

I am not a programmer or Japanese.

Hey, everybody! So this is the first of a few fics that will be updated this month, obviously. This was the winner of January's Ranma-only poll. Hope you enjoy it.

Chapter 8: Parting Company

The battle against the final Blue Suns mercs that had arrived on the scene ended quickly, the newcomers not having the numbers to really keep the fight going for very long and seemingly terrified by how much destruction and damage had been wrought to Kenzo hub before they had arrived in the first place.

Well, that and the fact that none of their weapons had been able to penetrate Ranma's armor. Once he was able to reach them, it became more a game of cat and mouse than an actual battle, with the Blue Suns Mercs fleeing in every direction and Ranma running them down. Really, fighting the urge to cackle or shout insults at them was harder than actually putting the Salarians, batarians and humans who made up the blue-themed merc-band down.

That didn't mean that everything had gone his way or Garrus'. At some point in the last few moments of the fight, a piece of rubble had somehow landed on top of Garrus, burying him, while Ranma was busily demolishing some Blue Suns mercenaries nearby. *Was it that last rocket blasting pieces of the deck underneath us and landing on him, or was it me throwing that one guy into that one wall that was somehow still standing so hard that bits of the wall exploded everywhere?*

Ranma couldn't honestly remember where the wall in question had been, only that he had aimed for it, so it was a tossup. Still, he wasn't about to bring that up to Garrus, simply moving over to the rubble and kicking it idly. "Oy, bird-boy, you good down there?"

"If by good, you mean still alive, the answer is yes. If this is some kind of sarcasm or human-type joke, I am not amused! Get me out of here," Garrus grumbled. A lot of his earlier wariness of Ranma had passed by this point. Not that he was any less wary, really, but circumstances being what they were, he had less shits to give, as he had heard it put by some of the humans he'd fought alongside since hostilities began with the batarians.

"Sure." Ranma instantly began to shift rubble off of Garrus, lifting what should have taken a krogan or a mech to lift with ease. Eventually, Garrus was able to crawl his way out, battered and bruised, but thanks to his armor and turian's endoskeleton, relatively undamaged.

As he crawled out, Garrus found himself staring almost face-to-face with the dead body of one of the Blue Suns mercenaries, another turian. He flinched, pushing himself to his feet and looking away.

“Ah, um, sorry,” Ranma apologized, “I thought you would crawl out the other way.”

He let go of the last bit of rubble, letting it boom back down onto the ground as, around the hub unit, civilians began to hesitantly leave their hiding places.

“It’s fine. I just didn’t expect to come face-to-face with a dead corpse just then. See a lot of them, yes, come so close I could snap off a flange if I wanted to, no,” Garrus grumbled, a little annoyed at himself for being so jumpy. “Seeing one of my own race involved in mercenary work is not pleasant either. Although, it does make me feel better to have been involved in putting some mass effect rounds in so many.”

Ranma snorted at that and, reminded of why Garrus was there in the first place, demanded, “Tell me more about this mission of yours. You’re here to kill people on a specific list, right? I want to be clear: none of my friends or me are on that list, right?”

“Believe me, if they were before I saw you in action, I wouldn’t be as stupid as to assume I could do better than a few thousand mercenaries. A few hundred, maybe. A thousand or more, no.” Garrus was counting every krogan as worth seven normal mercs, but even so, that wasn’t nearly as much hyperbole as his rational mind said there should be. *However, reality trumps rationality.*

“But to say it formally, you and your companion, Herb, are not on my list. As to your friends, I have no idea, as I have no idea who your friends are,” Garrus went on, looking around the battlefield. The entire habitat area had been smashed, but that had been mostly true before he had even arrived on the scene. The battle since then had simply added more damage on top of what had already existed.

“You’re the brutally honest sort, ain’t ya?” Ranma said, but he turned away from Garrus, reaching up to remove his helmet for now. With explosions and other stuff no longer in play, he didn’t really need it, and he felt it was also time to stop acting like the faceless unstoppable juggernaut and look a little more laid back. His gloves and chest plate soon followed his helmet into his ki space while a bemused Garrus watched, leaving only his leggings and greaves in place.

“I find that being both didactic in speech and direct helps save issues down the line,” the Turian intoned.

Ranma snorted at that and then began to move over the battlefield as Garrus followed, taking pictures of a few of the Blue Suns and krogan, noting absently that a large portion of the upper echelons of both mercenary groups had been wiped out here. *The Blood Pack leaders leading the charge I can understand, but I suppose that the Blue Suns leaders felt it was time for a bit of glory for themselves? They should have known that there would be no glory on hand on any battlefield, but I suppose it will make Officer Trios and her team’s work easier.*

Surprisingly, several of the krogan were still alive. Well, that part didn't surprise him. A krogan's ability to heal from practically anything far faster than any other race and their natural durability was well-known to his folk. It was why the Krogan Wars had been so devastating after all. That, and, admittedly, how quickly a krogan youth went from a baby to a battle ready young adult back then and how many the krogan could have prior to the genophage.

What did surprise him though was that Ranma wasn't finishing any of them off. Instead, he tossed the survivors towards their base, ignoring their groans and grumbles as he did. Soon, there was a pile of around twenty krogan, stacked to make the most ugly pyramid in existence.

There wasn't a single vorcha though. Only one of them had survived up to this point, and when Ranma lifted it up off the ground, the stupid creature tried to take a swing at him with a dagger in its hand. The dagger slammed into Ranma's armor right over his privates, which were in the same space on his species as they were for turians. The dagger shattered on Ranma's green armor as it struck, followed by the vorcha's neck to a chop from Ranma, which served nearly to decapitate the fool.

"Normally, I wouldn't have killed anyone like that after such a stupid attack, but ya went for the balls, man. Some things you just don't do," Ranma said to the corpse before shaking his head and turning away.

He looked toward some of the locals, who were very much not coming any closer to him or to Garrus than they had to, simply staring around themselves at the shattered, blasted, body-strewn battlefield that had previously been a rundown habitat. Yet no matter how run down it had been, it was where they'd been living or working, and now that the battle was over, Ranma felt a little guilty at how much wanton destruction had been caused during it.

Thinking about that, Ranma cupped his hands around his mouth, yelling, "Oy, if you want to get even with any of these assholes, now's your time. That is, if you can tell one krogan from another, I can't. But I figure since you guys've been living alongside them, you might be able to. At least these vicious little bastards," he held up the Vorcha, "all look unique."

For a moment, the locals just stared at one another, many of them having flinched from Ranma's voice as he shouted. A few were staring at him in awe, including several humans, who saw that Ranma looked almost as human as they did.

He honestly looked human but with the evidence of how dangerous he was, even seeing his very human face wasn't enough to make them all that certain of his species. One woman was muttering about him being some kind of devil or archangel under her breath.

Eventually, a few of them began to move through the rubble as well, and one shouted back at Ranma, keeping his distance but addressing him. "We know the faces of a few of the krogan we have the most issue with. But most krogan are just bullies and sometimes berserkers. They'll sneer, glare, kick at us if they pass by, maybe extort money out of us for protection, but

that last isn't anything unusual on Omega. One way or another, we all must pay for protection. A few are worse, but the vorcha are the main issue. There's more of them elsewhere on the station, a lot more. And all of them are vicious animals, vicious and cruel, and willing to eat anything, including other sentients, whether or not they've been 'trained' by the Blood Pack or not. Just like the varren, they are a plague."

"Then when I'm done here, I might go on a hunt," Ranma growled, shaking his head to hide a shiver at the idea of someone eating someone else who could talk and think. That was disturbing as hell. Still, that response told Ranma a lot. Specifically, that there was no love lost between the mercenaries and the common citizens of Omega. That was a good thing in his mind, as it probably also meant there was little love for the so-called leadership of Omega and the gangs that she used to enforce her rule.

That really should be 'used to use', Ranma thought with amusement. *I've pretty much taken her whip hand here and turned it into so many broken fragments, and that's to say nothing of Samara and Herb and whatever they've been up to.*

He turned and asked Garrus this, who responded that they had seen Herb and Samara being led to Afterlife, the strip club that Aria used as her base of operations. Like Herb and Samara before him, Ranma seemed quite nonplussed by the idea of having your base of operations be in a strip club. Even in the various crime movies he had seen over the years back in his old world, none of the gang bosses had done something like that. They would always have a separate area for their own offices and everything else. *Then again, how many of those were women, and how many of them could hide biotically enhanced bodyguards/shocktroopers among the dancers? Maybe Aria wasn't as stupid as all that...*

"We've got a live one over here!" one of the locals shouted.

Broken out of his thoughts, Ranma turned in that direction, striding over with Garrus. It turned out to be one of the Blue Suns mercenaries, his head lolling to the side, blood pouring from a blow to the head, but otherwise in one piece. Ranma looked at him, then over at Garrus, gesturing with a hand. "Well, is he on your list?"

Garrus lifted his omni-tool, running a facial scan on the man, but the scan came up negative. "No. He's just a grunt, nearly unknown."

"Makes sense. You guys want to hold onto him?" Ranma asked the locals. "Whatever else, I don't think the Blue Suns are going to be welcome on Omega after today. The Blood Pack might be in the same boat, even if they didn't actually cause as much damage to the habitat as the Blue Suns guys until they started getting shot at."

Garrus suddenly blinked, turning to the large and still intact warehouse building that the Blood Pack had been using as their base of operations here on Omega. He grinned suddenly, his

mandibles shifting widely around his mouth. "Actually, I can guarantee it. What is a mercenary company without any funds, after all?" With that, he began jogging in that direction.

Ranma watched him go for a moment, then looked over at the locals and then back to the Blue Suns mercenary they were still holding up between them. "You guys need some help to restrain him? And I hope that you all have some doctors or something among you. Not for the Merck's but for any injured among yourselves."

"Doctors demand payment and a lot of our livelihoods just..." the local began before falling silent, eloquently gesturing around them instead.

Ranma grimaced at that but nodded. "Well, Garrus just said something about taking all the Blood Packs money. I'm certain I can talk him into sharing."

That seemed to cheer the local who had spoken up tremendously, but he was also glaring towards the pile of krogan that Ranma had begun to make. "What about them?"

"If any of you want to kill them, do it. I'm not," Ranma answered bluntly. "I am a martial artist, a warrior. I don't kill the defenseless, and right now, all of them are pretty damn defenseless."

And I learned a lot about the krogan in this fight. They do have ki, for damn sure. They also have that eezo stuff in their bodies, much like the asari. Which is weird. That stuff is weird. I don't understand it, and I don't understand how it interacts with ki. But I know that Benezia was showing evidence of ki the last time we sparred. So, it isn't like you can't have one without the other. I thought maybe ki would drive the eezo out of her system or Usagi's, but it hasn't yet, and most of these krogans're using ki-assisted healing even now. What the heck is going on here?

