the remaining member of her guard detail waiting for her, holding up her arm with its omni-tool on it. "Matriarch, we've had a few attempts to contact the skycar's onboard computer, but our hack'n'crack team's stopped them all. We also have a message... one with the header we were told to look for if Ranma or Herb wanted to contact you."

Blinking in surprise at that, Benezia gestured, and the younger asari passed the message over to her. It did indeed contain both the header and the various other code words she had gone to some lengths to teach Ranma and Herb to use should they need to contact her. The reasoning behind why they would was left up in the air, but she had implied rather strongly that contacting her to, say try to intervene on their behalf with the council or local law enforcement would not be a good use of the emergency contact. Outside of the asari republics, Benezia had few resources, and even within, she was somewhat constrained as to what help she could openly give them.

As she got to the last paragraph though, she stared, her confusion such that she actually voiced it aloud. "What exactly could he mean by 'perfectly setup, if used, spy ring'?"

Next to Benezia, Shiala shrugged. "I suppose we will have to call Ranma back to find out, won't we? You don't suppose he's being literal, do you?"

"With anyone else, I would assume no. With Ranma, who knows?" Benezia chortled, shaking her head, in an even better mood than before, even though a part of Benezia felt like she was bouncing between different objectives, different goals with no means to bring any of them to a conclusion. "Take me back to our ship, Shiala. I believe that we need to follow up on this, and I want to use some coms equipment I can trust to do so."

OOOOOOO

It would come as no surprise to anyone who knew him in this universe or his last that the first thought Ranma had as he stared at all of the screens set up in the bridge of the derelict ship he'd found himself in was where the food was. Especially not after the ordeal he had. Beating off the gas-based chemical concoction that had initially led to his capture was one thing, and it had drained Ranma's ki reserves badly. After the fight with the massive monster, he was even worse off.

With his stomach growling at him like a pride of angry giant furry demons, Ranma tried his best to figure out how to pull up a map of the ship. This was not easy though, as the operating system was in some strange language that his omni-tool couldn't translate. "Which is weird, come to think of it. I thought the thing could translate any of the Council's known languages. So... what the hell was that guy? What the heck kind of species names itself Yagg? Come on, that's an onomo-whatever, a word for a noise people make, not a real name!"

Regardless, Ranma didn't have the dictionary for this language, and Ranma lacked the software needed to try to figure it out. Nor did he have access to the wider intergalactic network. When he tried, he got a 'access restricted' notification, telling him that the local uplink network of the ship was locked down, and would not let him send out to the wider net via his omni-tool. Despite the fact that that wider net seemed to be very much in communication with the ship.

Shutting down his omni-tool, Ranma stepped back for a moment, staring at all of the screens as that thought went through his mind. "A lot of these videos look like they're about important things, money changing hands, important people too judging by the number of bodyguards I'm seeing in a few of these pics. Strange."

Shaking that off, Ranma looked around. "Okay, so my only tools not going to be much help here. That means, I got two choices. Figure out which of these systems I can use to find a god damn map of this ship or head back out and tried my luck."

This was something of a no-brainer. Ranma had figured out the general directions in the ship and at this point, by simply being able to recall where he had been before. That was a far cry from figuring out where the hell the food was stored. His grumbling stomach getting worse, Ranma moved around the bridge, finding the lighting controls quickly enough.

Setting them to what he felt was good, changed the entire outlook of the bridge, from a cross between a monsters lair and a NEET's to what at first looked like a simple computer heavy room. And then he noticed details that had not been visible before, which brought the room into the realm of a set from a horror film.

"Great, just great. That big fucker believed in taking trophies," Ranma grumbled, trying hard not to look too closely at the various eyeballs or fingers set in small crystal containers scattered throughout the rest of the bridge. He hadn't noticed most of them at first due to the

wash of lighting coming from all of the screens and the darkness beyond, but now, with actual overhead light, they were easy to discern hidden in amongst the screens.

A worrisome thought occurred to him then, and Ranma paled. "Oh crap, don't tell me that guy was just a meat eater... I really don't want to know what kind of meeting it was eating!"

Luckily, along with nightmare fuel, the overhead lighting also allowed Ranma to discern what systems were original parts of the ship, and what had been added in later. He quickly found one of them, and looking underneath it, found a small plaque telling him that it was a communications console. "That's handy."

Looking up and around, he noted all of the wires leading into it. He also realized with a start that at least a third of the original bridge had been walled off around that console. "I'm going to guess that someone really had to up the size of this ship's communications system then. Makes sense," Ranma murmured. He had worked with the shipwrights on Mostromos and before that in simple construction projects that he knew that the more cables, fiber or whatever, you had, the larger the load you could handle. Considering the sheer amount of information there was even now coming through, a simple ship's communications system wouldn't have been able to handle it. *I mean, I haven't seen the same report or whatever even once since I entered the bridge, and I've been here for at least half an hour.* "Way too much information, and way too much of it over time. Lots more wires and I'd wager anything the ship's computer is also monstrous."

His stomach growling again, Ranma shook that thought away and moved off, heading to the opposite side of the bridge to another console that looked similar. He went through two more before he found one that was an engineering console. It had a map, thankfully, an actual map of the ship even if he couldn't read any of the headers for it.

He could see spots though those were in the red. "So one part of the engine, I think, and a few on the exterior. Huh." Ranma had traversed enough of the ship to where the engineering room was in comparison to the bridge, as well as a few of the other areas he had been.

Setting aside the red dot mystery to join all the rest of his observations, Ranma oriented himself then downloaded the image to into his omni-too. "I'll have to label things as I go, but that's all right."

Leaving the bridge, he labeled it on the map with the proper term, along with the engineering room before using the map figure out where he had left the big bastard's body, and where he had been deposited right off the bat, although he wasn't quite as certain about that one. His first attempt to find a mess hall, however, failed. Instead, he found what looks like a droid repair and housing station. It was easily one of the larger rooms he'd been in yet besides the engineering room, and also one of the most filled, coming only second to the bridge.

His second attempt was far more interesting to Ranma, and he spent a few moments gazing into a small armory, one filled with both modern and far more eclectic weapons. "Damn! Is that an old-time shotgun from the Wild West era or a replica? Probably more than a replica and swords? And what is that big ass buster sword thing? Ugh, looks like someone heard about sword and shield style and just sort of fused them together to get one huge large mishmash thing," Ranma murmured, stepping into the armory and taking a few of the weapons, practicing with a few.

This included the aforementioned sword-shield blade. As big as certain swords in fantasy novels or games, it stood at least a foot taller than Ranma. The last foot and a few inches was a simple sword blade, honed on both sides and coming to a thick point, the metal there tapering a bit, but not much. The rest of the 'blade' spread to look like a tower shield, and had several handholds along one side of it, creating what amounted to a strange weapon that didn't know if it was sword or shield and thus would probably fail at both in the hands of anyone normal.

Only one of the other weapons stood out to Ranma. Its balance was damn near perfect, although he didn't recognize the style. It looked kind of European to him, but also had a bit of an edge to it, and the hilt was weird. "But if I'm about to take trophies, I'm for sure taking something like this, rather than something from that bastard's body."

His stomach growled once again, perhaps annoyed at being ignored. Ranma groaned, turning aside and heading back outside, leaving the sword behind. He didn't really have enough ki reserves right now to want to bother keeping up his weapon space, despite that being a very tiny drain on it, and didn't want to just walk around with a weapon either.

