

Thank you to all the people who pointed out how many mistakes I had made in the first version of this chapter. This is a revised version, although I still don't own either Ranma or Mass Effect.

Prologue: A Not so Simple Change of Direction

Ranma scowled angrily to herself, muttering curses again and again at her idiot father. "Of course you don't know what the pamphlet said, you never bothered to learn the language you dumbass! God why'd I stay with your fat lazy self for so long? Of course," she smirked, "I'm not with you **now** am I?" She grinned evilly as she prepared a rabbit she had caught with her bare hands (a great speed/coordination exercise) over the fire after having skinned it with a small knife.

Ranma and her/his father Genma were martial artists, and Ranma had spent his entire life on the road with his old man learning martial arts from him and from various masters whose schools they stopped at. At around 12 or 13 however Ranma had begun to look at his father differently. He had come to realize through his interactions with other martial arts masters that Genma wasn't really a good man at all or even that good a teacher. His father tended to pound the information into his brain rather than try to explain it, and never believed in taking it easy on his son, simply coming at him harder and harder as the years went by. At that point Ranma was stronger and tougher than any 12-year-old could be, heck he was stronger and tougher than most adults, but that was because he had to be to stop his father from breaking his bones every time they sparred. Ranma couldn't remember the amount of times his father called him a weakling or a girl for having to stop sparring because of a broken leg or arm. Of course that didn't stop him practicing, Genma would simply force him to do other exercises, but it'd gotten old really quickly.

So as the years went on Ranma began to distance himself from his father more and more. He still listened to him about martial arts, but he tossed out everything his father said about honor or anything like that that he didn't practice. This was a very short list indeed, and Ranma had come to the conclusion that his father as a role model was just above your average slug.

So he began to search for other role models, a search that had infuriated his father. He was there to learn, not there to cozy up to the other martial arts masters. Of course Genma approved when that cozying allowed Ranma to learn their school's techniques. It was just the ethics lessons, the history lessons and the language lessons that took away from time spent on The Art that he objected to.

Still Ranma had gone along with his father trying to mitigate the old man's indiscretions. He returned things he had stolen (though he didn't care if the old man stole food. He had been starving too much as a young child to really care about the ownership of anything that was

edible), working off any debts he accrued, and generally trying to keep his own honor as separate from Genma's as he could.

This latest fiasco however had been the log that broke the camel's back. Ranma had argued for weeks against going to Jusenkyou, a training ground whose booklet his father had found somewhere, possibly in a brothel, a bar, or an all-you-can-eat restaurant, those were the kinds of places Genma most frequented. Ranma hadn't seen the point, simply because a training ground was legendary didn't really mean it was worth the trip. And they couldn't get any details about the place from the booklet since it was in Chinese, and his father couldn't read Chinese. Nor had he bothered in the three years they had spent in China to even learn how to speak the language.

Ranma could speak decent enough Putonghua (the main Chinese language), though his accent was horrible. He was better at English, which he spoke pretty well even if it was with a Californian accent. He'd learned it from some marines he and his father had met out on maneuvers in Japan. Some of them had some really effective knife techniques, and they had liked Ranma's gung-ho attitude. But Ranma couldn't read Chinese, and his arguments hadn't been able to convince his old man not to go to the training ground.

Once there Genma had proven again how stupid he was by ignoring the guide and when Ranma insisted they listen to them he tossed Ranma out toward the pools. It was only luck that he had been able to grab one of the bamboo shoots and swung himself up onto the top of it. After that the match begun, and had gone much the way it did in every universe where a Ranma went to Jusenkyou.

The fat middle-aged man attacked, the younger man responded and eventually punted him into one of the pools. A panda suddenly emerged, shocking the younger man, and letting the panda get a drop on him. In this universe that second aspect took a bit longer, but despite everything he could do to get his old man's attention the panda kept on attacking and Ranma was eventually knocked into a spring. It was in a very odd way however, as the bamboo shoot he had just jumped onto seemingly broke underneath him for no reason at all. It wasn't like the thing had been rotten or anything, it was the same one he had started on after knocking his father into a spring, a strong and new bamboo pole. There was something about that which bothered the hell out of Ranma, but that was neither here nor there.

After that, where before a young decent looking black haired young man had sunk a short and extremely buxom redhead emerged. The chase started, but here was where the difference of this universe and most others began. After chasing his father off the redhead had returned to the guide, and asked him to explain what the hell had happened. Once everything had been explained Ranma had very pointedly asked some questions about whether or not there was a spring of drowned man he could dunk himself in to offset the curse, and had been told unequivocally that doing so would not cure the curse but rather make your new body a mix of the two. To Ranma's mind this was beyond what he was willing to do.

It was one thing to turn into a girl; Ranma actually had some respect for girls now after having interacted with some of the martial arts master's families and having been taught Chinese from several girls he had met along the way. Though it did sometimes bother him that whenever he brought up the idea of paying they always giggled a little, and promised that he would pay at the end of the lessons. Ranma had no idea what they meant by that and had never actually had to pay because his old man would always drag him off again before the lessons got very far.

But being a girl with a boy part down there would make him even more of a freak.

At this point his father had not yet returned, and Ranma suddenly decided to get the hell out of dodge before Genma could double back. He exited the guide's hut, transforming into female form as a storm had rolled in while they talked, picked a direction randomly away from where his father had disappeared and ran. The rain continued for the rest of the day, washing out any sign of his passage thankfully, and Ranma had taken to the trees as often as he could to further elude any attempt to track him.

The direction Ranma had decided to go had taken him further up the mountains, and soon enough the forest gave way to rocky hills and cliff edges, but he kept on going, skirting around the edge of ravines jumping over crevices and scaling rock walls, moving further and further into the mountain range.