Ranma was kind of leery of getting to the bottom of that. He and Herb would need to examine large amounts of eezo, which wasn't something he was looking forward to, in order to figure out the connection there.

The locals all grumbled a bit, but eventually, after much back and forth, like Garrus, they came up with a list, and several of the older members of the sectors of the civilian population moved towards the pile of krogan, and Ranma went back to work enlarging said pile. By the time Garrus came back from inside the warehouse, the talons of his hands tapping together in a gleeful tune, something that turians did when they were very happy, and a program running on his omni-tool in front of them, the pile had grown to include fifty-two of the krogan, not including the seven that the locals had killed, while Ranma continued to pile them up.

Garrus joined Ranma by the pile, staring up at it with a wide grin on his mandibles. A few of the krogan had begun to rouse themselves from the unconscious state they had entered while their bodies were busy trying to regenerate themselves. "It almost looks like some kind of

abstract work of art. A 'Krogan Orgy', or 'Essence of Defeat', I'm uncertain which title would be more appropriate for such a work."

Ranma grinned at that, then gestured to Garrus' arm, where his omni-tool was still humming along, numbers passing by on the screen quickly. "I take it you were able to hack their bank accounts or whatever?"

"I was able to contact one of our team's hackers, and they took over my omni-tool and hacked into the Blood Pack's system here. I was able to drain all their funds, both here and elsewhere in the Intranet, with no one the wiser! The battlemasters leading operations or controlling their recruitment offices elsewhere are not going to be happy when they discover they suddenly have no funds whatsoever. Well, besides any hard currency they have on hand, anyway. But still, this will hurt them badly."

"Is that actually legal under Council Law?" a Salarian asked quizzically.

While Ranma just rolled his eyes, Garrus took the question seriously. "As a state of war exists between the System Alliance, the Turian Hierarchy, and the Batarian Hegemony, any combatant who fights alongside the batarians is considered enemy. Moreover, we were given orders to stop the Blood Pack, Blue Suns and Eclipse from continuing to get involved in the war. Taking their funds like this was just one of the many options we had. I'll admit that I didn't think we would be so successful, but I'm not complaining."

Turning to Ranma, he addressed the martial artist, holding out his Omni-tool. "Do you want a finder's fee or something? Given how much of the work you did hear to further damage the Blood Pack and Blue Suns' presence on Omega, Ranma, it seems kind of churlish not to offer."

"No way. I don't need the money, but these folks do. Give them some of it to help pay their medical bills and to help rebuild this area," Ranma ordered.

It turned out that the locals didn't have access to any accounts they could say were safe for that amount of money. Worse, all their Omni-tools had been built locally, and one of them said bluntly, "We know they transfer some kind of tithe to an exterior account with every money exchange, probably to Aria somehow. We'll need to figure out a way to secure some new accounts, maybe with the volus, but then we'll also need to head over to the Carrd sector to buy a new Omni-tool from them, one they've scrubbed of invasive programs."

Even Ranma could understand that explanation, but since that all could be solved in time, He turned his attention to Garrus. He wanted to know why the joint turian/human team had been sent into Omega, what their resources were, and what was going on with the "four-eyed fuckers."

Garrus answered his questions easily, seeing no point in hiding anything from Ranma. He basically finished doing so by the time the locals had found a computer that would allow them to transfer funds over the Intranet from his omni-tool. Garrus took a moment to get in touch with John and the rest of the officers among the company, and was given the okay, at which point he began the transfer, looking over Ranma speculatively. "Does your interest in the war mean you want to get involved in it? Given how vicious you were when you saw civilians going down to the fire from the mercenaries, I could see you being monumentally infuriated by the idea of slavers. To say nothing of what you did on Torfan."

"Yeah, I'm pissed at them." *And the fact the council allowed their slaving bullshit for 'cultural' reasons.* "But I don't think either me or her would be comfortable getting involved in a war. Not like a normal soldier, anyway. To do that, we'd have to work with the overall military structure, right? That's just not gonna happen. I don't do well with orders." Ranma shrugged his shoulders emphatically. Then he smirked. "Now, if you had information pointing to the exact location of the leadership of the Batarian Hegemony, I could see us getting involved."

"Headhunting? That's certainly possible, I suppose. Although the Hegemony leaders are extremely careful about not giving any idea of where they hide out beyond on their home planet somewhere."

"I would call it more decapitation rather than headhunting. Headhunting implies that you might not come away with the head of the person you're going after," Ranma drawled. *I ain't normally bloodthirsty, but these fuckers are the leaders of a whole slaving empire, people who send out slaves and even their own citizens with explosives strapped to them and a hell of a lot of other shit just so they can stay in power. I can make an exception, just like I did here.*

He looked over at the Blue Suns survivor, the only one who had survived from the Blue Suns, showing precisely how vicious the battle had been. Only the krogan's ability to heal and take so much more damage than anyone else Ranma had dealt with in this universe had kept so many of them alive.

Well, not so many, really, but more than I expected. Their ki healing really is damn good, almost better than mine, unless I'm directing it, Ranma reflected, gesturing to the Blue Suns guy. "So, you want to take this guy and see if he can help your hackers find anything important at their base?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea, but what about all these krogan?" Garrus asked, gesturing to the pile of groaning now slowly shifting krogan.

Ranma grinned in a way that showed all of his teeth, causing the salarian civilian and Garrus to both back away slightly. He then moved over to one of the krogan on the outer edge of the pile who looked to be the most aware of his surroundings. Grabbing him by his fringe, he pulled the krogan halfway out of the pile, staring him in the eye. "Yo. My name's Ranma. I recognize you as one of the guys I first started this fight with, right?"

The Krogan grumbled, which Ranma took as an affirmative even if he was holding the guy so still, he couldn't nod his head. "Cool. So, from what I understand, krogan believe in survival of the strongest or rule of the stronger something, right? So, after smashing your entire operation here single-handed, what does that make me?"

"A fucking target the size of a Thresher Maw," the Krogan growled. "You can't believe the Blood Pack will ever forget this! We'll come for you!"

"Good. That's what I want. Reclaim your honor or whatever you want to call it by coming after me. No more taking part in this war the four-eyed fuckers are in, right? You want a war, you bring it to me or my partner Herb. Who's just as strong and deadly as I am."

The Krogan's eyes widened at that, but Ranma went on, glaring now. "Mind you, I expect you lot to fight us up close and personal. No bombarding from orbit, no going after civilians to try to force us into a trap, nothing but you lot trying to prove that you're actually as strong as your reputation says you are. Because if I see anything like that, I might decide to take the fight back to you. I don't know how I'd do that yet, but I can find a way."

The Krogan grumbled at that but nodded, and Ranma smirked, letting him drop down. "Good. Although I doubt the Blood Pack is going to stay together after today's work. I did just kill your leader after all, and I also stole your money."

Garrus gaped at him while the locals all stared in shock, with the Salarian about to raise a hand to object to Ranma saying what was a patent lie, as well as something that would put an even larger target on his back. Thankfully, before he could say anything stupid, a human clamped his hand over the Salarian's mouth and began to drag him off quickly.

But the Krogan in Ranma's grip shrugged. "That's the spoils of war. When we prove ourselves by beating you, we can take it back. And it honestly won't be all of us at once. Fighting and defeating you one on one would earn anyone the leadership position in one go."

"Not a bad attitude, I guess. That's good. I'll let you and your fellows go for now, although I will warn you, there might be a change in leadership around here. My partner apparently was being taken to see Aria, and he is about as arrogant an asshole as you can imagine. I really don't think that anything good came out of that meeting, at least from Aria's perspective. If she's, you know, in one piece enough to have a perspective," Ranma quipped, trying to sound upbeat about everything, even though now that the adrenaline was beginning to leave his system, and everything combat related seemed to be dying down, the knowledge that he had killed quite a few people today was starting to settle in. But now was not the time to deal with that. He would eventually, but not right now.

The Krogan actually laughed at that, nodding his head. "We've no love for Aria. That's fine by us. We'll fight for our place here, and if anyone thinks they can lord it over us without proving their quads, that's another thing entirely."

“That’s probably the best I’ll get. I think we understand each other. And now, I’ll just leave you and your fellows to get yourselves out of that pile,” Ranma said with a grin, a real one now rather than a toothy one.

He let the Krogan go before turning to Garrus, taking the Blue Suns prisoner and tossing him over one shoulder. “Now, you’re the one with the map of this place, so where’s the Blue Suns’ headquarters? I realize your hacker friends are already probably busy there, but this guy might have something to add, and frankly, I can’t expect all of the krogan whose asses I have kicked today to take it as well as that guy did. I would rather go punch out some more vorcha than waste more fist on idiots who don’t know they’ve already been beaten.”

Garrus laughed, along with the Krogan, surprisingly. This caused the two of them to stare at one another before turning away with scowls on their faces. The shadows of the krogan wars meant turians and krogan rarely got along. Although they got along better than krogan and salarians did.

Garrus simply wordlessly gestured Ranma to follow him, heading out of Kenzo hub, while the locals quickly backed away from the groaning pile of krogan, hiding the computer system they had used to take their part of the funds Garrus leached out of the Blood Pack’s computers. It was more than enough to pay for rebuilding the sector and then some, although that would still take a lot of time. Nevertheless, their futures were markedly looking brighter than they had been before.

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As John Shepard explained why he and his group were on Omega, Herb only listened with half a mind, tapping one finger against the upper part of her other arm as her thoughts went over the battle with Aria. She was somewhat miffed by how poorly she had done. *While Aria’s breadth of biotic skill threw me, that alone should not have been enough to let Aria survive for so long. Not even the number of bodies that she’d had to throw at her was enough of an excuse. I should have stopped caring about the environment or pulling punches far faster than I did. I didn’t take her seriously, and her speed and mobility surprised me. Bah, Ranma will laugh at me if he ever discovers I had such trouble with her. Pathetic. The next time we need a large diversion or a significant number of enemies dealt with all at once, I will volunteer for that. Ranma can get the annoying job.*

However, despite only listening with half of her attention, Herb still understood the gist of what John was saying and held up her hand, indicating he should stop talking. “So, let me get this straight. Do you wish to take over Omega? Despite the fact that even the so-called normal civilians here on Omega are here because they have no home within the alliance, have issues with the alliance or just don’t want to deal with you? Does that make any sense to you? You would have a riot or an uprising on your hands within days.”

“We would if I was thinking of taking over the entire thing like Omega was going to become an alliance colony. I’m not. I’m thinking that Omega could be an independent colony, one only loosely tied to both the Turian Hierarchy and the System Alliance. One which would need to create its own local charter. So long as it keeps to the charter and allows a joint hierarchy/alliance force to bunk troops here, that should be enough to both satisfy my superiors and to make certain that this place doesn’t fall into the hands of the next criminal kingpin to come around.”

“But you can’t enforce that, can you? And I noticed that you didn’t mention the Council.”