Moving through the ship once more, Ranma finally found the larder and mess hall, if it could be called that, on his third attempt at figuring out what a large room could be. It was still a large room, but all of the tables had been removed save one shaped almost like a crescent moon around a single massive chair, the look and padding of which matched the one in the bridge. The kitchen was at least in the same place, and Ranma moved through it, noting no bread, pastas, or anything dried or canned in sight. The pantry was also gone, replaced by a much larger door into the cold room, which was probably also enlarged. "Great, okay so that makes sense given that big retard's size, but none of this is making me feel warm and fuzzy inside."

With trepidation, Ranma opened the door to the meat locker, then slammed it shut instantly, growling angrily and smacking his head against the door, the rhythmic thumping of his head against it adding to the background noise of his stomach's near constant growling. "Fucking fantastic! Of course. Meat eater loves to hunt other sentient people, of course he's going to eat them."

Grimacing, Ranma pulled away and opened the door just a moment, taking in what was inside again, hoping that there was something inside there that he could actually eat but there wasn't. His gorge rising, Ranma shut the door again, then in desperation looked around and

tried to find something, anything in the rest of the kitchen he could eat. He found a few fruits, lots of different sauces, and a few vegetables, but not a lot. Nowhere near enough to make a meal. He still ate it all, which helped to somewhat assuage his stomach, the low rumbling returning to the original pride of angry giant demons rather than the horde of said animals it had sounded like before. However, he was still damn hungry.

With growing desperation, Ranma searched around the rest of the ship, heading into each room in turn, updating his map as he went. He didn't find any other storage area for food. Indeed, he didn't really find much of anything else except a quite decent exercising room, with a lot of different machines in it. Yet even with that, it looked as if the guy spent most of his time on the bridge, doing whatever he was doing with all those screens and everything. It didn't seem to have much of a life away from that, except for hunting people like Ranma. "Which I might piss on your corpse for, you asshole. Especially since you got rid of even the canned normal food."

With his map and having turned on the lights for the ship from the bridge, heading back up to the bridge was an easy task at this point, and Ranma instantly moved to the communications console, trying to figure out the controls. That, his omni-tool helped with, but the operating system was still in a different language.

After a few moments of simply trying to input different commands, Ranma was able to bring up the audio of something.

"As you ordered, we have kept a close eye on the sale of tri-hexagon fulbrium on Azrahas. It does indeed look as if they are selling significant amounts sight unseen, and..."

Ranma listened for a few moments, and although he didn't know the topic, he could certainly understand what was being talked about. Someone was selling something and wasn't paying taxes or anything on it. Selling under the table Ranma had heard that kind of deal called. "Okay, that's interesting. And coupled with what I noticed before tells me this guy was a major information, what's the term, broker? Yeah, that's it, he's an information broker, like a crime boss but specializing in gathering and using information."

It then hit Ranma who the yahg he had killed must have been. "The Shadow Broker. He was one of the guys, who was interested in trying to meet or whatever back on Sijou," Ranma mused. "Was he always just interested in figuring out a way to hunt us? And if I'm here, where the hell is Herb? For that matter, who the fuck captured us?"

Thinking about it, Ranma felt a little guilty that this was actually the first time he had wondered where precisely his erstwhile companion was since he had woken up. "Then again, it isn't as if the guy can handle himself," Ranma rationalized, shaking his head. "Still, we were both captured at the same time. Where would the Shadow Broker have... I wonder..."

Hoping that the monster he had fought didn't use his own language for everything, Ranma typed in his own name in the search bar, having figured out how at least to pull that up prior to finding how to open the audible recordings being sent into the Shadow Broker's system from his agents across the galaxy. Unfortunately, this didn't work so well. He got a completely different report, as the letters for his name, Ranma had tried English at first since that was the language of the alliance, pulled out several different reports, all to do with some kind of farming equipment. Why the heck the Shadow Broker would be interested in farming equipment, Ranma had no idea. But it was obviously a dead end.

Then, suddenly, a thought occurred to him. "Hold on a minute. I've been translating on my own the places on the map I've been to aboard the ship, right? So shouldn't my omni-tool be able to figure out a way to match the characters on the original to the ones I've made on my copy?"

Eager to test this theory, Ranma used his omni-tool scan the screen on the console, then compare the two images, and soon, Ranma had a somewhat very limited alphabet. "Geez this is kind of annoying. Problems you can't punch or beat into submission like metal are the worst."

Yet with that alphabet, Ranma was able to slowly figure out how to use the search function at least. Specific words and other things of that nature eluded him, but he was able to input his own name, and play a recording of a report coming in about him. Indeed, he was able to play several dozen reports going back to the moment Ranma and Herb first fought off the mercs on Sijou, although only the latest one mattered. "Kind of disturbing how long this guy's been after me and Herb, but considering the council's been after us for as long, I'm not gonna say anything. Still, to think that a Spectre was the one who handed me over to him, and then handed Herb over to the Council..."

Grinning evilly, Ranma had a sudden thought. "You know, a part of me thinks that instead of hunting this bitch down, I should let the punishment fit the crime a bit more." With that in mind, he copied over that recording, the recording of Tela communicating with the Shadow Broker that she had captured Herb and Ranma, as well as the fact that she wanted to hand over the other one to the Council. Ranma then recorded the information that recording led to, a series of monetary transactions that the Shadow Broker had okayed. He had no idea where all of these banks and things were, but someone else would be able to take that information and run with it easily.

Stomach growling louder now, Ranma realized that he'd been at this for a while, at least another few hours. Pulling up his omni-tool's clock, he saw that was accurate. He had basically been woken around midnight Omega time, and now it was pushing that same time the day after. "I've been working on this and everything else for nearly the same amount of time I was wondering the ship after killing that yahgie guy!? And there's no food to be had, and this planet's atmosphere at this elevation would kill even me."

Grimacing, as he finally realized he'd gotten into the habit of talking to himself over the past day, Ranma shook his head, yet kept at it. Ranma wasn't exactly the most social of individuals, but the background noise the ship made wasn't nearly enough to offset the fact that he was stuck in this ship, with the body of a creature that had attempted to kill him, and the bodies all of its victims.

Ranma had never gone into horror movies back in his old dimension. He found them kind of hilarious frankly, especially the American series with the guy with the ski mask, who was about as threatening to Ranma as a Chihuahua was to a full-grown Kodiak bear. Yet there was no denying that there was something about the ship, which was starting to get to Ranma a little, after he had seen the cold locker.

"Think, Ranma. You don't know how to lift the ship off the surface let alone how to figure out where to go, so there's just no way that's happening, not with the operating system an entirely different language, and with you, you know, never having flown before. First, figure out a way to translate more than what you already have. Then, contact someone. Herb might still be out of it or maybe the Council figured out a way to actually keep him prisoner. But you might be able to contact someone on Omega who gets a message to shepherd, or Benezia, wherever she is."

Before they had parted, Benezia had given the two martial artists a way to contact her, not just a publicly known number, but through specific codes and phrases. Ranma could use that to get in contact with her over the hyperlink, and hopefully, even have a real-time conversation with her eventually.

"But first I've got to figure out a way to translate this crap!" Ranma groaned, running his hands through his hair again as he stared at all of the devices around him, then back to the search window he had been able to pull up. "Come on Ranma back to it. Seriously, how can nerds just stare at computer screens all day. Sitting this long is making me go crazy even with how hungry and tired I am. And not all of that's because this chair's pressing into uncomfortable places."

Eventually, he was able to pull up a line of communication not to a specific individual, but to the extranet as a whole, which thankfully, displayed numerous pages in different languages. Clicking on one in English, he was able to figure out a way to use that to get to other pages, and then translation software that he could download to his omni-tool. At first, this only replaced the existing translation software there, but he was able to use it to then scan some of the writings on other screens, and figure out the language.