He had been moving along for two days now, and had decided that he was far enough away to risk a little fire and some warm food for change. He stopped in a small clearing in an only slightly larger valley between a sheer cliff face on one side and the gently sloping mountain that he had just come down on the other. A tiny stream wound its way through the tiny valley and it was a very pleasant spot.

Ranma took out several cooking utensils from his pack, heating up a bit of water that he had taken from a stream and throwing it over his head changing forms into his male body. He stretched out luxuriating in being back in his normal body. Despite having spent the last few days mostly in his female form thanks to the rain, it just felt better to be in his normal body. *I'll have to devote some time to my new form to get used to it*, he thought angrily. *These big things throw off my balance, and my reach is a hell of a lot shorter, I don't even want to think about what it does to my strength.*

About twenty minutes later the rabbits were ready, and he pulled them off to fire setting them on a rock new near the fire pit he had created. He pulled off the basil leaves, calling out sardonically in Putonghua, "If this area is your land or somethin' I'm sorry for trespassing, but if you're gonna attack me could you at least let me have my meal first? If you're not actually a threat, come ahead and I'll share my fire and food."

Ranma instincts had told him he was being watched for the past ten minutes or so, and now he was proven correct as three individuals came out of the woods in response to his shout.

They were a stark study in contrasts as Ranma looked at them. One was short, almost as short as Ranma's new female body, wiry and fast looking wearing the pelt of a wolf over his back and as a small hat on his head, with its ears standing up, wearing several knives stuck here and there. The tallest man was also the broadest across and wore what looked like a tiger skin as parts of his clothing in the form of a belt and leggings, with two shoulder guards that poked out to the sides painted with stripes to match.

The third however was dressed much more richly. He wore what looked like a very good set of scale mail, over a very good silk shirt and pants. He was taller than Ranma by a good few inches, built along the same lines with dense muscle rather than heavy, and moved with all the grace of a martial artist much like his two fellows only to a greater degree. He also had the strangest hair Ranma had ever seen. Part of it was done up in a long ponytail, and that portion was violet. The top of his head was blue, as were two long bangs which fell from just in front of his ears down to his chest, and the fringe of his hair all the way around his head was white.

Ranma, looking at this young man realized for the first time that there were other people his age who he **really** did not want to tangle with. There was just something about this guy that raised the hairs on his neck and woke a warning in him that was surprising frankly given how much Genma had tried to beat the ability to think out of him.

"Is China your first language?" asked the apparent leader.

Ranma shook his head. "Not first, third, sorry if my accents bad or somethin'."

"It's good enough to get along with," said the young man waving his hand at the other two. One of them pulled out what looked like some kind of bird, Ranma had never really studied birds enough to know what kind. He immediately moved over to the fire and began to pull out the birds feathers, while Ranma cut out portions off the rabbit and set them aside.

"This is not our land," the young man continued, "It is neutral territory between our land and that of the Amazons. Where do you come from stranger? And why are you trying to enter our lands?" His eyes narrowed. "If we were having this discussion on our actual land this conversation would be going much differently."

Ranma shrugged. "I didn't know anyone was out here, I was just trying to lose myself a bit." He said this obliquely, not really wanting to mention his father or the fact that he had left the old man behind just yet. "But Amazons, they actually exist somewhere? I thought they were part of, of Greek myth? Or it was an Italian?"

"Greek," replied the young man dryly sitting down across the fire from Ranma and reaching for the largest portion of the rabbit. Ranma let it go, listening to his instincts which stated this man was an opponent he had no chance against. At the same time though it awoke in Ranma a fierce desire to better himself even further, and he vowed to one day be good enough to take this guy on in a match.

The young man didn't know what the stranger was thinking and merely went on. "They came over the mountains to the west several thousand years ago, and settled down near Jusenkyou. Technically it's in their area, so we have to go to them and make certain they realize that we're there with peaceful intentions before using them."

"Using them," said Ranma looking up sharply. "Why the hell..."

"Not your concern stranger," the other man replied glaring at him.

Ranma backed up quickly, again getting the impression that he really didn't want to fight this guy. He felt he could probably take the shorter man, and maybe even hold his own against the older more bulky guy, but not this one. "Hey, I didn't mean it like that, it's just I was there recently and well, they really are magic if you didn't believe the stories, and, and I think the place is kind of alive somehow."

The man looked up sharply from his first bite of rabbit. It was very tasty, and he made a mental note of the trick of wrapping it in basil leaves. It gave the meat a succulent flavor. "Alive, what do you mean?"

"I've been cursed," Ranma said frankly, realizing that honesty was the best policy here. It wasn't something that would have ever occurred to him a few years ago, but his interaction with other masters and their families had beaten a lot of the idiocy out of him. He was still blunt and wasn't very respectful to authority figures he didn't respect, but he had more manners than before and was better able to think things through before leaping, though he still leapt of course. "But the way I was cursed was kinda strange. I began a fight on a bamboo stick in the center of one of the pools, you know how they're set up?"

The man nodded impatiently motioning him to go on. "Anyway my old man got knocked into one of the pools, and came out as a panda."

This made both of the other young men break out into chuckles but the one in front of Ranma simply nodded across at him urging him to continue the story. "Anyway, that first bamboo stick was strong and sturdy, almost like it just been cut and planted there. I moved from it to others, but my old man forced me back to that first pool eventually, and when he did that pole broke from underneath me as if it was old and rotted through. I talked to the guide afterwards and he said that everyone who comes there gets cursed in some way. That plus what happened to me, well I think the magic of the place just forces people to be cursed one way or another."

The man stared up into the night sky for a moment, gently tapping a small package on the ground next to him. "That fits with some of the more unbelievable stories about the pools," he said to himself.