“This far out in the Terminus Reach, not even the council could do much. But you’re right. We couldn’t enforce it for long. Omega could be a major player in Terminus politics, though. In fact, it already was under Aria. But the nature of those politics could change if something approaching a civilian government starts to grow here.”

Herb stared at him thoughtfully. There were a lot of pragmatic reasons why Shepard wanted that, but Herb felt it was also being pushed forward because the man was an altruist and truly wanted to help the locals better their lives. Herb could understand both sides of that, but she felt it wouldn’t go nearly as smoothly as Shepard believed. Still, it was an idea, and Herb decided that it was as good an idea as any when it came to dealing with Omega. *And getting what I want too.*

She also decided that she had spent enough time in her female form. “Wait here.”

She moved over to where Usagi was behind the local bar, having created a line of mojitos that she and the other still conscious Asari were working their way through. That this included at least two of the local dancers went unremarked by Herb. She simply pointed at Usagi, declaring, “A bottle of water, I wish to change.”

“Aww, but you’re so cute!” Usagi leaped over the bar to land next to Herb, ruffling her multicolored hair before Herb could batter her hands away.

Herb growled, caught Usagi’s hand, and flung her up into the air, where she bounced off the ceiling, taking a page from Ranma’s book and landing lightly on her feet nearby with a laugh. “I’ve told you before I do not like that!”

“Meanie!” Usagi teased, although she was laughing as she did, hopping back over another bar near where she’d landed and pulling out what looked like an actual water bottle. “Taste it first. In a place like this, real water might not be so common.”

Herb did so, and it tasted all right to her. Certainly, there was no alcohol in it. If it was not clean water, she could not detect it from the taste, so that was fine by her. Herb nodded at her, then heated the water bottle with an application of ki before dumping the now-warm water over her head. She ignored John Shepard’s gasp of surprise or the Asari he’d come with into the

club suddenly slumping to her knees, staring in shock. Instead, Herb leaped up to where Aria's office was, going through the blasted-out window.

Inside, he looked around thoughtfully for a second. The sight of the computer still intact on Aria's desk caused Herb to smile, and he reminded himself to look at the omni-tool Aria had on her arm. *It will no doubt have a lot of information on it, including passcodes. That could be fascinating. I am always interested in gathering more information about this strange universe, and one of the reasons why I wanted to come here in the first place was the possibility of perhaps co-opting an existing spy ring. Considering it might be a while before news of Aria's demise gets out, that could be possible. And if not, well, her spies will be happy enough if they keep getting paid. But first, finish that conversation with Shepard.*

With that, he turned his attention away from the desk to look at the bottles of alcohol that were still in one piece on display in various places around the office. He grabbed each of them in turn, then hopped back out and down to the ground.

There, he found that John was still somewhat stunned and began pointing at him, his mouth agape. "So, so that rumor, it was real! You can really transform from one form to another! How! Why? Are they, are both forms fully functional? Or is it just your upper body that changes?"

"If it was just my upper body that changed, I would be even more of a freak than I am now," Herb growled back, shaking his head dryly. "How is simple, magic. As to why, let us just say that I made mistakes when I was younger at a training ground where magic permeated the entire area. As far as I know, both my forms are fully functional, although I hope to never truly test the limits of such on my female form."

While Ranma was more than willing to kiss and hug the girls in his female body, thanks to... well, the orgy that he had been surprised by on *Sijou's Eye* and some 'exercises' he'd done with Usagi on Crastus, Herb was in no way interested in getting to know his female form beyond the need to fight with it. He was still straight as straight could be, turned off entirely by the idea of having any man touch him regardless of form, but he was far more comfortable with his female form than Herb. Herb understood his own sexuality for certain but was in no way willing to engage in such in his female body. To him, his female body was still very much a burden with no positives beyond the fact that occasionally, it allowed him to blend into the background when his male body was known by the locals. As it had here on Omega initially.

"Usagi, rate these alcohols for me," Herb ordered.

Usagi was tempted to ask him to say please but figured that Herb would probably hurt himself if he tried and wasn't likely to do so in any event. She simply nodded, took all of the bottles from them, lined them up on the bar and then rearranged them from best and most expensive to least. Two she set aside, saying, "These are expensive as all get out, but I've never seen the point. One of them is so low in alcohol content you'd need to drain the entire bottle in

one go to get even a light buzz, let alone anything else. I think it's just a status symbol thing. The other one is supposed to be good and is kind of expensive, but it's also poison in large doses to anyone but krogan."

"I'll take that one then. Anything a krogan can do, I'm sure a dragon-kin like me will be able to imbibe," Herb announced, taking the bottle that Usagi just pointed out, grabbing a glass from nearby and pouring the alcohol into it before taking a long, slow sip. "Tastes almost fruity, but with an earthy scent to it. Interesting."

He then looked over at John, who had just helped the Asari Commander he had entered the strip club with to his feet. "Let us get this out of the way now. Yes, both Ranma and I have a curse that forces us to change genders when we are struck by cold water. While we have both come to terms with that, we are not happy about it, and I would personally tear the arms off of any person who tries to initiate the change without asking first or for such stupid reasons as science or 'physics just doesn't work like that,'" Herb said drolly, shaking his head.

Even as his tone turned mock-whiny on the last few words, he extended one finger, which began to glow malevolently with ki light towards one of the asari dancers/commandoes who had been sitting at the other bar with Usagi a moment ago. Herb had noticed the woman had grabbed up a cup of water and had been making her way towards him.

Something clear, anyway. In a bar, that left a lot of other choices.

"Yes, our curses are magic," Herb went on as the woman carefully set the glass down and backed away. "Yes, magic existed where Ranma and I are initially from. At this point, I doubt there is any way we can go back, and there is certainly no way you all could communicate back there or vice versa. If we are ever on Earth, we might be able to perhaps find some evidence that magic existed there in the past as well in conjunction with what is real in our old world. But I am not interested in going there as some Systems Alliance stooge or object of curiosity. You have far too many leaders who are only interested in talking, far too many leaders who are interested in going along with the Council or mass effect technology without searching for alternatives. In point of fact, you all remind me negatively of governments in our world I was forced to deal with as a prince when my father sent me out as his representative."

There had only been three governments he'd ever met representatives of personally: the Mongolian, Chinese and Russian governments. But even so, the Council did remind him of all three in many ways. *Although, given how well the alliance military is doing in this war against the batarians, at least whatever corruption there exists has not gone as far as the corruption in Russia did.*

"I'm a soldier who has been fighting a war against slavers for several months that should have started years ago when they first began to raid our colonies. You're not going to get an argument out of me as to how useless our civilian leaders are," John snorted.

“Good.” A thought occurred to Herb then, and he glanced around. “By the way, is there any way to lock this station down in some fashion? Make it so people cannot leave? My acquaintance Samara is after a quarry that I am very certain I do not wish to allow the chance of escaping?”

While John shrugged and pulled up his Omni-tool to call Corporal Ashter, heading to the entryway up to Aria’s office, Herb closed his eyes and sent out his ki sense. While Ranma was somewhat capable at this technique, he did not have the range Herb did. In addition, for all that Omega was a massive space station, which was because it was spread out in every direction, above and below as well as side-to-side. Herb’s ki sense could spread throughout most of the space station, including to the area where Morinth had been staying. And Herb had a feeling for Morinth’s vile ki signature. That signature, a diseased green with striations of black and purple, was extremely distinctive.

Moreover, that signature was even now heading away, out towards the edge of his senses. Growling, Herb flicked his omni-tool on, calling into it, “Contact, Samara. Samara, Morinth is running. I believe she is on the level of the station below where she was before, but she is running away and will soon be out of my range. I will do what I can from Aria’s office to try and make certain that she cannot flee the station, but after that, it is up to you.”

Samara’s calm tone answered almost at once. “I hear you. I am already after her. If you can do what you can to lock down the hangers, that will be enough. Thank you.” With that, she disconnected, and Herb turned and leaped up to Aria’s office.

There, he found John already using his Omni-tool to give his hackers access to Aria’s own computer system. “We’ve got it. We’re locking it down now.”

“Good. Leave Aria’s computer open. I may wish to... examine it later.” Herb thanked the other man, and then the two of them headed back down to the strip club’s main floor. There wasn’t enough furniture in Aria’s office intact to use it right now.

Soon, the two of them were sitting in one of the many small alcoves around the edge of the club, and Herb began to speak. “Now that Samara’s needs have been seen to, perhaps we can get down to, as they say, brass tacks. If I, as the person who killed Aria and one of the two individuals who the locals will be most terrified of crossing, help you to set up some manner of actual government here, what is in it for me? And what is in it for the locals?”

He gestured to the same Asari Commando who had been thinking about splashing him a moment ago. “Convince her for example, that a normal government out here in Omega is a good idea for the locals. That it wouldn’t just force a lot of them to leave and start up someplace else. How much of the local so-called civilian infrastructure is based on what everyone else would call criminal activities? What about people who came here to get away from the Systems Alliance, the Council and everything else? Why should they welcome the idea

of a civilian government that will allow your people to have a military presence here? And what guarantees will you offer them that you just won't take over the moment Ranma and I leave?"

The fact that they wouldn't be able to take over if either Herb or Ranma objected was implied so loudly that it was almost a literal cloud in the air, and under Herb's glare, John gulped at that, then quipped, "I didn't expect to need to debate with you on that point. Are you going to act like some kind of representative or something for the locals? Don't you think we should ask them their opinions first?"

"A fine idea. Let us discover what leaders or organizations still survive now that Aria has been slain, and let us get their opinions on your thoughts on what the future of Omega should look like," Herb said grandly. *And one way or another, either through unofficial channels, channels from Aria's former network or the locals and their obvious need to be interconnected with the rest of the Terminus Reach, I will have my sources of information.*

OOOOOOO

Morinth slipped out of a secret entrance to her apartment complex that led down into the next habitat block below. Such was the nature of living on a space station, as congested with different habitats like Omega, that the ceiling of one sector was almost directly connected to the roof of another. It had been startlingly easy for Morinth to create not one but several exits from her little apartment like this one.

Flipping herself up and forward, Morinth landed on a roof nearby, hidden in the shadows thanks to how close the top of that building was to the top of the sector. From there, she climbed down to the street level of that habitat, cursing inside all the while. *How the hell did Samara find me so quickly!? I've only been here a bare year. Blast Samara's soul to the deepest pits of space!*

I hadn't even begun to build up enough of a local following to eventually challenge Aria for mastery of the station, as was my plan. That would have put me in a position where I could never be challenged, even with my status as a rogue Ardat-Yakashi. And it would've provided me with endless supplies of food. I'm just lucky that I had used my Domination skill on so many throughout the surrounding hubs that they recognized the tattoos I told them to be on the lookout for on other asari.