Eventually, the translation software began to work, and he was finally able to figure out how to send out a call. The strange language was so bizarre, that it was taking his omni-tool a while to translate everything. The time to translate even the operating system for the computer network in front of him would take hours, but he could at least translate what was on the screens easily enough and input a few commands by translating back to the yahg language.

After putting in a series of nonsense paragraphs that had all the codes and phrases that Benezia had told them to use, Ranma entered with a simple line that he hoped would get Benezia's attention. "How would you like access to a perfectly set up, if used, spy network?"

To his gratification, this worked, regardless of how much distance lay between them. Not ten minutes after he'd sent out the message via a series of cutouts to her, Benezia contacted him on the number that he had given her via that initial communiqué. A real-time communication window popped up on one of the screens, displacing some information that had been coming in live there moments before.

Benezia looked at him quizzically, her brows furrowed. "Ranma, of the two of you, you were the least likely to try to contact me, so can I ask what this is about? Your little note at the end of your message was intriguing, but it also forces me to ask the very obvious question of what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now?" Benezia paused then, her brows furrowing further. "And is that loud growling in the background some kind of animal, or some distortion in our comms?"

Laughing sheepishly, Ranma scratch the back of his neck. "That would be my stomach unfortunately. And that's kind of part of the problem."

From there Ranma outlined what had happened since he had woken up, not even hiding the fact that it been a Council Spectre who had taken both him and Herb down, and then sold Ranma out to the Shadow Broker. "Now here I am, extremely hungry, with nothing to eat on the ship, with issues with this ship judging by the red on the map, and no way to figure out a way to pilot it or otherwise escape. So yeah, I kind of need help."

Benezia had listened intently throughout all this, shock and astonishment showing on her face, clearly in a way that she would never have allowed if she were meeting with another Matriarch or any other kind of politician. However, Ranma's tale was so strange that she couldn't help it. *To think that the Shadow Broker had been a yahg of all things!*

She will knew about that species, how they had slaughtered the team sent to communicate with them, and then the first military response by the turians to that aggression. How one of them had even gotten off-world was probably a tale in itself, as well as how it had learned enough modern technology to become the Shadow Broker. *Or is that take over from the Shadow Broker? I cannot think that changeover was peaceful.*

Setting that thought aside, Benezia began to ask Ranma a few questions about the ship in general, what information he could glean from it and how much control he had of the Shadow Broker's network at the moment.

"A lot from what the screens are saying, but every time I try to download something into the actual computer network to translate the operating system, it refuses. It's some kind of security thing. I can send out only limited orders, and I can't really stop of the inflow. I can copy

direct from the screens onto my omni-tool, but that's slow and really random since more of the info on the screens here change every few seconds. The guy must have been the yagh equivalent of a speed reader."

"The ship's main computer isn't locking you out because you need to pass some kind of bio test? Like from a retina or fingerprint scanner?" Benezia asked.

"No, that was the first thing I thought of." Ranma did not flinch, but he did glance towards where the hand of the creature that he had fought lay on the ground nearby. Figuring that maybe a small pad that looked large enough for the creature's hand might have been some kind of fingerprint print reader or something, Ranma had no qualm whatsoever of chopping the creature's hand off and coming back with it to see. Not after having seen, what the creature's meat locker looked like. "It didn't work. Or it needs to be alive, and that would be a big problem at the moment."

"No doubt," Benezia agreed dryly, lips quirking into a wry smile before shifting down into a frown. "But you are able to translate what you can see on the screen and were able to figure out a way to contact me. Yet I have no idea where you are, and without that information, what I can do is quite limited. As much as I would like to help, you need to give me more to go on."

With that, Benezia began to walk Ranma it through the kind of information she would need to figure out what planet he was on, what system it was in, and so forth. This took them a while, but eventually, Ranma was able to pull up the name of the planet at least, as well as a map of the planet showing where there the ship was laying. Meanwhile, Benezia had asked one of her commandos who had a secondary interest in engineering go over the plans that Ranma was able to upload to the communication.

As Benezia began to plot out a course towards this planet, that worthy spoke up to Ranma saying that he was right, there seemed to be a few areas that would need to be repaired on the surface of the ship, as well as something wrong with the engines. Some part had degraded, but its importance flew right over Ranma's head, despite his having worked with the shipbuilders on Mostromos. "If you could repair the surface of the ship, you would be able to get into orbit and even move around in real space, but you wouldn't be able to get to acceleration speed to travel from one system to another. Unless you get lucky and there's a Gate in that system, you won't be able to do more."

"Do you think you could walk me through how to get into orbit at least? I figure that would make it easier for anyone coming my way to pick me up or whatever it is Benezia's plannin'," Ranma questioned.

"I think we would best be served taking the whole ship," Benezia interjected, coming back into the conversation, a furious scowl on her face. "Unfortunately, I do not believe that myself or anyone within the Republics I can trust will be able to make that rendezvous. It is far too deep into the Terminus Cluster for us to be able to go in any appreciable length of time. It

would take us at least six days to get there from where we are, Ranma, mostly because of how few Relays are out there. Which isn't even considering how long it would take to put together a force large enough to scare off any pirates."

Ranma's stomach became even louder at that, as if the monster had understood what was being talked about, and it was angry that it would take so long for it to be properly fed. "Yeah, that's not gonna fly. I don't think I can last that long without food." It hurt Ranma's pride to admit that, but it was true. His ki reserves were nonexistent right now, and he really did need food kind of desperately. Not to mention the fact that being on the ship on its own was getting to Ranma. *I reaaally don't want to try to sleep on this ship. Not unless I have tossed that big bastard's body out the airlock anyway.*

For her part, Benezia could only agree completely. While at first she hadn't noticed, looking at Ranma more closely she could see his face looked sallow, his cheeks sunken, and his normally vibrant blue eyes nearly dim. *His ki reserves seem to have begun eating his body to power themselves, either during the battle or since.*

"In that case, let's try something different. Let us see if the Shadow Broker has resources that could be used to help you instead," Benezia said aloud while tapping out orders on her own omni-tool to get her ship ready to go. Regardless of anything else, she would be meeting Ranma and that ship in particular. Gaining access to the Shadow Broker's network was too important to pass up, especially since this would also let her newfound enemies here on Thessia calm down a bit.

This took a while as in the background Ranma's stomach rumbled continually, but eventually, Ranma was able to find a nearby ship whose captain apparently was one of the Shadow Broker's agents. The list of onboard resources also told him the ship would be able to repair this one. So long, as Ranma could get it back into space anyway. Since this meant simply giving out a series of orders passed on to him by the engineer commando to the robots, it too took a while. First, he had to figure out what the engineer was talking about, and then replicate those orders, giving the orders to the droids in the yahg language via his omni-tool, directing them to the portion of the outer hall that needed repairing.

By the time that Ranma had finished repairing the outer hull of the Shadow Broker's base to rendezvous with him, the robots had done their work. Getting the ship to take off afterwards was hard, but with one of Benezia's pilots encouraging him and directing him, he was eventually able to do so. Whatever the operating system, the controls at least were the normal ones used throughout known space.

The ship made a frightening amount of noise as it lifted off, and still more noise as they powered up through the atmosphere, but eventually, it petered off as they reached space, and Ranma sighed, leaning away from the controls and wiping sweat from his forehead, feeling even weaker than he had been moments before. "Damn, anxiety and anxiousness really to get out of you when you're as weak as I am now!"

“Hang tight Ranma,” Benezia encouraged, staring worriedly at Ranma. “Wait until that ship rendezvous with you. Don’t let them into the bridge, but let them anywhere else, and get yourself some food as soon as possible. Once that is done, we can figure out a way to meet up once more.”