Ranma nodded "That's why I think you probably shouldn't head their whatever your reason is. Who are you guys anyway? I'm Ranma, of the Anything Goes School of martial arts. Though I don't think ya can really call it a school since it's just me and my old man and he's a bit of a dishonorable bastard."

The larger man chuckled. "You're blunt spoken Ranma Saotome. I've heard of Anything Goes before your highness." he said, looking over at the young man sitting by the fire making no effort to join either of his fellows in preparing the meal. "I believe the old master was a short pervert by the name of Happy-something or other."

"I'll take your word for it Lime," said the younger man he had addressed as your highness. "And to answer your question outlander my name is Herb, Prince of the Musk. These are my bodyguards Mint and Lime."

"**You** need bodyguards?" asked Ranma incredulously.

Herb barked a laugh nodding approvingly. "Your eyes are good. No I don't need bodyguards per-se. Call them retainers or perhaps necessary objects appropriate to my rank."

"That makes more sense," said Ranma leaning back and looking at all three.

"If you're a martial artist," said the shorter man by the fire, "You up for a spar later? We're going to stop here for the night so we'll have time don't we master?"

Herb looked at the young man across the fire from him calculatingly. The younger boy was obviously wary of Herb himself, but didn't seem so much concerned about his two fellows. It told him where the young man ranked himself and terms of skill, but whether or not that was the truth was something else entirely. "After dinner Mint, you may spar with him if he wishes."

Mint nodded happily, then stuck the now featherless bird on a stick and put it over the fire. Ranma shook his head, moving back to his pack and pulling out a small vial of something which he held up and tossed to Mint. The other man caught it easily looked it over and grinned before opening it and taking a small taste of what was inside before shaking it over the bird as he turned it on the spit. Lime had even found some edible mushrooms which cooked quickly over the fire, and the mood was quite convivial.

Herb took a bit from the bird wing Mint handed to him, and nodded in surprise at the spicy flavor. "This is quite tasty, both the rabbit and the bird. But where are you heading Saotome to come so far into the mountains?"

"Away," said Ranma bluntly. "This whole trip to Jusenkyou was my old man's idea, and it was pretty much the last straw if you know what I mean. I've been looking for an excuse to get away from him for a while, and I'm going to take it."

"If you keep on heading the way you are you'll run into Musk territory," Herb replied coldly. "I would suggest turning and going that way." He pointed up the sheer cliff face. "If you keep going up and towards the north, you'll be eventually coming out onto the steppes of Mongolia on the other side of this mountain range. That will allow you to avoid Musk territory." He looked up that way his face suddenly a little whimsical and Ranma noted it as he began to clear up the debris from the meal. "At least that's the way some traders go."

Ranma nodded standing up and stretching out. "So, How about that spar?"

Herb sat and watched Ranma spar with both of his bodyguards one after another. The boy was good, even Herb had to acknowledge that. He had no ki ability to speak of, but he was fast, and seemed able to keep up with Mint's speed, if only barely. Mint also seemed unable to deal with an opponent who took to the air as easily as he did walking. Ranma took Mint's punches and kicks, throwing them off easily, waiting for an opening. Eventually however he landed a blow that had it been anything but in a spar might have been fatal and the match was called.

The next match however was very different, with Lime simply standing there and throwing out his powerful attacks. Being the clan of the tiger he was far stronger than Mint who was from the Wolf clan, and knew to play to his own strengths. But here Ranma's speed was greater than his opponent, and he used it ruthlessly.

Eventually Herb called the match, after Ranma had landed two blows that would've hamstrung his guard, followed by another one swiftly that would well have ended his life. In a real fight Ranma would probably have lost two Lime and by the look on his face Ranma knew it, but he could have easily beaten an unarmed Mint that was obvious. Of course he was nowhere near Herb's own abilities, but the boy had never made any kind of indication that he was. Indeed he seemed to have a very clear grasp of where he stood in the pecking order here, and Herb was well pleased.

After the matches was over Ranma poured some dirt on to the fire dousing it and curling up on the ground with his head on his sleeping bag. "So are you guys still going to head to Jusenkyou?"

"I have an obligation to," said Herb honestly. "We're going there so I can learn what the female form is like before my formal marriage. Among our people male and female are closely segregated, it has to do with our animal totems I believe, but in any event I have no idea at all what a female is really like, both in mind and body."

Ranma looked at him and smirked suddenly. "Bullshit." Herb stood up with a snarl on his face but Ranma waved him off. "Oh that's one reason why you're out here, but I can tell that ain't the only one. Let me guess, bein' a prince ain't all it's cracked up to be in the stories? Lots of time spent indoors talking with self-important people, lots of reading, lots of writing not a lot of doing?"

Herb growled, angry that the younger man had been able to see his wanderlust. "Your point?"

Ranma shrugged. "All I'm saying is if you want to go and get to know girls there are better ways of doing it. You said Mongolia's that way," he said nodding at the direction Herb had pointed. "Why don't you three come with me then? You can always double back to Jusenkou if you can't figure out a way to 'understand the female form' but trust me it's not all it's cracked up to be."

Ranma just hoped that he would be able to keep his secret for long enough for these guys to get to know him better before it came out. Thankfully for Ranma as he had spent the previous few days in his female form so the water attracting part of the curse was in abeyance at the moment and it would be several days before it started up again and water began to seek him out.

Herb scowled at the idea, but Ranma could tell from his eyes that he was seriously thinking about it. "Come on," he said coaxingly, "I think it's a win-win. I get some companionship, some good sparring in," he said nodding at Mint and Lime who grinned back at him, "you get away from the Royal humdrum, and you don't get cursed."