Morinth snorted then as she pulled up a hood to hide her features before leaving the alleyway between buildings. *And I suppose I should also say that I'm lucky that Samara has never thought that hiding such markers might be a good idea. Samara's too damn straightforward for that.*

Of course, when Morinth spoke of food in this context, she wasn't speaking about actual physical hunger, but the feeding that Morinth did when she embraced eternity with someone and sucked everything out of that individual that made them an individual in the first place. The

feeling of doing that, the rush of power it gave her when she drained someone's essence, there was nothing like it in the galaxy.

Oh, Morinth had tried to find something similar. She'd tried literally every drug an asari could imbibe without dying instantly. Every alcohol, every sex-crazed act, Morinth had tried them all in the first hundred or so years since becoming a rogue Ardat-Yakashi. Back when Morinth had thought that perhaps she could just use the Hunger like any other biotic power, back when she had thought it was just a means to an end, the end being power over herself and others.

However, nothing came even close to the feeling of feeding on someone else's mind and soul. And that feeling was even greater when the other person was a biotic. Now, after hundreds of years, Morinth had embraced the Hunger. Had embraced the wanton desire to drain others, to see the light fade from their eyes as she fed on their very souls. To her, it was an almost religious experience.

It's a damn shame, but I'm not staying around to discover if Samara was able to make a deal with Aria or not. She's shown before that she is willing to make agreements with a so-called 'lesser evil' in order to catch little old me. I'd almost be flattered if not for the fact that I know she'll kill me if she ever catches up with me. No, there will undoubtedly be no chance of 'redeeming' me. Not after so long, not even from Samara. Not even if her damned oaths allowed it.

Soon, Morinth was pushing her way out from that habitat and then further out from where most of the people who lived on Omega congregated. Moving through a series of small and large hallways, she eventually came to a segment of the station cored out of the asteroid part of Omega where there were no longer any offshoots. This would eventually lead her to one of the many hanger bays that dotted the exterior of the junkyard-like space station. This one, in particular, was smaller than most and thus didn't see much in terms of traffic, which had suited Morinth down to the ground when she stowed her small, dilapidated cargo hauler upon arriving on Omega.

Fuck, and it took so many credits to buy out the hanger, pay to set me up here and pay all the various 'taxes' to fucking Aria! I barely have a hundred thousand now. Still, I've had less in the past. And there are a lot of places in the Terminus Reach where I can... What the?

Ahead of Samara, a blast door was shut where it should not have been, blocking the way forward. Most of those doors barely worked, so Morinth was surprised to see it able to close in the first place, but seeing it closed here made Morinth scowl in both confusion and sudden concern. "What the hell? Why is this closed?" She quickly moved to a small panel next to the blast door, tapping at a few of the buttons there. "Is it just this one, or..."

Morinth pulled back, flipping open her omni-tool and connecting it to the computer, allowing her to access more of Omega's computer grid than the simple door controls alone

would have allowed for. A second later, she was staring in shock at a systemwide announcement that all traffic had been halted. All hangar bay doors had been locked down on order of Aria, as well as many of the blast doors throughout the outer shell of the station, like the one that was in front of Morinth now. Worse, many of the hangers, including the one she was heading toward, were reading as being airless currently.

“FUCK, what do I do now, tear this down and see if I can find a spacesuit, or try and backtrack, steal another ship?” Morinth bit one of her nails, growling in anger. “By Athame’s diseased azure, how did Samara get Aria to do this?”

“No help from Aria was needed. I brought with me far more reliable aid in this hunt.”

Morinth stiffened at the cool, cold voice coming from behind her, whirling around, a biotic aura going up and down her arms as she stared at Samara standing at the far end of the hallway, cold and composed as she stared at Morinth. “How, how did you...”

“Once warned by my allies that you were already on the run, I launched an assault on your home. I have been on your trail ever since,” Samara answered. “You made the mistake of assuming that there were asari in the habit unit that you escaped down into. There are not, and your sudden arrival and quick exit caused a bit of a stir. After that, once more, my allies came through to stop you from escaping justice once more.”

With an explanation given, Samara’s tone dropped further, going from cool and composed to formal and grim as she brought her hands up to either side of her face. Biotic energies built along her hands and forearms as she intoned, “By the power invested in me by the code of the Justicars and the ancient words of our foremothers, I denounce you as a rogue Ardat-Yakashi. You have given yourself to the sin of your powers, lost yourself in your revelry, preying upon those around you to sate your Hunger. Will you surrender and be returned to the sisterhood for judgment, or must I kill you where you stand?”

“Always so officious, always so self-righteous, **mother!**” Morinth spat the word like a curse, and for the two of them, it might as well have been. Her own biotic power began to appear around her in a corona of purple and dark green energy. “Do you honestly think that I will come quietly?! Do you think I will let you simply slay me to remove the guilt from your own mind?”

Samara slowly shook her head, staring at Morinth, trying to see any hint of the small child that Samara could remember her being so long ago. She saw nothing there. There was no familial connection between them any longer, only the centuries of blood and death that Morinth had left in her pursuit of power behind her and her efforts to not pay for her crimes. “It has been many years since I thought of you as my daughter and even more decades since I felt any personal guilt at your actions. I brought you into this universe, yes. Yet what you have done with your life is your own burden to bear. I became a Justicar to watch over you and your sisters, and part of that is, yes, judging you now, Morinth. I will not hesitate.”

“That makes two of us!” With that, Morinth charged forward, howling a wordless battle cry as she sent a Biotic Burst down the hallway, followed by several dozen Biotic Orbs, each of them flashing forward along a different parabola as she moved from side to side, bouncing up and off the walls and then off the ceiling for a second.

The biotic burst was blocked by Samara, who then danced through the rest of Morinth’s attacks, lashing out with a Biotic Grab that hooked one of Morinth’s legs, pulling her down and into a biotic assisted punch that hurled Morinth back into one of the walls. For a second, Samara pinned her there with a Biotic Push, hammering punches and blows into a hastily raised shield, which cracked under each successive blow. But then Morinth pushed outward, sending the shield outward, pushing the Justicar away, the energy almost solid like glass, cutting at the older woman.

A low kick flashed out to take Samara’s legs out from under her, but she jumped up over them, a double kick landing hard into Morinth’s chest, sending her careening back into the wall and then to the ground. Samara tried to follow up, a singularity lashing out and down into Morinth, but Morinth rolled away, only taking a bit of peripheral damage from the singularity even as she charged up her own, tossing it not at Samara but at the air above her.

Samara ducked out and away from where she thought Morinth had been targeting, but then Morinth pushed up off the ground, kicking off the wall and into a biotic charge that slammed into Samara. A biotic hammer, a technique that Morinth had learned from feeding on a krogan battlemaster, came down on Samara even as Morinth was flung away. However, Samara replied with a slash, intercepting and cutting through Morinth’s biotic attack, showing that despite the centuries and the amount of biotics that Morinth had fed on, her mother’s technique was still better than her own, able to overwhelm her at the point of impact.

“But I have the advantage in raw power!” Morinth shouted, lashing out with a series of biotic flashes of her own.

Samara simply dodged through them, not blocking or redirecting any, moving between the walls of the hallway as if she had all the space in the world. Then she kicked off one wall and up onto the ceiling, where a biotic lash, much like one of the attacks Aria had used on Herb, appeared in one hand, flashing down and nearly wrapping around Morinth’s neck. She dodged at the last second, the lash cracking into one of her shoulders, causing her to howl in pain.

However, Morinth had absorbed so much biotic energies over the centuries that her ki, to use the terms Ranma and Herb would, was more than up to the point where she could use ki healing. Within seconds, her wounds began to heal almost instantly.

Realizing where that power came from, Samara shook her head sadly. “How low have you fallen?”

“Shut up! You and everyone like you, all you sanctimonious bitches! I am what you all made me!” Morinth howled, charging forward again.

Samara let her come, and for a few moments, the two of them fought hand-to-hand, biotic armor around their limbs, pulses and orbs appearing and disappearing as they connected or were redirected into the ground and the surroundings. “No. Again, your actions are your own. Do you think you are the first rogue to rail at the tenants the Ardat-Yakashi must follow? Do you think you are the first to blame all of asari culture for it? You forget, there was a time many thousands of years ago before we Asari took to the stars, when there were no aliens around for us to meet and mate with. And even back then, there was a stigma against such as you. People who could feed and who could be lost in the revelry of doing so. The sisterhood is a necessary part of our society and has been forever.”

“Your actions are your own,” Samara said again, breaking through Morinth’s physical defenses and slamming a hand into her chest before she could raise a biotic shield there. A jolt, as if she had just touched a live wire, went through Morinth, and then a kick cracked across her face, rolling her into one wall. Once more, Morinth found herself pinned there, a desperate biotic shield protecting her from most of the punches and techniques of Samara for a few seconds before she was able to push away again.

This time, she was able to take Samara’s legs out from under her, following up with a biotic push to the chest that hurled Samara away. Nevertheless, neither strike was powerful enough to do much damage, and even though one of her knees nearly gave out when she landed, Samara was able to launch her own next attack a second after landing.

Biotic cluster grenades, a technique that basically created small biotically enclosed areas of highly condensed air, were flung back at Morinth, and her eyes widened before she hastily covered herself with another biotic shield. That shield was torn away by the resulting explosions, and she was again tossed backward, cracking her head against the wall and then skidding and bouncing and flopping from wall to floor as the other blasts went off, tearing chunks out of the rock that comprised the tunnel here.

As the attacks subsided, Morinth pushed to her feet raggedly, breathing heavily, staring down at herself for a second as she realized suddenly that her wounds were not healing. “What, what did you... what is... **no!**”

Samara winced a bit at the pain in one of her knees and in the shoulder on her opposite side. “You are not the first rogue Ardat-Yakashi I have dealt with, and the Justicars have a history going back thousands of years, as I just mentioned. Within that history are included several techniques that can stop someone from healing, even healing oneself through biotics. An attack on the nervous system of the individual. No matter how hard you try, your body will not realize it needs to start healing so long as the energy I discharged into your nervous system is there, no matter how desperately your mind tries to tell it.”

With that, Samara reached forward with one hand, clenching it and sending out a biotic pulse across the ten yards of distance between them, which grabbed Morinth before she could move, pulling her in.

Another attack began to form in Samara's other hand as Morinth came closer.

Yet even in midair, with most of her biotic power diminished or trying to push out Samara's energy within her, Morinth still had one trick up her sleeve. She bit down on a small pouch in her mouth, a surgically created pouch put there by a salarian doctor she had dominated. Opening the pouch Morinth used her tongue to pull the small pellet, barely the size of two teeth, out. And just as she entered punching range, Morinth spat forward.

The tiny ball burst open on contact, sending what amounted to about a thumb nail's worth of acid out onto Samara's chest. A chest that, like with most Asari Commandos, was not protected by any armor beyond her skintight suit.