OOOOOOO

For several minutes, the salarian captain/owner of the ship *High Risks* could only stare at the message in front of him. Then after taking a few seconds to make certain it was authentic, instantly agreed with the order, barking out his own to his crew. “Change of course gentlemen. We just got a communication **straight** from the Shadow Broker. There’s a ship he needs us to link up with and repair. Plot in these coordinates, helmsmen!”

Unlike on a military ship, freighters only had four people on the bridge at any time, and that was counting the officer of the watch, which, on merchant vessels wasn’t always there. Yet all three of the captain’s crew present stared at him in surprise. “Captain, we’re due at Capek in two hours, if we deviate...”

“Doesn’t matter! The Shadow Broker has already deposited half the pay he’s offering, which is more than we would get if we arrived on time at our original destination for our cargo. Shift yourselves! Comms, send an order down, I want our engineers, including those useless suit rats, ready! And the cook too,” the captain added after a moment, as one of his crewmen got on the intercom. “I know he can make human food, sandwiches and so forth. He needs to make as much as he can. Food for ten who haven’t eaten in a while.”

That order was somewhat confusing, but after a few moments, the crew rationalized that if they were heading to repair a derelict, there was no telling how long it had been so. Moreover, being paid that much up front had all of them very happy indeed.

That happiness did not last. This was the Terminus Cluster. The lawless, wild zone, where pirates, mercenaries, slavers, and ex-batarian naval ships made their home.

Yes, those last two were not quite equal. Slavers would, generally speaking, want to take your ship intact if only so that they wouldn’t damage the true ‘cargo’ they were after. The ex-military ships out here who had fled the Hegemony, either recently due to not having the stomach to fight a real war against the human and turian juggernaut, or previously due to simply no longer wishing to obey the Hegemony’s orders, were frequently far more ruthless.

Ships like the *High Risk* plied this area of the galaxy knowing all the risks, and hoping to avoid them in order to make a big payoff from planets who couldn’t rely on routine traffic but sometimes, their luck ran out. In that case, most merchant vessels who made this area of space their home had enhanced engines, which would allow them to go much faster in real space than most pirates or slavers could pay for.

Unfortunately, that was only a general rule. There were always some ships, always some planets willing to repair and refit a ship uncaring of who the owners were. Thus, in perhaps the most ironic turn of events, the ship going to help Ranma, who had been captured by Tela Vasir and then sold to the Shadow Broker under the pretense of her ship having been attacked by pirates, was in turn truly attacked by pirates.

As the *High Risk* entered the system where they would rendezvous with the derelict ship, a pirate vessel powered up its active systems. It was well out of weapons range, but was also well within radar range, and coming in fast.

“Fecal Matter!” the captain snarled. “All hands to emergency stations. Bring up our shields. Keep us on course, it’ll keep us out of their hands for a little while longer. And maybe that derelict we’re here for has some working weapons.” His ship was built for speed, so if the other ship had been directly behind them, he would’ve been much more confident in simply running away, even with a stop to maybe pick up whatever survivors were on the derelict. It wouldn’t have completed their objective from the Shadow Broker, but it would at least have done something.

Yet in the few minutes since their radar had picked up the other ship, it had already accelerated to match the merchant vessel in speed. And it was coming in at an angle from above and to the right, meaning that he would need to turn directly away from and deeper into the star system rather than out to escape. It would be a tossup how long it would take the enemy ship to catch them, but catch them they would if nothing else happened.

OOOOOOO

On the semi-derelict ship, the Shadow Broker had made his (their?) base for who knew how many centuries, Ranma stared at the radar screen. Figuring out which that was had taken him a bit, but he had made it his priority after getting the ship into orbit after what had admittedly been one of the most frightening things he’d ever done.

After all he had been through over the past few days, seeing a pirate ship pop up on his radar screen and make a move to intercept the ship that was bringing him food, and you know, engineering help of course, was just icing on the nonexistent cake. “You know what, screw telling her superiors about Vasir being on the take. For starting the ball rolling on this avalanche of shit, I’m going to break her in half. **AND THEN** I’ll ruin her reputation.”

Ranma sat there in the highly uncomfortable chair for a few fulminating moments, then ran a hand over his face. “Right, okay, what can I do to help?” He had already spent a few idle moments looking for external weapon systems, but surprisingly, the ship didn’t have any. Ranma felt that might have been because the yahg had never thought his hiding place could be found from the outside, or maybe some kind of social thing, but it really didn’t matter right now.

Quickly, Ranma powered up the engines once more. They couldn't get enough speed to enter hyperspace, but they had some measure of speed, and instantly, he could see the enemy pirate ship start to split its attention between its really regular target and Ranma. It slowed down changing the angle of approach, so that it could keep both Ranma ship and the manned freighter on the same semi-angle. "Okay, good, but I've still got no weapons, but, oh, the name, the Shadow Broker name!"

Working quickly, he began to hail the pirate ship. He had already figured out how to send out an omnidirectional communication signal, so this was relatively easy. Using his omni-tool, he even recorded and then changed his voice to be deeper, more menacing before sending the copy off. "This is the Shadow Broker. Incoming pirates, leave off. That ship and the ship that it is heading towards are under my protection."

For a moment, it almost looked as if the enemy would not even respond, the very thought of which astonished Ranma. It seemed as if it was part of being an evil asshole that you liked the sound of your own voice after all.

Thankfully, after a few seconds, someone picked up on the other end. Ranma had kept the visual side of the communication signal off deliberately, so only a voice came through the com at that moment. "Prove it! The Shadow Broker never sends out open signals like this, this is a bluff."

The voice was young or at least would be young if it was coming from a human, although the timber of it told Ranma that wasn't the case. Ranma hadn't heard enough batarians speak (screams didn't count) to know offhand if their voices got deeper as they aged like humans, but the pirate captain certainly didn't have that strange clicking sound that a turian's voice would. It also was male, which ruled out asari.

"How do you want me to prove it? Give me a bank account, and I can wire enough proof that your entire crew would believe me," Ranma said, scowling in annoyance as he once more went through the process of recording and then changing his voice, while the pirate ship came closer to the *High Risk*. *Trying to threaten someone without actually being in a position to do so is really annoying.*

"And now I know you're not the Shadow Broker! The Shadow Broker would've made threats, not simply told me to hand over a bank account!" the other speaker crowed. He would've already had the name of my ship up, information on all of us, he would have been **terrifying**! You're not terrifying. But don't worry, we'll get to you on your derelict soon. After all, a life as a slave is better than no life at all."

Here, the pirate made a mistake. He left the comms open, possibly hoping Ranma would beg or plead or continue trying to barter. But with the idea of scaring the pirates away off the table, Ranma felt back on an old faithful. Make 'em mad, make 'em stupid. "Aww, someone sounds as if he can actually think! How the hell the hell did you become a pirate then?" Ranma

taunted in his own voice this time. “Or is it that you’re so ugly in person you couldn’t make it in any lawful way? I mean ya batarian, so that’d be slaving, raping and shouting orders... but even that has to be a step up from pirate right?”

“Wh, you, you! What the...” the man on the other side stammered, clearly thrown off.

“Don’t you know how to have some wordplay with someone? Damn, my idea of your general intelligence just dropped off a cliff.”

“When I get you, I’m going to string you up by your entrails, you, corpse eating pyjak!” the pirate captain snarled.

“Hah! Don’t make me laugh! Little men like you, you’re always at the back of the horde, aren’t you, ordering others to do your fighting, and thinking for you, then swooping in and taking credit.” Ranma added a drawl to his voice, as if he had nothing to worry about from the pirate. “Little men, little dogs, barking loudly the both of ‘em. Look at me, I’m a big bad pirate captain, damn it take me seriously!”