"You can't speak Mongolian can you?" said Herb dryly and Ranma shook his head grinning. Eventually Herb nodded a small answering smile on his face. "Very well, that sounds like it might be interesting. And I never did tell my father a specific date I would return by."

With that said the four of them bunkered down for the evening.

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They started off on their trek early the next day as the sun rose into the sky. And surprisingly it was Ranma who led the way, being much more adept at living off the trail than any of the others. He was able to keep up with them despite having to stop several times to hunt up game, and Mint grinned evilly at seeing the other boy actually catch forest rabbit and hares with his bare hands before coming back to the trail. Lime showed him how to spot edible mushrooms, and Ranma learned how quickly, though also noted that the bigger man had a fondness for the things that bordered on the obsessive.

So the trip went, the four teens getting to know one another and enjoying their time tracking into the mountains until they eventually came to a stiff cliff face, which they scaled and found themselves suddenly going down, the steppes of Mongolia on the other side.

The group moved through what seemed like a Spartan forest for two days, before they finally came out onto a plane as far as the eye could see. There were no roads here, no tracks or anything, and Ranma grinned. "You know what, we might be the first guys to ever come up this way onto the steppes. Wouldn't that be cool?"

Herb rolled his eyes at his younger friend's exuberance while Mint grinned cheerfully and the more stoic Lime merely shrugged.

The quartet moved out onto the plane and when they stopped that evening it was with a sky above them as far as the eye could see and all around them was a plain of grass.

They set off early the next day with thunder clouds in the sky, and Herb noticed Ranma looking at them occasionally as they went on wincing and pulling up the hood of his traveler's cloak. It was only then that he remembered that his friend had said that he was cursed, and he frowned wondering what it was.

He'd come to enjoy his time around Ranma. The younger man was irreverent in the extreme, blunt spoken and had no respect for his princely title, all his respect for Herb came from the fact that he knew the older boy was simply his superior in the martial arts. It was a refreshing way of looking at things, and went well with what else he had spotted in the younger man.

Ranma's learning curve was simply astonishing to the dragon prince. At the beginning of their trek together in that first spar Ranma had barely been able to beat Mint, and both he and Lime knew that if they fought seriously Lime would win any kind of standup fight between them. In the days since Ranma had learned and his skills had grown so that he was now faster than Mint which was astonishing. He wasn't ever going to be as strong as Lime, but his speed made up for it, and he had actually begun to use what almost looked like an Amazon maneuver Herb had read about to speed up his hands even further. It wasn't quite enough, but it looked fascinating.

If he kept learning and getting better it would only be at best a few months before he might actually be worthy of sparring with Herb himself, and the prince found himself looking forward to that time. Not only would it let him put the younger brat in his place, but fighting his retainers and his father's guards got old quickly. After all none of them tried to win very hard against the Prince, only hold their own enough so that he learned. It was only with his father and his own personal guardsman, an old member of the bear clan named Parsley that Herb knew himself to be outmatched and had to strive to survive.

About three hours later the storm broke over them, and Ranma quickly pulled up his hood. It didn't save him however, as they passed through a patch of the plane with several puddles on it from the rain, and one of Mint's foot splashed into one sending the water up into Ranma's face.

It was easily apparent to the other through that the boy changed. He shrunk by about a foot, and large protrusions appeared on his chest. With a sigh Ranma pushed her hood back, now standing revealed as a female with red hair. "I guess this jig is up, so yeah this is my curse. You can say that I was understating the fact that I didn't want anyone else cursed at Jusenkyou."

Herb gaped at the boy turned girl, and began to chuckle. Mint and Lime however had a much stronger reaction. "Boobies!" They both shouted and leapt forward, and Ranma suddenly found herself with Lime grabbing her rear and Mint's hands on her breasts squeezing them. Herb looked at this and could feel one of his eyes beginning to twitch.

Ranma looked down at his/her two companions who it suddenly turned out were perverts and gently reached down pulling Mint's hands away from his chest. "Embrace pain," she said calmly, and with speed beyond anything shown previously Ranma proceeded to beat both boys into a pulp.

Herb watched this with wide eyes until she was finished, then commented. "So, this is the mighty female fury I have heard so many tales of? Now I understand why my father always mentioned my mother with respect despite our people's views on females."

"Yeah whatever," said Ranma angrily kicking Lime in a place that would pain him for several days. "You're not going to try anything are you?"

Herb shook his head, his voice dry as he replied. "Trust me, the idea of trying to get to know a girl who turns into a boy is not at all appealing to me. Although" he said hesitantly looking over at the redhead, "I don't suppose I could talk you into..." Ranma glared at him and he stopped speaking. Despite the fact that he knew he could easily beat the young girl into submission he found himself slightly wary of her anger. "Never mind."

Ranma nodded and the two of them continued on. After about another hour Ranma looked back the way they had come. "How long do you think it'll take for them to catch up?"

Herb shrugged. It normally takes them several hours to catch up with me when I go ahead of them, I've done it several times in the past. Though I should warn you that they will probably try that again."

"Then they'll have to get used to broken bones," said Ranma. She shook her head. "Whatever else this form does, it definitely gives you a new perspective on perverts. Before I simply, you know, smacked them around a little when I saw something I didn't like in the cities my old man and I passed through, now I'd probably have to kill them, or at least neuter them."

Herb nodded, discreetly stepping a little further away from the redhead. It would never do for her to figure out that he had actually been checking her out. Portions of his psyche and mind had been woken up by the nearness of a female, and he resolutely decided to stick all such thoughts about his young friend into a box marked 'do not touch ever, I mean it, seriously,' and then toss it over a mental cliff.