"AAGGGHGH!!!!" Samara screamed, the pain like nothing Samara had ever felt before. While a lot of biotic powers had hit harder or done more damage, there was something about the feel of acid on flesh that was so searing and painful that all Samara could do was back away, her biotic powers dimming as she frantically wiped at her chest with both hands. "Get it off!"

And then, Morinth grabbed Samara's head in both hands, her eyes glowing. "Embrace eternity!" she howled triumphantly as she pushed forward with her own powers into Samara's mind.

As suddenly pain-filled as Samara's mind was, she had no defense. Nothing she did could stop Morinth from feeding on her essence.

As Morinth leaned forward to give her mother the true kiss of death, Samara had just a brief second to think of her other daughters. Both were Ardat-Yakashi. The pair were together at one of the sisterhood's convents and seemingly happy with the isolation that they were forced into, unlike their older sister when she was younger. Indeed, Samara had made a point of visiting them even while chasing Morinth, keeping the familial connection alive, applauding their art, their carvings and the various perfumes they had created.

And now, as her older daughter prepared to kill her in the most excruciating and humiliating manner possible, Samara only had one thought, made hazy by the pain of the acid. *I'm sorry I couldn't say goodbye.*

A green armored foot slammed into the side of Morinth's head before she could kiss Samara, sending her into the wall and then to the ground.

"You know, when I was told by Herb you heading out to this area, I kind of figured I'd only arrive to find that you had already defeated your quarry and would be taking her into

custody or standing over her body by the time I met up with ya. Lucky for you that I find math, money talks and what have you so boring, huh?" Ranma said mock-cheerfully.

"R, Ranma?" Samara stuttered, staring up at her savior from where she had fallen to her knees, her face a rictus of agony from the acid still burning into her body.

Ranma nodded, and seeing her wound, his hand instantly began to heat up to the point where it was nearly to the point he could have melted metal. With his heated hand, Ranma began to burn the acid, grateful that it was a type that could be burnt away like that, as he had no other way to clean it off. *Thank Amaterasu I remember Master Vulcan using acid occasionally to add etchings to things and how to handle it.* "Hold still, Samara. This is gonna hurt."

"It is already hurting; do what you must!" Samara growled, trying to think through the pain and the knowledge the acid was still eating through her body.

Nodding, Ranma turned his attention to the work at hand, keeping all the while one eye on the slumped, groaning form of Morinth. Cleaning the acid out of the wound took several seconds, as Samara clenched her teeth against the pain while Morinth tried to push yourself back to her feet, dazed and concussed by the strike, as well as still dealing with all of her other wounds. Samara's shock to her nervous system had faded, but it was still taking her reserves of energy a while to repair the damage she had taken. Once that was done, he began to funnel some of his ki into Samara, a trick he had only the most rudimentary knowledge of. There was a vast difference between even something complicated like his body armor and a living person's body, after all.

Thankfully, Samara could feel what he was doing and had a far better understanding of both healing herself and how to shift the energy around within her body. Soon, the last bits of acid were cleared away, and her injury began to heal itself. Finally, Samara smiled and pushed herself to her feet, wrapping Ranma in a quick and very out-of-character hug. "Thank you, Ranma, both for this and for your fortuitous intervention. If not for you, I would be very dead right now, and Morinth would be far and away the most powerful biotic in the galaxy. Never before has a Justicar been preyed upon by an Ardat-Yakashi. I can only imagine how powerful she would've become."

Ranma nodded with a faint blush on his face, trying not to look at the hole left in Samara's outfit by the acid. Now that the skin had healed, he could see more than a bit of dark blue nipple there on top of an inch of exceptionally interesting bouncy blue flesh.

Thankfully, Morinth grabbed his attention as she began to call up her biotic energy again. The blow to her head had addled her badly and when she spoke, it was in a near lisp. "No! I will not die! I will have more, more power, more eternity! You will not..."

That was as far as Morinth got before Samara flashed forwards, pushing herself forward with a biotic charge that made any that Ranma had seen the krogan do seem slow in

comparison. A knife hand jutted forward, her body reinforced by her biotic energy in a way that made her almost like a knight on a horse. She crossed the intervening distance in a millisecond, her knife hand slamming into and through Morinth's neck, practically decapitating her.

As she stared into her daughter's eyes, her blood pouring down from her throat, Samara ground out, "By your actions did I judge you, and by your oath did I act! Be abjured and tossed into the darkness beyond the goddess and the ancestor's lights for all eternity as the monster that your actions have made thee."

Morinth tried to open her mouth, tried to say something, but only blood seeped out, and slowly, her eyes rolled back in her head, and Morinth knew no more. Only when Morinth's body stopped twitching, and the blood stopped flowing did Samara pull her hand back out from the dead woman's neck, letting both more blood flow out and for her body to collapse to the deck. The corpse slumped there against the shattered, crater-marked wall of the hallway like a broken doll instead of a living creature.

Samara stood there for a few moments, staring down at her quarry of centuries, finally brought down at last, filled with too many emotions to consider to say anything at the moment.

Grim thankfulness that the job was done, elation that Morinth would hurt no one else, as well as her own survival, brought about by random chance and Ranma's, well... if she was honest, probably Ranma slight... interest... in her perhaps? Samara had seen the looks Ranma had given her occasionally during spars or directly after and wondered now if his interest in her as a woman had something to do with why he had sought her out just now.

But even that took second place to the fact that Morinth was dead, by Samara's hands and her oath. *I find it so strange that after all the evil she has done, the thousands of lives that she has ruined or taken over the last three centuries, I still feel some guilt, some regret in her passing. Still, better it be me than anyone else, better that I have some closure by my own hands rather than seeing it done by someone else. I can live with the faint guilt, knowing that she was going to kill me in turn, knowing the thousands of lives she has taken.*

Shaking her head, Samara turned away, nodding thanks as Ranma wordlessly handed her a cloth, with which she cleaned her hand. She then dropped the cloth on the body, shaking her head once before bringing her hands up in a traditional prayer position for her people. Her fingers tented together to create almost a square between them, as if encapsulation the light of the soul and then opening it, as if sending the soul on to Athame, or in this case, the darkness of the void. Samara said nothing, bowing her head as she repeated this gesture, remembering Morinth not as the monster she had become but as the little girl she had once been.

Then she wordlessly turned away, leaving the body of the monster behind her as she and Ranma made their way back deeper into the bowels of Omega.

OOOOOOO

Admiral Hackett stared at the screen, trying hard to fight down an urge to cackle like a madman. Fedorian was already doing his species equivalent of that on the other side of the office that they had put together to share joint command in this campaign against the batarians. "I'm sorry. You've done what!?"

OOOOOOO

Herb looked up as he saw Ranma and Samara enter the strip club, nodding wearily as Ranma looked at him, then gestured around with both hands, and made a choking motion with his hands. "Yes, the decor leaves much to be desired. Whatever happens hereafter, Afterlife will return to being simply a strip club of enormous size rather than the center of a criminal government. And I use that phrase with feeling."

"Good to know, I guess," Ranma answered, looking uncomfortable as he gazed around the area. A lot of the decor featured naked women and a few naked men here and there, mostly human, with one or two batarians. Even with none of the dancers dancing at the moment, there was very little that could be done to make this place look like anything but a strip club.

As she had already seen it, Samara seemed somewhat desensitized, nodding to the various asari there, several of whom, both locals and Ardat-Yakashi alike, had flinched when she entered. Those who knew her quickly calmed down, watching as Usagi hopped over towards her, throwing an arm around the older woman. "Hey. Did you do what you had to?"

"That is a very good way of putting it, and yes, I did. And now, I really want to move past it. I believe even the Code will allow me to have a few hours at least of relaxation," Samara answered with a wan smile.

"Oh, I know just the thing!" Usagi twisted around, dragging Samara towards the bar where she had made the line of mojitos earlier before hopping up and over again. "Unless you have a favorite drink you want me to make instead, I think there's a drink called a Root Beer Smasher. It's one of those drinks that came about only because someone experimented with various different liquors from various different races. It's supposed to be really tasty. Apparently, it tastes just like a human soda mixed with ice cream, but it also has a kick like a krogan."

"That sounds lovely," Samara answered, sitting down at the bar. Leaning against it, Samara placed her head in her hands for a moment, then shook herself. "I place the condition of my liver in your hands."

"Ooh, you might regret that," Usagi snickered, and Samara smiled, shaking her head. With acquaintances like Ranma and Usagi, remaining morose about finally executing Morinth was a simple impossibility.

Ranma watched Samara go, happy to see her smiling again. He had gotten her to smile a few times as they'd walked back to here, but it had been tough. It was very clear that despite being a complete monster, executing that asari had not been easy on Samara.

Ranma decided that he could leave cheering Samara up further in Usagi's very capable hands for a few moments, turning to address her and the man with the crewcut standing next to him. "You'd be John Shepard, right? Garrus told me about you, and about what you and your team are doing here. More power to you if you think you can make an actual government here, and I'll be more than happy to help hunt down any vorcha or criminal elements if you want me to. Just don't ask me to help ya come up with laws or anything."

"I might take you up on that, that is, if I can't convince you to come with us back to the Systems Alliance? Herb here already said no to that, but I figured I'd ask," John shrugged his shoulders as Ranma rapidly shook his head in the negative. "Well, anyway, we've already got a tentative agreement from Admiral Hackett. It will be his job to sell the higher-ups about the idea, and General Fedorian has already agreed on the Hierarchy's side of things."

That the military presence here would probably be a joint military base between the two races was, well, it was above John's pay grade, frankly. It had interesting...connotations, just as the entire war with the batarians did. The bad blood between the humans and turians from the First Contact War was slowly disappearing under the weight of shared danger and growing respect, and John knew a lot of people didn't know what to think about that. *I wonder what Hackett meant about perhaps putting some kind of research station out here, too?*

"Honestly, Ranma," Herb was saying as John thought of that and the long-term ramifications of it, "that might be the best way for you and me to make ourselves useful. I hope to be turning over the idea of creating an actual government here in Omega to the locals soon. In fact..."

Herb smiled, stood up and moved towards a new group of people that had just entered Afterlife. The place was in no way crowded, but several more asari had shown up one after another, off-duty dancers coming by to see what had happened, and after speaking to their fellows, none of them had made any trouble or tried to take over. Aria had not been the type to instill loyalty to her personally, but rather to her power and the fear of Aria's frequently unpredictable anger.

That wasn't even considering those asari or human women who really hadn't been given a choice to work with Aria. In many cases, it had simply been the best of a bad situation, but others had been given the 'opportunity' literally at gunpoint. Regardless, while all the dancers/commandos were a little worried about the future, something that they shared with their human counterparts irrespective of gender, they were staying docile for now. Usagi, O'taku and the others who had come with Ranma were watching them, but Herb didn't suspect that there would be much trouble from that score. The number of gangs and other groups that Aria had scared into obeying her were probably going to be more of an issue.