“I will gut you!!!” the captain roared, and Ranma watched as the pirate ship changed its course. Instead of heading directly towards the *High Risk* the pirate vessel was now on a course to meet the derelict as it travelled towards the civilian freighter.

“Heh, come and prove it,” Ranma taunted one more time, before cutting the comms to the pirate ship. With that done, he hailed the freighter, ordering it to stay its course. This time, the offer of better pay actually worked, although he was warned that Ranma would also have to pay for any damages done to the ship. It was clear to Ranma that the freighter captain knew that he was screwed one way or the other, and could only hope that the Shadow Broker, which he still believed Ranma to be, could pull off a miracle here even if he couldn’t for some reason simply order the pirates away.

Even as the semi-derelict ship continued on its way though, Ranma was already moving. First, he headed down to the armory, grabbing up that weird sword shield thing, deciding to call it a shword, testing the heft of it and the width of it, wishing he could run some of his ki into it to see what kind of melting point it had. However, he didn’t have enough ki reserves to spare for that, especially not if he was going to get into a fight.

The reason why he was grabbing this particular weapon was the fact that he didn’t want to be hit by any of the high velocity rounds that they used in this dimension without his ki reserves to back him up if he could help it. His general physical toughness didn’t drain away as his ki reserves did, but even so, getting hit in the eye with one of those things or even his boy bits would hurt like hell, and he wouldn’t be able to heal the damage.

Weapon over his shoulder, Ranma returned to the bridge, where the pirates had launched a boarding shuttle toward the freighter, while still closing with Ranma’s purloined

vessel. Seeing that, Ranma grinned. "Hell yes! I might not be able to threaten that captain, but apparently, my taunts did the job. And who knows, maybe the pirates have some food I can eat."

Figuring out which of the ship's two exterior hatches the pirate vessel would try to link up with was a little difficult, and Ranma had to wait until the last minute to figure out which side of the ship they would eventually stop on. Thinking they were clever, the pirate vessel passed over his, then pushed back towards it, launching the boarding tubes or whatever they were called at almost too close a range.

By the time it hooked up though, Ranma was already moving, racing out of the bridge to intercept them.

The pirates rushed out, and instantly, one of them held up a fist. He was the only human among them, the band of pirates being primarily batarian, volus and turian. An odd group admittedly, but one that in the Terminus Systems you saw quite often. Outcasts and criminals had far more in common with one another than they did their home race. "Hold on, this doesn't match the map of this classification of freighter was able to..."

He was promptly ignored. The rest of the pirates streamed past him, splitting up, firing down the hallways just because they could, not because they saw actual enemies. "Come on!" one of them shouted over his shoulder. "We already know it's got atmosphere, that's all we need to know. Let's find that asshole who was taunting the captain. I don't know about you, but I like the idea of having my pick of the slaves once we take that freighter!"

"If the captain was so pissed off, why isn't he leaving the boarding party?" the middle-aged human grumbled. Still he raced to catch up, only for his eyes to widen a few moments later as something huge came over around the bend ahead of them. The thing crashed into the batarian who had been leading that group, the thick cutting edge still sharp enough to cut the man in half.

Ranma grimaced as the pirate was sliced in half by his sword weapon, but didn't hesitate as he let go of the weapon, allowing the momentum of his swing to carry it hard into the side of the hallway, as he leapt upwards bouncing off the ceiling and out of the line of fire of the pirates, who tried to follow his movements, but were too slow. Only one of them was able to clip him, a long-range shot from a human pirate that had stayed behind the others winging his shoulder. Then he landed in among them, hard blows flashing out, smashing pirates this way and that, before he grabbed one of their guns, twisting it around and firing it into several others.

Some of the pirates had body armor, which was able to stop a few of the rounds. Others did not. Regardless, their armor was no match against Ranma's punches, which shattered the armor, even if he couldn't use his speed technique without ki to reinforce his speed. Better for Ranma though, for some reason, like most people in movies he had seen over the years, pirates

didn't believe in wearing helmets. This made their heads very large targets, which Ranma took advantage of. Bone and brain matter splattered around him as two of the pirates fell, their faces literally punched in by Ranma's blows, while Ranma kicked out of one of them, sending him hurtling down the hallway.

The sole voice of reason among the borders, the human went down, hurled off his feet by the projectile that had once been one of his companions. Both of them slammed against the far bulkhead, as the pirates who had split off to head towards the engineering room came back this way at the sound of carnage.

Ranma grabbed two of the dead pirates, using their bodies as shields as he charged forwards, then bounced backwards as if retreating, grabbing up his giant sword before leaping up, bouncing off of the ceiling and down into this group as he had the first. This group was marginally better prepared, having heard the sounds of violence and already being keyed up. Several of them pulled back, firing at Ranma and into their fellows regardless of who they actually hit.

Ranma grunted as several of the bullets hit the sword before he landed, sweeping it around. The sight of the juggernaut that they had suddenly found themselves fighting cutting down more than seven of their fellows in one roundhouse sweep caused several of the shooters to pause.

One of them, perhaps a little more in tune with the news coming out of Omega than the rest, gasped as he shouted, "Fuck, pull back! Pull back! That's that bastard who took on the Blood Pact, there's no way we can fight him in close quarTTTT!!"

That was as far as he got before Ranma used a portion of a splintered gun he had picked up, hurling it at his face like a needle. The attack embedded into the turian's forehead right above the second set of eyes.

Knowing that there was a chance that the pirate vessel would be monitoring what was going on via coms, Ranma smacked the last of the pirates down, and not bothering to finish any of the downed pirates off, raced towards the hatch. There, he found several lights beginning to turn from green to red as the pirate vessel tried to pull away, but he leapt into the boarding tube just in time.

The tube was pulled away from the derelict, Ranma leaped forward, the sword stabbing into the slowly closing opening at the other end. Here, the pirate's lack of maintenance on their vessel helped him. He could hear the screeching of the doors hinges as it tried to close quickly even over the howling of the wind caused by the vacuum of space opening up between the two ships. Turning sideways even as the air left his body, Ranma was able just barely to get inside the pirate vessel, pulling the sword thing out of the way with difficulty, letting the hatch close behind him.

Emergency lights flared as the pirates became aware of him from a video recorder nearby, but Ranma was already off, racing deeper into the vessel.

Pirate vessels routinely carried a larger crew than normal civilian or even military ships. This was because they wanted to board other vessels, and, more often than not, take those vessels as prizes. Thus, they had to have more than their fair share of crewmen to man the prize vessels. So, even though Ranma had already taken around thirty of the pirates out, and they had already launched a similar number of pirates on the boarding shuttle, there were still more than enough pirates on the ship to make a fight of it.

As the captain bellowed orders to that effect, Ranma was already moving. He knew which direction to go in a general sense towards the bridge, and had already sped in that direction past several different hallways leading off the one he was currently in. Reaching an elevator and heading upwards to the second story of the ship, where he began to make his way forward before running into real resistance.

This real resistance came in the form of five pirates who had taken up position in a slightly more open area, one that had three doors on either side of it leading off the central, circular zone. Why that was here, Ranma didn't know, but it almost looked like some kind of central lounge area, although it was set into a hallway, which was kind of weird. Regardless, they had turned several of the bits of furniture there onto its side, creating makeshift defensive positions.

The fivesome fired at Ranma the moment he came into sight and Ranma charged into the fire, keeping his sword up in front of him to absorb the fire, until he once more performed the maneuver that he had used on both of the pirate groups he had dealt with. Leaping up over his sword, he bounced off the ceiling, and then down into the pirates. Like the first two times, facing someone who could suddenly change direction like that threw off the pirates, although it didn't cause them to freeze.