Herb's prognosis was proven correct it did indeed take until the sun was falling for Mint and Lime to catch them up that evening. The trip fell into a routine after that. The four of them would start out, Ranma would get splashed or rained upon, and then would subsequently beat

Mint and Lime to within an inch of their lives before he and Herb went on and the two would catch them up in the evening.

This monotony was broken a week later when they finally found signs of life, a small herd of horses and accompanying herdsman in the distance.

Soon enough they were spotted, and a few horsemen came out to get a look at them before motioning the quartet (Ranma hadn't been splashed yet today) to follow them.

It turned out that the Musk were well known here, and a few traders came up a actual trail from their lands to trade with the people of the steppes. Herb was very careful not to share the full reasons for their trek, and he was welcomed readily enough. Mint and Lime however were warned away from the girls, saying that any trouble in that direction and they would be given to the girls. Ranma didn't understand why that phrase made Herb blanch, but when he explained it in Putonghua to Mint and Lime he got enough of it to cross his legs and look a little worried at the smirking and downright evil looks on the faces of a few of the older women in the chief's yurt.

They were told that they had to make themselves useful during their stay; there was no place in the village for layabouts. Mint and Lime agreed to join the hunting parties, while Herb stayed with the chieftain, discussing trade and exchanging their knowledge of the world.

Ranma was left to his own devices for a time and he decided to help out with the horses and other animals. He had always been good with animals they just seemed to like him for some reason. After he started he couldn't explain why several of the girls of the tribe came out to watch him exercises the horses. He didn't know that his insistence on going shirtless (he only had three shirts with him) and the way he would actually run with the horses, his muscles gleaming as he outpaced them, was one of the best shows any of them had ever seen. The girls also seemed to get a kick out of him changing into a girl when he got splashed (something about a boy knowing their pain, a phrase he didn't understand until weeks later) though they would react most violently to any guy who tried to convince him he should go around shirtless in that form as well.

After a few days working with the animals however Ranma got a little bored up of it, and wandered off after helping the horses into the paddock for the day toward the sound of a hammer on metal.

Ranma stepped into the blacksmith's forge and stared at what was going on. To layman's eyes it seemed as if a simple blacksmith was working the metal at his forged, the only problem would be that he was doing it without any protective gear on his hands. But to Ranma, who had developed a bit of ki sight over the past few weeks, there was a lot more going on here. It seemed to him as if the blacksmith was actually pouring some of his own ki into the metal as he worked on it, and he just stood there staring, mesmerized by the sight.

Vulkan the blacksmith was a well-respected individual both in the clan and out of it, not only because of his blacksmith skills but because of his martial arts skills. The fact that the metal he designed and created on his forge mixed these two was just icing on the cake.

Eventually he noticed Ranma was there and looked up holding the finished piece of metal in his bare hands. It turned out to be a horseshoe, and Ranma wondered what that said about the man that he took that he put that much time and effort into a horseshoe.

Good things, he decided and waved his hand. "Hey," he said in Putonghua, "I don't suppose you can understand me?" That last was set on questioning note and he trailed off uncomfortably realizing that he hadn't developed a good enough grasp of Mongolian to really talk to anyone. He could somewhat get what other people were saying but actually making himself understood was well beyond him.

"I understand you stranger," said the blacksmith in the same language. "I too journeyed far beyond the land of my home when I was younger." He grinned, the expression transforming his craggy face into a much softer countenance. "Good for you lad," he said, reaching out and slapping Ranma on the shoulder with a strength that staggered the younger man. He realized then that this blacksmith was probably physically stronger than even Lime, a startling thought. "So what can I do for you stranger?"

"Ranma," said Ranma rubbing at his shoulder still staring at the metal that the man had just been working on. "How do you get your ki to pour into the metal like that?"

The blacksmith looked at him sharply then grinned even wider. "So you have the sight do you? Good. That stranger is a secret of my trade. Most blacksmiths, especially those in your land of the Rising Sun where I believe you mentioned you came from when you arrived?" Ranma nodded. "Most blacksmiths used to use a similar technique. In this day and age it must seem unusual of course."

"Can I learn it?" asked Ranma. "I know that sounds a little rude I guess but that's fascinating."

The older man turned away, pulling out another strip of metal and beginning to work the fellows. Ranma swiftly joined him, and Vulkan nodded as Ranma took over the bellows as he worked on the metal. The two of them were silent for a time. Ranma just followed the older man's wordless directions on what to do and what tool to get while the blacksmith worked, gaping in astonishment as the man's own hands heated up to keep the metal soft and pliable. Eventually he held up what looked like a flower made out of metal bed that seemed to have an inner light hidden in its petals. It was still just plain steel, but it seemed more somehow and it actually moved gently just like a real flower in the wind as he sent another little jolt of ki into it.

Vulkan looked at the younger man and nodded. "If you want to learn lad I'll teach you." The blacksmith's apprentice had actually left about three weeks ago to meet up with his wife

and her family. They had finally gotten the bride price, which was where most of the horses that Ranma had been looking after for the past few days came from originally. The number of horses probably meant that the boy wasn't coming back either. Vulkan decided that even if Ranma wasn't going to hang around, and the blacksmith knew none of the four newcomers were going to do that, he had been nice, respectful enough and had proven to be a hard worker. So even if he couldn't truly learn Vulkan's art in the amount of time he was here the boy would be a help around the forge. And of course if he was splashed by cold water at any point the old man would have some nice eye candy to look at. He wasn't a pervert, but he would take any free views that came his way.

It turned out however that Ranma's skill at learning new martial art techniques was not just for the physical. In the next two months both Vulkan and Herb were astonished at the rate the younger man learned.