With a gesture, Herb asked Ranma to fall in beside him, and like a good retainer, a thought that caused Herb to smirk a little, Ranma did, with John following, gathering up his own team with a wave of his hand. This included one of his own men, Garrus, who had shown up about forty minutes before Ranma and Samara had arrived back, as well as one of the hackers, who was serving as liaison to the others as they continued their work diving into the Omega OS, and the Blue Suns and Eclipse's computers.

Herb knew this meant that the group that oversaw stealing all the funds and information from the mercenaries was still at it, as well as the group that had been charged with taking over Omega's power stations and air circulation center. However, that was fine by him. *That place will become a target for many of the smalltime gangs who might think they had a chance of trying to fill in the void Aria left. Very few of them will be stupid enough to try to act while Ranma and I are still in Omega. But eventually, it might become an issue. That is if the good folks here are not able to point us at them.*

"Gentle beings, my name is Herb, and I am one of the individuals who have removed Aria, the Blood Pack and the other mercenary units aboard the station. Undoubtedly, you will all be intelligent enough to realize this leaves a power vacuum," Herb began without preamble, gesturing the elcor, volus and salarians, three of them to one elcor and two volus, to one of the booths nearest the entrance they had entered by. "You all are locals, and your names came up when I was going through Aria's system as people of some import on Omega. Others will be joining us, but it will be you and they who, with my help, if you wish it, decide what nature of governmental body is to take the place of the criminal organization that aped one before this."

"A quick question, *PHSSS* Herb of the human clan. *PHSSS* Or rather, two. One, is your *PHSSS* companion the green armored juggernaut that *PHSSS* wrecked the Blood Pack and much of habitat *PHSSS* Kenzo? And do the two *PHSSS* of you speak for the human clan called *PHSSS* the System Alliance?" one of the Volus asked.

"I do not, and he is," Herb answered crisply.

"I wanted to see how strong the krogan were, and frankly, I wasn't all that impressed. They've got a decent base to build on," Ranma said bluntly, shrugging his shoulders as he sat on a nearby table, distancing himself from the conversation so that he could leave when it got too political. "As for the habitat in general, that was mostly because the krogan started to use guns about halfway through the fight, and the Blue Suns mercenaries and Aria's thugs showed up in waves and used guns even more than the krogan. Blame them, not me. I even got them some money, thanks to Garrus over there."

Garrus grinned from where he was standing behind John, giving the locals a nod of his head. "Best day's work I've done yet." *I've also got a lot of information I might be able to use when I'm part of Citadel Security after my mandatory enlistment period is up. Eclipse had quite a few connections on the Citadel, and who knew that the Blood Pack even had a recruitment office there?*

“And you will continue to help, aid, work alongside us?” one of the Salarians asked, showing some of the frenetic energy that his people were known for as he stared at the two humans with interest, his long fingers tapping a staccato rhythm on the table.

“For now. We will probably stay here a few days, but then Ranma and I will undoubtedly be leaving. We have no wish to make Omega our permanent home and have certain obligations elsewhere.” Herb wasn’t about to tell this lot that they wanted to be back on Mostromos to pick up a ship of their own, that was for certain. Better to be vague about such things.

Thankfully, Ranma seemed to pick up on that and nodded firmly. “That’s right. Both Herb and I don’t want to be tied down to any one place or even a government. We’ll be independent citizens of the cosmos, going where we want to go.”

The sole Asari among the locals was an ancient Matriarch, who wore a white outfit marked with a red cross, an affectation many healers had taken up after meeting their human peers. She had apparently been on the station for far longer than anyone else could remember and led what was known as the Omega Doctors Guild, a powerful group that saw to the health and various medical needs of around seventy percent of Omega’s habitats. Only the most dangerous or habitats that could supply their own medical needs were not overseen by the ODG. “And what of the Justicar that you arrived with? I take it she found her quarry. Will she be leaving as well?”

“Whether or not she’ll be leaving is up to Samara, but she did find her quarry,” Ranma said.

He was unsurprised that the Asari had asked or that she then moved the subject along quickly, asking instead if the station itself or the new governing body coming in would be given some of the funds that the hierarchy alliance company had effectively stolen from the mercenary groups. “Along with the funds that we can no doubt try to access through Aria’s Systems that would give us a large starting budget.”

John answered instantly, saying that they would be handing over at least sixty percent of what they had taken from the mercenary groups. Herb stated simply that they could use all of Aria’s so long as they kept on paying her agents elsewhere within the Terminus Systems and agreed to let him be part of that information network.

At that point, Ranma decided to leave the conversation, saying over his shoulder, “Call me back in when you’re talking about what to do about the vorcha or varren elsewhere on the station. Or if there are any small-time thugs and whatever that you need taken out to help keep order.”

The last thing he heard as he moved away from them and towards the group of dancers and locals who had slowly begun to reenter the strip club at another bar was one of the volus stating, “*PHSSS* Order can mean many things, depending on clan, *PHSSS* temperament and

desires. *PHSSS* Our desires for order here will not coincide with what the Alliance clan or *PHSSS* Hierarchy clan might approve of. *PHSSS* For one thing, the criminal enterprise is part and *PHSSS* parcel of..."

At that point, Ranma was far enough away to not make out much of the conversation, and he was thankful for it. Doubly so when he saw several asari maidens laughing and giggling at something Usagi had said while Samara was simply shaking her head, a smile of amusement on her face. Right now, all of that seemed far more interesting to Ranma than politics and philosophical debates about what freedom and order or whatever meant.

OOOOOOO

Benezia sighed, staring at the two admirals of the Quarian Admiralty across from her. "You realize that you are consigning your race to slow genocide? I have seen your ships. I have seen all of the information our scanners have been able to glean about the state of your ships, large and small. You have done wonders to keep those ships running for so long, but as humans say, the devil's due is coming up. How many thousands of your people will you consign to death for a dream? For a dream of a homeworld that none of you can even remember firsthand?"

"The Admiralty Board is firm on this matter. We will not join any of the asari republics unless we are given a guarantee that in so doing, we will have your backing eventually to return to our home world," one of them, the male Han'Gerrel vas Neema, stated firmly. "That might seem immaterial to you, but that dream, the dream of returning to Rannoch, is at the center of our entire society. We cannot give it up and retain what we are."

"And how many quarians have died just in this past year because you did not have enough space, food, or air for them on your ships?" Benezia asked harshly, slapping her hand down on the table in front of them. Weeks, weeks of discussion, conferences, debates, agreements made, overtures and promises. All so that she could offer this agreement to the quarians. And now they were turning it down in hopes of a better one that would give them military assistance against the geth in the future? *Insanity.*

Both admirals across from her flinched at her tone and the noise of her slap, but Han'Gerrel growled back angrily, "And how much of that is caused by the Citadel Council's continued refusal to help us?! We broke one law and have been vilified and crucified in the court of public opinion and at the highest level of power because of it. How is that fair? How is that just?"

"It is not. But I was but a matron when that decision was reached. Do not blame me personally for it. And you know by now that the Asari Republics do not walk in lockstep. This is why I was able to offer this agreement to you in the first place. And instead of having problems with the deal offered, you demand more."

Benezia shook her head firmly. “More that I **cannot** offer. The Asari Republics will not be dragged into a war against the geth. If perhaps they had taken aggressive action against us, against the Council as a whole, there might be room for something along those lines. But they have not. Instead, the geth seem completely willing to leave us alone so long as we do not enter their space.”

She held up a hand when both admirals made to speak, and such was her regal, almost commanding air that they fell silent instantly. “I am one of the Thirty-Two, and I say this as a leader of my people. While we Asari have a strong martial tradition, we are not quick to war, and we will **not** be pressured into one. That is partly why the agreement offers you limited autonomy among the republics instead of equal status to one. The offer I have placed on the table does have some room for negotiation about prices, details on various mining rights, and trade. But on this point, there is none. If the quarians want access to a planet, access to a world that they can start to colonize, then they will do so under the auspices of one of the republics. And as such, there will be no further talk of war against the geth.”

Benezia leaned forward, placing her hands on the table, willing her listeners to see reason. “Think of what could be gained. Asari construction, asari science, our economy linked with your minds and your ability to adapt. Your people are natural engineers programmers. Mine are natural planners and have an abundance of resources. What could we build, what heights could we reach if we work together?”

“But you will not allow us to even continue our probing the Perseus Veil, let alone offer military aid to reclaim Rannoch. If there is no talk on that score, I do not see the Admiralty Board being willing to subsume ourselves into one of the Asari Republics. Not even if we are able to be placed into leadership roles within it, not when such a limitation is put on our actions,” Admiral Liana’dar vas Narvasa answered grimly.

Benezia noted that neither of her opposites had mentioned anything about their fleet’s survivability, nor had they answered her question about how many quarians had lost their lives in the past year due to reasons that could have been easily seen if the Migrant Fleet but had the resources. She acknowledged that the Citadel Council was mainly at fault for not allowing the Migrant Fleet to gather such resources in Council-controlled space, a mandate that many of the Asari Republics were more than willing to uphold.

The edict that the quarians had broken, the creation of synthetic life, was one of the bedrocks of the Council and an issue that the Asari Republics had run into early on in their migration into space. Such scars ran deep, and the asari were not alone in having faced the horrors of artificial intelligence revolts. Indeed, the salarians, krogan, drell, volus and elcor faced similar events. To the best of her knowledge, the turians and humans had not. However, in the human’s case, she knew that was because they’d had a far, far more robust science fiction and fantasy genre to steer them away from making the mistakes that other races did. *Whereas the turians, like the krogan, really didn’t need artificial intelligence to come to the brink of extinction several times.*

Thus, the fear of artificial intelligence was very, very real, and it was one that the quarians had released into the galaxy. Punishing them for it seemed only simple common sense to far too many sentients. But Benezia knew that could be offset.

If the quarians joined one of the republics, then the Asari Republics would be able to try to mitigate the social stigma against them. The republic in question would become a shield on the social and political levels. Although it would take a few decades to change the opinions of the general public to the point it impacted the individual quarian and their interactions with other races, it would help the Migrant Fleet rebuild or repair their fleet. It would even, as the deal she had brought indicated, allow the quarians to settle a new planet in a few months, with a definite, outlined timeframe for that and for their eventual colonization.

There were several planets within the Asari Republics that they had yet to colonize, and a few even had decent resources. Her people just did not spread as quickly as the humans or turians. Let alone the salarians or the krogan prior to the genophage. The only thing the asari really had going for them that let them spread as far as they had before meeting any of the other races was the fact the asari did not truly believe in large-scale wars and thus, did not have to deal with the various issues of losing massive portions of their populations as the other races had.