One turian rolled away as Ranma landed, dropping his rifle and pulling out two pistols, which he began to fire at Ranma from point-blank range, causing Ranma to hiss in pain especially when one of them clipped his ear, and another one smacked into the side of his nose. The imparted momentum of that strike actually broke his nose, causing Ranma to bleed for the first time in this fight, but a quick kick caught the man before he could get out of range, caving in his entire head in turn, as Ranma finished off his fellows, tossing the last of them so hard against one of the closed doors, the recessed door that should've slid into one of the walls was smashed inward.

Then Ranma was racing on, pausing only to grab up several grenades he saw on one of the pirate's bandoliers and a rifle to go with his shield sword. *I might not like using guns, but that doesn't mean I don't know how to, and smoke or frag, grenades are always useful.*

Better for Ranma though, was the fact that one of the pirates here had been human, and had been eating something he recognized. Nutrient sticks, long thin sticks used by spacers in areas where the gravity wasn't so secure, this variety tasted like crap yet Ranma gobbled down several of them, grimacing at the taste even as he charged on.

Ranma's body was so efficient at turning food into power that from those few calorie heavy bars, Ranma could feel some energy returning to him. It would take his body a good forty minutes to an hour to really turn it into actual energy, let alone ki, but they, and perhaps more importantly, the promise of more to come, would keep him going for now.

A smoke grenade came in handy in the next instant, as Ranma rounded the corner and saw a larger hatch than normal ahead of him. Here again was a slightly wider area, made once more to look like a lounge or something, but here, unlike the last area, there were signs of both the fact this was a slaving ship and of, well, Ranma thought it looked like the kind of barbaric finery he had seen in animes back in his old world: tapestries and a massive fur rug and stuff like that.

Ducking out of sight and using his shword to protect himself from the defender's fire, Ranma grimaced. *I really don't want to know what that rug has seen.* Shaking off that idle thought, and somewhat grateful that he was back to thinking such things rather than speaking aloud as he had been on the derelict, Ranma flicked the timer on one of the grenades.

Rolling the grenade along the ground the defenders had time to shift their fire, hitting the grenade and exploding it short of the group of ten scattered around the lounge area. By the time they had, Ranma had two grenades already in the air. One was lobbed straight at them, and a marksman among them hit it mid-air. The other bounced off the wall at an angle that carried it into the air above the pirate's position before its timer expired.

The unmarked grenades, another sign of how little the pirates cared for what others would call 'organization,' hadn't all been the same. The one shot out of the air had been smoke, the other explosive. The third was frag, a grenade with tiny ball bearings within it along with the explosive. The resulting explosion tore the heart out of the defenders, killing two outright and horribly wounding four more.

Their screams caused a few of the pirates to waver, then with a grimace, Ranma charged forward. He didn't like killing, but pirates and slavers weren't worth crying over, no matter how much pain they were in right now.

"Fuck this!" One of the pirates broke as the smoke of the explosion over their position cleared, racing forward to try to get around Ranma. Why he thought that would save him, Ranma had no idea. Instead, Ranma kicked the man in the side, using the momentum of the strike to hurl himself sideways. As the man groaned in agony and his ribs cracked, Ranma bounced off the wall, dodging still more fire, blocking some with his shword.

The pirates were able to correct their aim just as he landed in the shattered remains at the center of their makeshift defense. Ignoring their screaming fellows still, they opened fire on Ranma from both sides. On one side, Ranma had his sword, which clanged and banged under the onslaught, while Ranma's other side was hammered by the fire of the three pirates remaining there. Once more, the mass effect rounds couldn't penetrate Ranma's skin, but they hurt like **blazes** and he stumbled under the dozens of impacts, using the sword to hold himself to his feet.

Only one batarian pirate hadn't joined in, instead he was scrambling at the controls to the hatch leading into the bridge, desperately smacking numbers into the console. When that didn't work, he pounded on the hatch itself. "Fuck you captain, let us in, this bastards that fucker from OMegAAA!!"

That was as far as the man got before Ranma could pull the rifle he had previously grabbed around to blast into the attackers on that side. His chest and side still took hits, and one round actually caught him in the cheek, causing Ranma to grunt at the flash of even more intense pain. *Fucking hell that hurt!*

In contrast, his return fire had shredded all four pirates on that side. Ranma now turned, firing around the sword blindly at the remaining defenders.

Four more pirates arrived from down the hall at that point. They fired at Ranma's position, hurting him further, but the last defender near the hatch fell a second later thanks to his blind fire, and even as his magazine ran dry, Ranma hurled his sword shield down the hall with a roar. "Catch, you bastards!"

None of the crew were biotics, and thus, there was no way they could have even tried to catch the massive slab of barely shaped metal. The outer face of the shield had been battered to resemble more the surface of the moon than a real weapon, but the edges of the shield and the sword tip was still sharp. The sword point missed as the men in the middle ducked desperately, but both men on the sides of the enemy formation screamed as they were cut, one losing his ear, the other getting a long gash over her shoulder.

The feminine scream of that pirate nearly stopped Ranma's charge towards them, but not the fire from his reloaded rifle. *Fucking hell, a woman among slavers? I know we saw some batarian women among the slavers on Torfan but that's a **human** woman. That is beyond messed up.*

Before the group of newcomers could recover, Ranma had gunned down three, and was on the last, the batarian who had lost his ear. Before the man could do more than drop his rifle and reach for a long dagger, Ranma's blow almost removed his head from his shoulders.

Grimacing as he stood among the dead and dying, Ranma tried to grasp at some of the energy the protein and calorie heavy sticks he had eaten moments before but failed. The energy

hadn't converted yet, and thus all he got in return was a deep feeling of emptiness and a grumbling stomach as he moved towards the hatch.

"Alright, I am going to say this once. Open the door, I take you prisoner. Don't, and I won't." Ranma growled. "I am tired, cranky and in a generally shitty mood, and I normally don't give you pirates a chance to surrender but I am also in a hurry."

A hurry to fill his stomach before he passed out, but the pirates didn't need to know that.

There was no response, though, and Ranma snarled. "FINE!"

With that, Ranma gathered up all the grenades and other things that he felt could go boom, which included the power cells of all the guns the pirate had been using. Ranma then stacked them into as small an area as possible where the hatch would normally slide into the wall on the left. When that was done, he set one of the grenades to explode, then after a moment, decided to do three more, just in case.

With that done, Ranma ran like hell down the corridor, running into and over two pirates, both elcor, who had been making their ponderous way toward the bridge. Both massive aliens gapped at him as he raced towards them, their weapons coming up slowly, but Ranma shouted, "Bombs away!" and the oddity of that caused them to pause. Before they could aim at him again, Ranma was sliding between the legs of one of them before popping up once more.

There was a loud booming noise followed instantly by an even louder rolling boom, and a shockwave raced down the corridor, slamming into both large aliens. They were bowled over by it even as the front of the explosion cooked their bodies, but their bulk helped protect Ranma from further damage, even if the shockwave did lift him off his feet and hurl him down the hallway.

He rolled with it, skidding to a stop with his feet against one of the tables in the first lounge area he had passed through. "Huh... I think I overdid it," Ranma mumbled staring back the way he had come.

When Ranma returned to the bridge, he found that was indeed the case. Sometime in the process of building the pirate vessel, whichever dock had done the work had decided to cut corners. The door had been made of substandard metal. A real defensive hatch would have been able to mostly weather the explosion except right behind the mass of explosives, where Ranma would probably have succeeded in blowing a hole at least large enough for him to grab onto. A military grade door would have been able to shrug off the explosion entirely.