Ranma would never be as physically powerful as Vulkan or Lime, but he didn't even try. Instead his muscles were at the peak of what they could be, and his ki reservoir grew as he began to use it consciously to strengthen himself. By the end of the month he was strong enough and his body was tough enough to do anything that the blacksmith asked him to do around the forge. The actual toughening technique for his body, gradually increasing its resistance to heat and its durability over time which had taken his apprentice four months to learn to a high enough standard that he could withstand the heat of the forge and the almost molten metal without his hands blistering. It took Ranma two weeks to get to the same point, and he just kept right on getting tougher after that.

By the end of two months Vulkan was in near tears at Ranma's ability to learn his craft. Indeed he was already figuring out little tricks of the trade that the blacksmith had taken years to learn. At the end of those two months he felt confident enough to let Ranma make his own artifact, and Ranma did so, though it wasn't anything that the blacksmith would've thought he would make. Most apprentices would make their own hammers, some would make their own armor or gauntlets. Ranma disdained such, and made what looked like metal studded gloves until you looked at them closely. The gloves were small patches of leather around the palm and back of the hand connected by a thin bracelet of metal around the wrist with very thin metal wires coming out between the top pieces of leather that could expand into knuckle sized pieces of armor when ki was run through them. They were light and durable but each piece had been ki strengthened to the greatest ability Ranma possessed. With these on he could punch through a tree without even feeling it, and they could be rolled up and hidden on his person easily.

Alas all good things had come to an end, and it after three months Ranma's father finally found the trail of his wayward son.

He came in the dark of night, moving through the dismal little town in search of his son the ungrateful brat. He found Ranma outside a large mobile house, leaning against the side of it with his eyes closed but when his father stepped up, Ranma's eyes opened and he motioned the old man to be quiet.

Ranma had known that staying in place this long was a bad idea, his father was sure to find him sooner or later, but his time with master Vulkan and the others had been too good to pass up. The trio of Musk warriors had left weeks ago to head back home anyway, Mint and Lime having caused one ruckus too many, and Herb having gotten a handle on girls. Or at least a mental handle anyway. Unbeknownst to Ranma, Herb was still thinking of heading to Jusenkyou to check out the female form in controlled circumstances.

Now Ranma was ready to head back to Japan. Vulkan had mentioned at one point that it was strange Ranma had no memories of his mother, and the idea of figuring out why that was appealed to him, and if he had one in the first place. And Genma was his only clue to that mystery. So when his old man showed up he was ready to go, and had a prepared lie ready to divert any interest in why Ranma was out here. "Bout time you found me pop. I've been here asking around for a clue to our curses, there was supposed to be another Jusenkyou victim here. It was a dead end though, he didn't know of any cures."

Genma harrumphed, his diatribe about his son leaving him behind completely derailed by that. "Well boy I've found you, now it's time to get going back to Japan."

Ranma nodded, and the two left without another word, leaving behind some memories and a farewell note tacked onto Vulkan's forge.

OOOOOOO

Hey old man, why the hell are we passing through Vietnam rather than China to get back to Japan?"

"Never question your elders boy, I have my reasons."

"Oh I don't doubt that, I just wonder if these reasons're gonna cause trouble for us down the line."

"Hah, stop whining like a little girl and keep running!"

Of course Korea would have been a bad idea, Genma was a known criminal in both nations, and the Northern policemen tended to shoot on sight. And though he would never share it with his son, but the idea of entering Russia terrified him. He could remember only too well how badly he had been beaten by that giant Russian with the spandex shorts hairy chest and wrestling moves. Yes, doubling back to Vietnam was a much better idea.

OOOOOOO

Ranma looked around her at the house as the extremely pretty older girl lead her and the idiot panda further into their home. The house was sparse, but extremely clean and well kept, reminding him of the chief's yurt for some reason. The girl also seemed to somehow fit

right in with the place, as if she was a part of it. The rest of her family didn't have nearly that sense of belonging, which made it stand out all the more.

Ranma played with her pigtail absently as she studied the other two girls. While nowhere as kind looking, the middle one was almost as pretty as the older girl, but there was something about her that screamed at the redhead not to trust her above and beyond the whole fondling on first sight thing. The third sister was sort of drab by comparison, but she had a martial arts gi on so that probably indicated she was some kind of martial artist. What kind though Ranma couldn't tell. The girl had none of the grace or lightness of foot that Ranma associated with good practitioners of The Art so wasn't hopeful of much there.

They all sat down around the table, looking at one another awkwardly as they waited for the mustachioed man to wake up from his shocked stupor at finding Ranma was a girl. Ranma took advantage of this however turning to the kindly looking girl and asking "Excuse me miss, but could I have a glass of hot water?" The panda next to Ranma growled in agreement motioning to itself with one paw.

The brunette cocked her head at the odd request, but smiled at the manners the young redhead was showing. "Certainly, I'll be back in a moment, and you don't have to call me miss, my name is Kasumi." She sighed, looking at her father. "Poor father, he must be so disappointed."

Heaven huh, no wonder with the vibes she's giving off, Ranma mused, but cocked her own head in reply. "Disappointed, about what? And do any of ya know why my old man wanted to come here anyway? He wouldn't tell me."

Beside him the panda growled again, but stopped when the youngest daughter turned and stared at it. The middle daughter however, simply shrugged and poked Ranma's breasts again, a little irritated that they seemed to be at least a size bigger than her own and firmer at the same time. "Makes sense I guess, though why he isn't here with you I don't know. We were told your father would be bringing his **son** Ranma over to meet us and decide which of us **he** was going to marry as to fulfill some old family promise, but that's obviously not happening."

At this point Soun woke up, turning to the table and mumbling "But Genma said he had a son..."

The brunette who had just been poking Ranma's breasts now began to fondle it staring angrily at her father. "Does this look like a son to you daddy, does it?"