“If you are unwilling to go along with that stipulation, there is only so much help that my people will be able to give you and yours. Food, air, raw materials, nothing prepared or manufactured. There can be nothing on your ships that can be used to point the geth in our direction. And even then, the price we will demand in terms of work and effort on your part for those will be steep,” Benezia warned. “If you’re not going to become part of one of the Republics, then the normal tariffs and dues will need to apply. Yet are you so certain that your people would not agree with our proposal? It seems to me, judging by the lack of communication between the various ships on this score, that you haven’t even shared it with your general populace yet.”

Both admirals stiffened, and Benezia shook her head dryly. “Gentle beings, your fleet is currently encircled around one of our planets and is being scanned from every angle by an Asari System Defense Fleet. Your communication network was broken within a few hours of your arrival at the meeting point. Now I say again, are you so certain that your people will not agree to our proposal? Because if so, perhaps it is time to see if the court of public opinion agrees with you.”

“Our people will never turn away from the dream of returning to Rannoch! And we will have no more of this, this heavy-handedness!” Han'Gerrel growled, standing up and glaring down at the far, far older asari. “Any attempt to try to invade our communication network or spread false information will be met with, with all due dispatch.”

Benezia was somewhat amused by the way the woman had changed what she was going to say. After all, with four dreadnoughts within the fleet of asari ships nearby, as well as the

normal asari combat frigates, force alone would not avail the quarians much. While the Migrant Fleet was far heavier on a ship-to-ship basis than the asari fleet and had its own defense fleet, if it came to a fight, the asari fleet in-system could easily call for help and simply overwhelm the Migrant Fleet.

“Then I suggest that as the Admiralty Board is supposed to speak for the quarian people, that you actually communicate with those people to see if your point of view is shared with them,” Benezia drawled. “Please, I will be very interested to see if that is indeed the case.”

What followed from that point on was a lot of shouting, to put it bluntly. But she had gotten her point across. There was still room to wiggle, but if the Admiralty Board continued to try to enforce its own opinions on its people, then Benezia was more than willing to simply sidestep the issue entirely. The quarians were a resource that she wanted desperately to bring into the asari sphere of influence. And frankly, as a species, they deserved a chance to live.

With her ultimatum laid down, Benezia decided that she had used the hammer often enough. It was time to bring back the fruit stick into play. “That being said, there are several measures of this umbrella agreement that we could look at as solitary items.”

“...” The two admirals stared at one another in silence for a few moments, then turned back to Benezia. “Which portions are available for negotiation?” Lian’dar asked cautiously.

Several hours later, after those two admirals had been replaced by several others, and ‘someone’ had leaked details of the full agreement to the Migrant Fleet, a few contracts were finally in place with the Migrant Fleet as a whole. There was also a good deal of upheaval on the various ships, something Benezia was pleased to see and which she had been very careful to make certain could not be traced back to any asari ship. The Admiralty Board would no doubt investigate, but they would discover that it was one of their own defense ships that had been listening in on the initial back and forth between Benezia and the Admiralty Board before they met in person, which was responsible for leaking the ‘rumors’ of the agreement that she had come to offer the Migrant Fleet out.

Perhaps nothing would come of it. Perhaps something would. Benezia wasn’t walking away with everything she had wanted, but at the very least, the Migrant Fleet would have access to several asteroids worth of precious metals to help repair their ships. And even now, several dozen highly skilled engineers and computer technicians were being gathered together. They would be spread out over the nearest planets, which specialized in shipbuilding, learning and teaching.

“Yet it could have been so much more,” Benezia sighed, leaning back in her chair and her personal yacht, Shiala standing attentively nearby. “A part of me admires the quarian’s dream and understands why it has such power among the strange society they have created over the centuries. But I also detest it. If the quarian leadership is unable to change, it will truly doom

their people to slow extinction even with our help. We still can't sell them actual ships after all, or even shipbuilding space in our dockyards thanks to council law."

Hopefully, this will have forced a change on the Admiralty Board. I hope that some turnover there will eventually allow them to make more deals and more agreements with the Asari Republics that will ultimately save them and enrich us.

"You tried your best, mistress. You cannot make up for the stubbornness of others. I think the humans even have a saying about that, leading some kind of animal to water but not being able to force them to drink?" Benezia chuckled at that, and Shiala smiled before asking formally, "Might I ask where we are going now?"

"Home for the moment. We have been long away, and we are close by now. I will need to take some time to go over my actual holdings rather than running around as I have been," Benezia said dryly. "Meanwhile, you can take some time to add a further five commandos to our core. And then, see if there's any information on the Intranet about Saren, but I am not going to rush forward to restart that search. Not unless there is something that demands our attention."

Shiala nodded. "And then, mistress?"

"Then to Thessia. There are several things I want to investigate there, a few old mysteries, and suitable other bits of information I would like to follow up on," Benezia said, remembering why she had been en route to Thessia before the news of the Migrant Fleet had reached her. *More information on Bera'van'Tuwan and more information about the ancient past of our people, before the goddess. Before we began to resemble those who came before so closely...*

OOOOOOO

Ranma spent most of the next few days along with Herb basically stomping on any group of vorchas or wiping out as many varren across the whole of Omega as they could. Meanwhile, the survivors of the Blood Pack had left the station, having made an agreement with the locals to keep their former headquarters in one piece for now, while the survivors met up with their fellows elsewhere in the Terminus Systems to decide where the group would go from here.

That such a plan would entail coming after Ranma sooner rather than later was something they were very blunt about. Whether or not that would be singly or in large groups was up in the air, but from the impression he got, Ranma felt it would probably be single members of the Blood Pack: battlemasters or young idiots trying to make names for themselves. Whatever the case, they were gone, and the locals were happy to be rid of them for now, along with most of the dead gangsters.

Meanwhile, Herb occasionally worked with the locals, John Shepard, and through him, Admiral Hackett and his Hierarchy counterpart to put together what was, in the prince's words,

“The most unholy lash-up of a declaration of government that has never been seen before.” He tossed out a lot of words that Ranma had never come across before, such as guild-based economies, libertarianism and other things of that nature, but Ranma was more than happy to leave Herb to it.

Usagi and the others, meanwhile, were making themselves busy, making deals with the locals, purchasing stuff for Ranma and Herb, helping here and there, or, in Usagi’s case, teaching the former stripper/commandos of Aria that taking their clothes off didn’t have to happen at the beginning of the dance, it could, in fact, wait until after you left the dance floor for greater effect.

“Lingerie isn’t just for show in the bedroom!” Usagi had shouted more than once in Ranma’s hearing. “And showing off your body right from the start cheapens it! If you want to, sure, but come on! Aria really had bad taste. I knew that from when I worked here. You really need to expand your repertoire, girls.”

Three days after Aria had died, Samara decided it was time for her to leave. She booked passage on a ship leaving Omega that day without telling anyone and then said goodbye to Usagi, Ranma, Herb and the Ardat-Yakashi without any buildup. O’taku and the others were thankful that they weren’t traveling with the Justicars anymore, her farewell to them being slightly more chilling, a warning to never stray from the path. Similarly, her farewell with Herb was a simple handshake, while Usagi gave her a farewell hug to Samara’s hidden pleasure and feigned annoyance.

When Samara said goodbye to Ranma, she asked him to walk with her to the hanger bay. She made certain that the two of them were alone for the moment, walking along one of the hallways, which would eventually lead her to the docking areas and the ship she was booked on to leave. While there were many people around them, none knew who they were, which was a kind of anonymity, Samara supposed. “They agreed to take me on for the trip as a police officer keeping peace with the other passengers, a task I am well suited for, I think. Once I get into Council Space, I will have an easier heading back to the Asari Republics. There, I think that I will take some time off before asking for my next assignment from the Justicar Order.”

“Makes sense. You’ve been after Morinth for several hundred years, right? You are due for a bit of a sabbatical. Take in the sights, maybe draw or something?”

Samara smiled at that, having mentioned painting and knowing several painters before Ranma. It had been her way of bringing her daughters into the conversation without actually hinting at the relationship. Ranma had seemed happy to hear about the two but had evinced no real interest in painting himself. “I suck it painting and handwriting,” he had said. “Outside of the Art, frankly, I haven’t got a single artist bone in my body.”

By this point, Ranma had told her about several of the martial arts challenges that dealt with art he had been forced to endure back in his old world. Many of which had Samara giggling and laughing aloud for the first time in years.

“Perhaps if you are near Lesuss you can stop by. I think Rila and Falere would like to get to know a free spirit such as yourself. And despite the fact that you say you have no artistic bone in your body, you are quite good at describing scenes and people. Such could be used to enhance their painting,” Samara said with a smile.

She turned to Ranma as she saw the hatch to a hangar bay coming up in the distance and people gathered there. Looking around, Samara gently pushed Ranma into a small, darkened alcove that must’ve been a maintenance closet in the distant past. While no one had done proper maintenance on most of Omega for a long while, the shape of the closet was still there.

“I wanted to thank you again for your help. Not just in helping me to reach Omega as I did but also in rescuing me when Morinth had the upper hand on me. Without you, that acid trick she pulled on me would’ve been enough to allow her the victory. I would’ve died in a most painful and horrible manner if not for you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just happy I could help you,” Ranma said awkwardly, shrugging his shoulders. “Sometimes, following your curiosity is a good thing, you know?”

“Yes, your curiosity. Your curiosity in me,” Samara said, smiling gently, both her words and smile causing Ranma to blush a bit and look away.

“Er, was I that obvious?” he muttered, shaking his head.

“Somewhat. But while such an interest will not ever be followed up on in my case, Ranma, I did want to truly thank you at least for your help. “With that, she leaned in, kissing Ranma before Ranma could have a chance to react. His eyes widened, and for a second, Samara felt him almost flinch away, but then, he leaned in, kissing her back.

She did not allow the kiss to deepen or linger. That would’ve sent an altogether different message. Instead, after a few seconds, Samara gently placed a hand on Ranma’s chest and pushed him back. Ranma could have resisted, she knew, but he allowed her to do so, and Samara smiled faintly at him. “Thank you again, Ranma. And I hope you do find someone who will share your interest. One who is not constrained by oath, personality or age as I am.”

Mind you, if none of those things were true, I might have thought of pursuing you myself, Samara thought ruefully, trying to not let her body’s response to the first kiss she’d had in a few decades show.

“I’d like to say age is nothing but a number, especially considering how long your race lives and how long I might live things to ki, but I can’t exactly argue with your other two points,” Ranma answered ruefully.

Samara laughed at that, having heard from Ranma before this that he and Herb might be able to live as long as an Asari thanks to how early they had learned to manipulate their own life energy and how much of it they had. “That shows some maturity. But never fear. You will find someone out there who will not only garner your interest but will return it. It is a big, wide galaxy, after all.”

And that won’t be you, old woman, Samara reminded herself once more, although her traitorous mind could not quite move past why she had to force herself to think that. There is something magnetic about Ranma, his zest for life, his energy and good humor that is immensely attractive. But he is far too young for me, and I do have my Oath. I also don’t know if the two of us could become something permanent or if our different personalities would drive us apart, even without my Oath to the order getting in the way.