The pirate door, on the other hand, had shattered like a wall of pug iron hit by a tank round.

Inside, the remaining pirate crew had been shredded, and Ranma grimaced at the remains of a few pirates that had apparently been manning stations nearer the hatch. Unlike the elcor, who had still been recognizable, these guys closer at ground zero had been flattened and burned into so much scorched hamburger so much he couldn't even tell what race they had been. "Ugh."

The batarian captain, who was indeed a young man judging by his lack of shoulders and general appearance, had also been killed. A splinter of the door had gone right through the back of the chair and impaled him as he leaned back against it, a gun nearby on the floor. Ranma stared at the man for a few moments, then shook his head, deliberately remembering that these were pirates and slavers. He had killed such before, but this lot had had the chance to walk away at least.

Luckily for Ranma, while a lot of the bridge had been wrecked in the explosion he'd caused, the helmsman's position had been relatively spared thanks to having the captain's chair between it and the explosive area and being at the farthest point of the bridge away from the hatch. Ranma sat down there, noting absently that there hadn't been a helmsman here at the time of the explosion, pulling up the sensor information of the ship only to curse.

The sensor station was down, but Ranma was quickly able to use a workaround, connecting to his omni-tool, and then from that to the Shadow Broker's ship which still had working sensors. It was a bit like a man riding one bicycle trying to direct a blind man on another bicycle, but Ranma was able to figure it out, and get the ship moving towards the freighter. The freighter had been overhauled by the pirate's assault shuttle, and Ranma was almost tempted to reach out and tell them that help was on the way, but figured he wouldn't be believed. Or worse, that the pirates aboard that ship might be able to pick up the transmission if he tried to contact the ship rather than them from the pirate ship. So he remained radio silent, moving the ship in that direction as quickly as he could.

Once more, the pirates lack of organization bit them on the ass, as no one on the enemy shuttle, which had long since docked with the freighter, before they even noticed that their mothership was moving. Right up until Ranma flew the vessel past them over to the other side of the vessel. There he settled the ship alongside the no-longer moving freighter, then, his omni-tool once more guiding him, he got the hatches on the ships lined up, before ordering the pirate vessel to remain on station.

Someone on the shuttle began to squawk at him at that point, but Ranma was already up and moving, leaving the bridge and heading down the way he had come. *I didn't damage any of the controls to the boarding tube, so hopefully, that means it still works. If I was a band of pirates, I would be sure to make certain that at least the boarding tube and my engines worked, even if nothing else did.*

This, thankfully, proved to be the case, and Ranma was able to figure out how to work the boarding tube thanks to his omni-tool's helpful directions, linking to the freighter and going

across quickly. Moving through the ship, he tried to be quiet, as he really didn't want the pirates to try to take hostages if they knew he was coming. He continued his slow progress until he heard the sounds of fighting nearby. Sticking his head around a corner, he saw a pirate shaking his head slowly from side to side, as he stood outside of what looked like... "YES, a mess hall!"

Before the pirate could turn, Ranma leaped forward, crossing the intervening distance before he could react. A palm strike to the face hurled the turian back into the mess hall, where he slammed into one of his fellows.

Inside the mess hall was bedlam. A tiny drone was flying up in the air, looking almost like some kind of flying dinner plate to Ranma's hungry mind. Shots were being exchanged between the pirates and someone behind a counter to one side of the mess hall. Four pirates were already dead, as the shooter screamed incoherent fury from within the kitchen, the words accompanied by a strong argument in the form of several shotgun shells. One of whom, just as Ranma entered the mess hall, took a pirate in the shoulder and neck, blowing out chunks of his body and sending him to the floor dead.

"That's what you bosh'tets get!" the voice shouted from within the kitchen, followed instantly by another shotgun blast so loud in the mess hall's enclosed space that Ranma twitched at it even from near the door.

One of the pirates had already turned in his direction having seen his fellow get knocked out by the body of another of the pirates, but Ranma raised his gun and fired into the man, a neck and face shot sending the human pirate to the floor. Two more of the pirates whirled, but one of them fell to a shotgun blast in the back even as Ranma dodged to the side and brought up his sword. The last pirate seemed to hesitate, his four eyes wide and flicking everywhere as he panicked at suddenly being surrounded, only to die a second later to another shotgun blast.

Dropping his rifle and the sword, Ranma raised his hands to either side of his head. "I come in peace. I did shoot one of them and killed another already for you, whoever you are. I'm just here to grab some food before I continue clearing out the pirates."

"What? Who in their right mind stops halfway through a fight to eat! And I don't recognize you, bosh'tet!" the voice shouted.

It was only now that Ranma realized that not only was the speaker a woman, she sounded... well if she was human, she sounded kind of young. If she was an asari maiden, she would still probably be older than Ranma by a good margin, but Ranma didn't think so. For one thing, whoever was behind the counter leading into the kitchen was using a shotgun. Very obviously a shotgun. As well as the drone. Using drones in combat wasn't something that he had seen from many asari. Moreover, even a relatively untrained maiden would have used some kind of biotic power if she was in distress. Which this woman obviously was.

“I was on the ship this ship was going to rendezvous with. The pirates decided to board me, and I decided to return the favor,” Ranma said. “Maybe you’ve heard of me, Ranma, or, er... The Green Titan I think the Omega folk called me?”

“The Green Titan’s supposed to wear green body armor. I’ve never seen a picture of his face when he took it off,” the voice answered, sounding a little calmer, but with the shotgun still pointed unerringly at Ranma over the mess hall’s counter. “I thought we were supposed to be landing on a planet! Not rendezvousing with another ship.”

“Then your Captain didn’t tell you what was going on. Is that unusual?” Ranma was really trying hard to be pleasant and polite right now, but there was food right over there, and he hadn’t eaten in more than a day, a day moreover when his ki reserves had been drained to the point where he couldn’t use even hints of it at the moment, which was making him feel almost naked. Plus, one did not argue with someone pointing a shotgun at you even at the best of times, which this very much was not.

Especially, considering all of the bumps and bruises Ranma had taken since the start of this fight hadn’t healed at all. The food he had taken on in the slaver ship hadn’t been fully absorbed just yet, and Ranma had figured that helping the crew of this ship was more important than looking for more.

“No, that’s pretty much the norm for that bosh’tet, especially when it comes to me and...” The voice broke off, and then went on in an even more worried, but far softer tone. “I don’t suppose you know any first-aid?”

“Some, but not a lot.” At the moment, there were some things that Ranma could do with ki if he had any, but he didn’t. “But I can at least offer two helping hands.”

“... Fine, come ahead, but I’ll be watching you.” After a moment’s hesitation as Ranma began to move forward, the owner of the shotgun shifted, pushing herself upright from where she had been crouching behind the mess hall’s counter, and Ranma paused, staring.

The figure caught that and brought her shotgun up the pointed him. “What, you’ve never seen a quarian before?”

“I’ve actually seen several of your race before actually, way back when me and my friend broke some of them out along with a lot of other slaves on Torfan. But I will admit this is the first time I’ve seen a quarian girl,” Ranma admitted sheepishly.

The suits the quarians back on Torfan had worn had been old looking, patched, but covering their bodies from head to toe along with their helmets as they all said they needed due to their immune system issues. Ranma wasn’t certain about where that immune system issue came from as he hadn’t actually looked much of their history up, but this was indeed the first time he had seen a girl wear such a suit, and there were a lot of differences.

For one thing, the suit she was wearing was noticeably a little newer than the ones that Ranma had seen before. For another, it was a little more formfitting, specifically around the hips and thighs, to say nothing about the chest. It wasn't a lot more formfitting but coupled with the thinness of the figure's waist and the set of her shoulders, it was enough to be obvious.