Ranma squeaked a little then slapped her hand away. "Stop that those things are sensitive!" Then she turned and glared at the panda, who was just sitting there trying to look innocent. Despite its natural advantage in that department it was failing miserably. "And this is

the first time I've heard of a marriage contract like that! Who the hell would want to be told who they're supposed to marry anyway?!"

At this point Kasumi came back, and was about to hand the glass of hot water to their young guest when it was snatched (rather rudely in her opinion) out of her hand by the panda who dumped it over its head, changing from a portly panda to an overweight bald male with glasses wearing a dirty gi. "Boy, it's a matter of honor! Soun and I suffered under the same master, and we made a vow of honor that our children would unite the schools!"

As the others gaped in shock Ranma stood up angrily leaning forward and cupping Her breasts while she glared at her father. "Do I look like a boy right now, huh do I!? And whose fault is this body exactly you stupid sack of sh-"

She stopped speaking as a wave of cold seemed to emanate from behind her, and she and her father stopped glaring at one another to stare at Kasumi, who was simply standing there, a strange half-smile on her face that filled them both with terror. "Oh my, I'm certain whatever it is there's no need to use language like that in our home is there?"

Both martial artists shook their heads violently, and she continued, her smile returning to normal. "Now why don't we all sit down and talk about it."

Father and son sat down, both of them keeping a wary eye on her now, wondering what the hell that had been. The brunette with the bowl cut recovered from her stupor faster than the others and pointed at them both shrieking "What the Heck!" Despite her level of freak out at the moment Nabiki had been well trained by her sister and knew all too well to keep from actually cursing, so much so it was second nature now. "What, what was... I mean, it was a panda and now it's a fat old guy, w-was that a hallucination or something we, we couldn't have just seen that could we?!"

The last few words came out almost pleadingly and Ranma actually felt a little stab of pity for someone else for the first time as he realized the girl's world view had just been shattered. But it was only a little stab after all. "Yeah see, this is my old man Genma, who, because he's an utter idiot, decided we should go this training ground called Jusenkyou in China, which has these cursed springs. If you fall into them you turn into the thing that drowned there before. The idiot in the dirty gi fell into the spring of drowned panda because he was too stupid to listen to the guide who was trying to warn us about it!"

Genma puffed himself up angrily, unhappy with all the lip the boy had been giving him since he had found him on the plains of Mongolia, but Soun beat him to it. "Jusenkyou, the rumors of its true horror are stepped in mystery."

Ranma turned and glared at her old man again. "Wait, you knew some of the rumors of that place! And you still made us go there, even when neither of us could read a word of Chinese?!"

"You sound like a little girl Ranma!" Genma roared reaching forward and trying to grab his son turned girl but had to stop and defend himself as she retaliated.

Despite being weaker and having less reach, Ranma had made up for that in training his new body in speed, and Genma could now only barely keep up with her, and that was only because Ranma wasn't actually serious at the moment. "If I do it's because of you old man!" She shouted, standing up again to face her old man.

Kasumi nodded her head firmly, as did her as yet un-introduced middle sister. The younger one was now glaring at Ranma, though the aquatranssexual couldn't figure out what that was about. "You went too far Mr. Saotome, there are limits to what you should be willing do for anything."

"There can be no limit to what you are willing to risk to attain mastery in the art!" Genma declaimed pompously, while Soun nodded along with him.

"Wait, so if he fell into a spring of drowned panda, what did you fall into?" The middle sister asked.

From seemingly nowhere Kasumi suddenly pulled another glass of hot water. Ranma blinked, wondering where it had come from, and if it was a martial arts technique he/she could figure out, but took it and smiled at her. Kasumi smiled back and Ranma turned to look at the others. "You See, like my old man I fell in one of the cold springs, so the rain on the way here stuck me like this. I'm actually," he poured the water over her head, changing forms back to his birth body. "A boy." He smiled even wider now, able to look Kasumi straight in the eye, thankful beyond words that his time in Mongolia had reversed the effects of his malnutrition. Some of their concoctions had tasted horrible, but they had reversed a lot of the negative effects of Genma's training over time, not the big ones but still. "The names Ranma, nice ta meet ya."

Kasumi blushed slightly at the boy in front of her while the brunette with the bowl cut smirked at the eye candy, but they were both frankly still wierded out about the whole magic existing thing. The youngest only glared even harder for some reason.

Soun now seemed completely recovered and crossed the distance between him and Ranma quickly, smacking him on the back exuberantly. "Well then, your problems not so bad after all!" Ranma's eyebrows twitched badly at that, but Soun didn't notice and went on. "Well then, let me introduce my daughters. Kasumi, she's 19," Kasumi dimpled at Ranma who shrugged his shoulders at the formal folderol as Soun went on, waving at the girl with the bowl cut, "Nabiki, she's 17," Nabiki was watching everything going on with a calculating air, but she nodded greetings all the same. "And Akane, aged 16." The girl with blue hair kept right on glaring. "Pick one and she'll be you fiancé."

Kasumi and Nabiki moved as one, without any prior planning between them. "Oh he wants Akane." Nabiki said, and Kasumi nodded agreement, pushing the younger girl forward gently.

"What, why me, I don't want anything to do with the pervert!" Akane cried, pointing an accusing finger at Ranma.

Rather than take umbrage Ranma responded in a deadpan tone of voice. "Yeah how 'bout no? No offense but I ain't marrying anyone I don't know better than a five minute talk. And the whole turning into a girl thing doesn't make me a pervert, unless you count knowing firsthand what the monthly monster is like."

Kasumi winced at that, but Nabiki blanched, determining again to look but not touch from now on. The magic body changing thing was really freaking her out.