Thinking that was enough for Samara to shove her budding interest in Ranma aside as she shook her head. “Beyond that, I hope our paths cross again, Ranma. It has been a fascinating time. Until then, may the goddess go with you.”

After another kiss on the cheek this time, Samara left Ranma there. Alone, she headed back out into the hall, joining the crowd of passengers heading into the hangar bay without looking back.

Ranma stared after her for a time, his eyes on her hips, then shook his head, and, fighting the current of the locals for a bit, headed deeper into Omega. Only to be splashed moments later by someone getting rid of sewage refuse. “FUCKING really!?”

Two days later, it became time for Ranma, Herb and their acquaintances to also leave. Despite John’s request that they stay until some reinforcements could arrive, Ranma and Herb had no desire to remain any longer on Omega. Herb had helped the locals enough with creating the local government such as it was, John and his team would be staying there for a while, and the Elcor had called home, contract with several professional security companies there. While the elcor’s battle platforms were not perfect to say, hunt through several of the varren, the poorest and least controlled habitats, where they were literal mazes, they would provide a nice bump in security elsewhere across Omega along with the alliance/hierarchy reinforcements.

Moreover, Ranma and Herb had done such a good job at slaughtering the local varren and vorcha populations. All that remained to trouble the locals were a few gangs that didn’t want to pay the remarkably small tax that the local government had decided to instigate across the board. Most of the drugs, weapons manufacture or selling and so forth were still going on, although slavery was no longer being allowed.

Although Herb knew indentured servitude would probably replace it. Nevertheless, he honestly didn't care enough to try to convince the locals to stay away from the concept of using service to pay off debt.

Ranma and Herb were the last to head back to the ship, having been ambushed by a salarian doctor named Mordin Solus. It took them nearly thirty minutes local time to disentangle themselves from him and several refusals to give blood samples or tissue samples, all the while each time increasing their threats to his body if he kept on persisting before they were able to get free.

"Honestly! He even asked for a semen sample. What the freaking hell?" Ranma grumbled.

"Yes, if he had persisted beyond that point after you threatened to snap the salarian's head like a dry twig, I think I would've gone through with the threat despite how well-respected he is among the local populace," Herb said dryly. "I am still uncertain what exactly he thought he was going to find. His contention that we could not actually be human and had to be some kind of new mutated branch of humanity was most upsetting."

"True that. The idea that our skills and abilities come from genes or whatever annoys me." Herb snorted at Ranma's comment, but said nothing, agreeing even if he did think his own breeding did have something to do with his inherent skills. But those skills had been honed by training, so it was equivalent. "The local humans could be as good as us if they were willing to start as early as we did and knew how high they could go."

"And did not have the same fascination with mass effect and that eezo substance that everyone else in this dimension seems to have. You realize we are going to need to do some experiments with that stuff eventually," Herb said, changing the subject.

"Yeah, I figured that out after my fight with the Blood Pack. Something is weird there, and I don't know what it is," Ranma answered, a faint scowl on his face. Herb nodded again, and the conversation on that point continued, the two of them exchanging theories on why eezo had affected them so much and what it could mean going forward.

Neither martial artist realized that they were being watched and were walking into a trap.

OOOOOO

Spectre Tela Vasir grinned, watching eagerly the feed on her omni-tool, as the two humans that were her quarry continued walking towards the hangar bay where their ship docked and where she was currently hiding. A hangar bay that was already empty of workers and in which only the tramp freighter the pair of odd humans owned resided in now. A ship whose inhabitants were already unconscious thanks to a few specialized gases released into the

ship's atmosphere. Only one of them, the Asari Commando named Usagi, had even noticed anything before she had fallen unconscious.

Avek'nolda was a chemical that knocked out asari quickly. It was used mostly in hospitals to knock out patients during operations or dental work. In the confined space of a ship, it worked to knock out the entire crew from one end to another within minutes, far too fast for them to get any warning out, despite Usagi figuring out what was wrong.

There I had some luck on my side, which I have to say is about fucking time. If Usagi hadn't been in her quarters but rather on the bridge or somewhere where her omni-tool could reach Omega's system rather than the computer system of the ship, she could have given the game away!

That had been good, but now? Now, finally, after several days of waiting, Tela was seeing her final targets moving into the hangar bay. Quickly, as the hatch closed behind them, she hit a few buttons on her omni-tool, then turned it off entirely, making certain no movement, noise, or light could give her position away. A few seconds later, the air within the hangar bay began to change. Oxygen was slowly pulled out, leaving only hydrogen behind, and then, several numbing agents and other things were added into the mix.

A lot of them. Enough neurotoxins and numbing agents to knock out several herds of Earth-style elephants. Tela was taking no chances. *If both of them wind up dead because I overdid it, that is more than fine by me.*

OOOOOOO

Corporal Ashter looked up in puzzlement as a warning went off on his computer screen. He had just been talking with a few of the locals about replacing some of the computer modules that ran Omega behind the scenes, but this didn't have anything to do with the conversation. Instead, something was going off in one of the hangar bays that he had set a bot to watch for trouble. As he saw which hangar bay it was and the specific notification from his bot, Ashter's eyes widened in shock, and he quickly pulled up his communicator. "Sir, we've got trouble! Something is going on at Ranma and Herb's dock."

OOOOOOO

"Ooh, eww! What is that smell!" Ranma growled, looking around them as they entered the hangar bay. "It smells like one of Akane's cooking experiments."

"I would assume that there is some trouble with the air circulation system," Herb said, also gagging a little at the stench. "Let us get aboard the ship quickly. At least on board the ship, we won't have to deal with that kind of issue."

Ranma nodded, and the pair hurried forward, not quite running, but no longer just lazily walking either. But they weren't even halfway to the ship, a mere forty yards, before Herb stumbled, feeling as if a numbness was coming over his body. "What the, what is... Ranma!" Having been a prince and coming close to being poisoned by rivals for his father's attention several times, Herb realized what was going on the moment he felt his body was no longer responding as it should. "There's something in the air!"

With that, he clamped one hand over his mouth and nose, trying not to breathe in more of whatever it was. However, the damage had been done. Herb had already breathed in enough of the toxins, and his body, completely unused to a threat from coming from its own lungs like this, had never dealt with anything similar. His ki healing could not recognize what was going on as a threat, and he was soon overcome.

Ranma was slightly better off. His ki healing had dealt with Kodachi's various gases and touch-based poisons before. Grabbing Herb and tossing the other man over his shoulder, Ranma raced towards the ship before the numbness began to hit him in turn.

Never before had Ranma had to deal with so many different types of toxins at once. Between one step and the next, his body began to fail him even as he slammed a hand down on the entryway into the ship. Nevertheless, the hatch didn't open. Tela had taken over the ship electronically to seal in the rest of the crew, and her order had turned off the exterior gangway controls.

Ranma turned, still carrying Herb over a shoulder as he headed back to the hatch, intent on ripping it open if he had to.

He never made it.

Ranma's feet became numb and between one step and the next, his legs tangled up, and Ranma slammed to the deck, tossing Herb forward. Ranma, on his knees began to reach into his ki space, cursing himself for a fool for forgetting the fact that his suit had a small inbuilt air system. But he couldn't grab the helmet. His fingers refused to work. They couldn't clench over the helmet's lip to pull it out of his ki space.

Desperately, Ranma pulled his hand back out of his ki space and began to power up a ki attack, thrusting his hands out towards the hatch. The attack flared out, slamming into the hatch and beginning to burn its way through, making Ranma more thankful that Master Vulcan had taught him how to add heat to his ki attacks than he had ever been before. However, not fast enough. Ranma felt his mind beginning to shut down and gritted his teeth, trying to power through it, but ultimately, he too fell unconscious.

OOOOOO

Tela breathed in a sigh of relief, wiping at her crests as she slowly pushed her way out of her hiding place in a crate set to one side of the hangar. *Damn, but I am thankful most of those gases are inert gases and not flammable ones. With the amount of hydrogen I added earlier into the air, if they weren't, I would've been at Ground Zero at one hell of an explosion.*

She hastily moved forward, quickly placing cuffs on both humans, cuffs that were rated for krogan, placing them both on their ankles and forearms, wrists, and then another one, rated for emergency medical transport, around their upper arms so that neither human would have no leverage whatsoever to be able to break them. This took her about ten minutes, by which point some of her attack drones were reporting that the human Shepard and several of his men were rushing towards the hangar bay. *No time to get back to my ship. I'll just have to take theirs.*

Dragging the two unconscious martial artists onto the ship took some time, by which point the humans and turians were at the other side of the hatch, and one of his hackers was trying to override her controls to open it. "Now I know I could just order them to leave me be, that I'm on a job for the Council. But best not to test whether or not they will go along with that kind of thing for now."

That this would also lock Tela into giving both her targets over to the Council rather than one to the Council and one to the Shadow Broker was also a consideration.

With that in mind, Tela raced onto the ship, her omni-tool able to open the gangway that had so stymied Ranma a moment ago. A few moments were all it took to power the ship up, and to force the outer hangar doors to open at her command, thanks once more to the days she had spent preparing for this.

Moments later, the Spectre was on her way, her two targets in tow.

Once in space, with the ship on autopilot, heading towards the nearest mass effect relay, Tela left the bridge. Gathering up the asari ship's crew, she dumped them all into the engine room, making certain all of them were tied up in turn, although she didn't have enough handcuffs to go along around, unfortunately. While a part of her told her to just space them, Tela wasn't that cold-blooded to her fellow asari. *If they were human or anything else, I would already have spaced them.*

Regardless, Tela did have enough knockout gas, and she left the canister there, gently seeping out into the air of the engine room before hurrying to her two primary prisoners. The two of them were quickly fitted with gas masks, each attached to other canisters of various human equivalent gas, the same normally well beyond lethal mix she had used earlier. Then, she headed back to the bridge and made plans.

Soon, the Shadow Broker knew what Tela had and had already given her coordinates for a drop-off point. It was deep in the Terminus Systems, within the Hourglass Nebula, but that was fine. All the credits flowing into her personal accounts made it more than fine indeed. The

Shadow Broker would have his prize, and after that, so with the Council, and any stain on Tela's status as a Spectre would be removed. Sitting on the bridge, Tela Vasir grinned, putting her feet up on the console in front of her. "Ah, a good day."

End chapter

This is proof positive that the carry-over effect works in terms of my Ranma poll. I am honestly quite happy with that because I enjoy seeing how a Ranma-type character (**Chaotic** Good, highly adaptable but prefers to punch his problems) does in a sci-fi setting. Eventually, I might come up with a Space Battleship Yamato crossover with him. I just think that would be fun. But we will see. Hope you all enjoyed this!