It also made her previous histrionics far more understandable in Ranma's mind. He could still remember the shudders that the male quarians had given when mentioning in passing what had been done to their womenfolk when they had been captured. They didn't need to go into detail.

"Sorry if that comes out weird," he added.

The figure in front of him seemed to roll her eyes for a moment in her helmet even if Ranma couldn't actually see those eyes and gestured him forward with the shotgun she still held in her hand. "Over here, I need someone to help me with Ravi'vas'Narrya."

That was a mouthful, but Ranma nodded, figuring that there was another quarian in there with the girl. However, as he was moving forward, his stomach decided to voice its own complaints again. The girl responded instantly, her shotgun coming up so fast and firing so quickly that Ranma could not do anything other than shout in pain as the shotgun shells slammed into his chest, hurling him backwards.

"What, what was that exclamation what, wh...oh broken gaskets! Are you okay of course you're not okay you just took a shotgun shell, oh Keelah, i just killed someone who was going to help oh Keelah! I'm going to be alone against the..."

"I'm still alive," Ranma groaned, pushing himself to his feet, really feeling his multiple injuries right now. "You might have broken a rib with that strike though." Ranma had never actually been shot by a shotgun shell before without his armor on, but the amount of impact that mass effect shotguns could release was impressive, and, again, Ranma didn't have access to his ki to heal his wounds even as he took them. "I'm a lot tougher than I look, but there are limits. And that was my stomach that just roared, not some kind of animal."

"Could have fooled me," the girl retorted, but she set the shotgun down for a moment, and leaned down to help him to his feet.

Ranma waved her away, knowing that she was very close to a mental breakdown, and probably not strong enough to help him to his feet anyway. Instead, he flipped over his head, landing lightly on his feet and pushing upright, grimacing at the pain of his chest. "Just don't shoot me again."

"Heh, um, sure, I guess I can agree to that," the woman said, standing as if she was staring at him, although again Ranma couldn't make out what her face was doing inside that helmet. But it was evident that seeing someone stand up from taking a shotgun shell straight to

the chest was not something that the girl was used to, and on top of everything else was pushing her just that little bit closer to a nervous breakdown.

“Let’s see to your friend, and then, could we maybe find something to eat? Like I said, I need some food in me,” Ranma said, gently moving past the girl, and keeping well out of touching range.

“If you were able to eat what we were, there’s actually some nutrient paste already ready. For anything else, you’ll have to go into the larder,” the girl said, answering quickly, calling down a little. “Now, can you tell me what the hell’s going on?”

Ranma shrugged as he entered the kitchen, seeing no problem with scrounging for more food, but putting more emphasis on helping the young girl’s friend. On the ground between two cooking tables lay another quarian, a young man this time, judging by his height and lack of shoulders. He didn’t have hips or even the hint of a chest that the girl did, hence Ranma’s guess. His leg and side had been riddled by shrapnel. “I can help you pull out shrapnel, if you’ve got enough patches to go around. And antitoxins or whatever you guys need.”

“We’ve got emergency stuff for when our suits are punctured, hopefully they’ll stop the bleeding. As for antitoxins, we got an emergency dose each. I’ve already given him one, I just hope it’s enough. If it isn’t, I’ll give him mine after we get Ravi patched up and I can link to his suit’s system without being interrupted,” the woman said firmly.

Ranma nodded, and as the two knelt on either side of the man and got to work as he answered her previous question. Hearing Ranma state so simply that he had wiped out the majority of the pirate crew so far seemed to take the woman aback, but she didn’t question it after seeing Ranma in action already. Soon, they had the quarian on the ground patched up, and the woman held out her omni-tool over him, connecting to his suit’s systems.

Meanwhile, Ranma hopped to his feet, the sudden motion causing the woman to twitch. However, she didn’t try to shotgun him again, which Ranma was very thankful for.

He made his way to the door at the back of the kitchen, entering and finding himself in a larder, a regular one this time, not one filled with the dead bodies of other sentients. Instead, Ranma found several pounds of what was marked out as wheat, a few loaves of bread already cut and other things that he could actually eat. “I take it you had a few humans aboard?”

“Three,” came the reply, the woman sounding relieved at something. “One in engineering, one in charge of the cargo area and one working on the bridge. I think the mess hall guys were trying to make up some food, but they are also part of the ship’s small security team.”

“If we find them, remind me that I owe them, both your cooks and your humans. I’m about to clear up their food for the next few days.”

With that, Ranma grabbed what was already out and ready, sandwich fixings for the most part, and built himself a tower out of them. Then he began to munch down, the noises he was making causing the girl to bring up her shotgun again and hesitantly stick her head into the larder, shotgun first, to peer at what he was doing. When she saw the strange pigtailed man was eating what looked like his own weight in food, she slowly shook her head, and then turned back to Ravi, inputting a few more commands into his suit's system, before grabbing up her shotgun again, and loading more shells into it. With that done, she sent her drone out into the hallway beyond.

"When you're through stuffing your face like some kind of herbivore on a farm, perhaps we can go and save the rest of the crew? I might not like most of them much, given how they treated me and Ravi, but we need at least a few of them still alive to help us move the ship."

"Right, now that the beast has been placated for a bit, we can get back to work," Ranma said, finishing off the last of his little snack, feeling full, thankfully. He would have to be careful to avoid any hits to the stomach as even with toughness training that would be a bad idea, but Ranma was feeling way better now than he had a few moments ago. "Can you send your drone ahead of us, figure out where the pirates are without them seeing it?"

"I'm already doing it," the girl said sounding a little smug, as she cocked her head towards Ranma. "But if you think I'm heading out the door first, you must be crazy. You're the one with a proven track record to be able to take eezo-accelerated shotgun shells to the chest and still live."

Ranma laughed at that, and the girl did at the same, a light giggle coming from inside her helmet. And if that giggle was still tinged with hysteria and went on for a little too long, Ranma certainly wasn't about to point that out. "Sounds like we got a plan. Although I would like to know the name of the person I'm working with."

He held out his hand, a smirk appearing on his face, the same smirk that had made several women back in his old life thoughtful, and most of his rivals clench their fists in rage, a mix of confident, outgoing and good humor. "The name's Ranma."

The girl looked down at his hand for a few moments, and Ranma wondered if he was forgetting something, if maybe her species didn't go into hand clasping her anything. After a moment, the girl seemed to understand what he was doing, and hesitantly reached out her own hand. She was very cautious about gripping his, but when he didn't try to crush her own, she gripped Ranma's hand harder, and another small giggle escaped her, although this time it sounded a little saner. "Tali. I'm Tali'Zora nar Rayya. I can't say it's altogether good to meet you, Ranma, but I am willing to be proven wrong."

Ranma chuckled. "Well, then let's finish off these pirates, and I don't know about you, but your last woman stand here in the commissary better get you some extra money, don't you

think?" That won a very firm nod from her, and the pair headed out the door, the ominous clicking of Tali's shotgun shell going with them.

End Chapter

And so we come to the end of this chapter, but the slow trickle of an actual plot for this work: Saren, his current location and Ranma's quest to stomp on the heads of anyone dealing drugs. We also have here our first canon character who's gonna stick around for the entire work from now on: Tali. I hope I did her justice, although this Tali is noticeably younger than the one in ME1. That one was 22, this one is 17, maybe even 16, and just started her journey away from the Migration Fleet. Still tough and quick to grab a gun, but not as used to facing real combat.

The next few chapters will concentrate on Ranma and Tali as they take what they want from the Shadow Broker's info/ship and then head for Asari space, although not before making a few stops along the way, where Ranma decides to do some chastisement to certain criminals.