Akane however ignored that and yelled "You change into a girl that makes you a pervert!" *I've had to deal with perverts for months now, ever since that idiot Kuno sempai made that dumb announcement. I'll be danged* (Akane had been trained so well by Kasumi over the years she had lost the ability to curse even inside her own head) *if I have to deal with one in my own home!*

"Yeah still not getting it." Ranma shrugged. "Anyway, like I said, I ain't marryin' anyone." He scowled a little as he saw his father puffing himself up again. "Not until we get ta know one another. So how about this, instead of choosin' someone right away, we wait a bit?" this would give him a base of operations and let him start searching for his mother.

"How long?" Nabiki asked quickly, her eyes narrowed. "And what would you be doing in the meantime?"

"Well of course they'll be living here, and I imagine Ranma needs to go to school." Before Ranma could open his mouth Soun responded jovially. Then went on more seriously. "But my boy while I applaud your decision to get to know you future wife, I should think only a week or two would"

"Hell no," Ranma interrupted, "I'd say two years." Soun gaped at him but Ranma went on. "That'll give us all some time to get to know one another, and I can actually graduate high school. And my old man and I will both get jobs to help pay for our stay." Ranma could probably get a job with the local police easily enough once he showed them what he was capable of, especially if there were martial artists around here, and they could help in his search for his mother. As for his old man, if he didn't come up with something on his own Ranma was fully prepared to sell him to a zoo. Probably not the breeding program though, as he had no idea if sexually transmitted disease could cross species, and given the number of times he'd had to drag the old man out of whore houses he knew Genma had to have a few.

Kasumi jumped on this sensible suggestion quickly, her saintly smile washing any objections. "That sounds like an excellent idea. After all there's no need to rush is there?" For some reason both fathers found their objections disappearing under the weight of that smile, and Akane's objection of not wanting to live under the same roof as a pervert died stillborn. "Good, now that that's settled, Ranma-san you must be cold still, I'll show you where the bath is."

Ranma mutely stood up and followed her, leaving a few very confused people, one fuming part-time panda, and one young girl who was planning to smash the pervert the first time he gave her an excuse.

OOOOOOO

With his experience under master Vulkan and among the Mongolians this Ranma was very different from the one that might have arrived if he hadn't been so suspicious of his father. While many things cropped up that Ranma would have had to deal with did still crop up, this Ranma responded very differently.

OOOOOOO

Ranma scowled. "Look Kuno I told you that first day of school, I don't care if you or anyone else chase after Akane, just don't do it when I'm tryin' ta get ta class."

"Tis fair and just that one such as yourself has no designs on the fair Akane Tendo, but tis not the magnificent example of onna-bugeisha I have called you here to discuss. Nay, I was wondering of the other fine flower of womanhood, she who has hair the color of crimson and a body even the greatest artists would weep to paint! I am speaking of the pigtailed girl that came to thy aid when we fell into the pool after our little misunderstanding"

Ranma scowled a little, wincing at the idea this freak might be obsessing on him as well as Akane. "Well I have to tell ya, the pigtailed girl ain't gonna want ta have anything to do with ya pal."

Kuno frowned. "but how could such a thing be? Am not the most powerful of samurai, the scion of the noble house of Kuno?" His eyes narrowed and he reached for the bokken at his side. "What manner of sorcery hast thou employed to keep her from coming to my side?"

Ranma was about to retort hotly when another idea came to him and instead he made his eyes widen in simulated shock. "Wow, Kuno that's impressive. But you're wrong, it's not me who has her under a spell, it's our father. See he doesn't want to part with her, and has cast a spell on both of us so that we can never be in the same place at once or love anyone and will refuse to undo the spell for any reason fearing we would turn on him the moment he did."

Kuno nodded arrogantly. "I knew there didst have to be magic most foul involved somehow, tell me where I can find this man so that I might slay him."

"He looks like a middle-aged bald man with a dirty bandana and gi on. At times however he can turn into his familiar, a panda that can summon up signs to use as messages and weapons. Be careful though, in both forms he is powerful and dangerous." Ranma said, making his face as serious as he could.

"I will take your words to heart Saotome, now if you'll excuse me I have preparation to make." Ranma nodded and the two parted ways. Ranma was even able to hold in his mirth until he was out of hearing range, then burst out laughing, wondering if he could grab a camera and capture what was going to happen for posterity. Thus Kuno became Akane and Genma's problem, and because Ranma wasn't friends with Akane, he never volunteered to take her place, so missed out on meeting Kodachi for a time, and when they did meet she didn't latch on to him as she would have, instead being torn between him and his foe at the time.

Later that first week he found Nabiki had been taking pictures of his sleeping form, and burned them all, then later when she tried again, he burned her camera into a puddle of goo. The look he gave her after that was so filled with contempt that it made even the ice queen back off and leave him alone. Later, when he started to bring in a regular and rather large check from the police force she tried to make it up to him to get in on that knowing that her older sister, who he always gave the checks to, wouldn't let her access any. But Ranma wasn't willing to try and trust or befriend her again, leaving her feeling surprisingly sorry for herself and questioning her actions in a way she had never done before.

Ryoga showed up later in that month as usual. This Ranma was much quicker to anger, taking Ryoga down hard for endangering innocent bystanders. Their rivalry kept going from there, but was much more hardcore and brutal, with neither of them pulling any punches. They would both develop many of the techniques they would have otherwise, but there was a growing feeling of honest dislike, even hate between them, and the idea of teaming up would never occur to either of them. Nor was this the only difference Ranma's new skill set and thoughtful nature would make.

OOOOOOO

"So let me see if I've got this right," Ranma said in Manchurian, looking at the pretty purple haired girl in the cheongsam sitting next to Kasumi at the table. "You're looking for me because you think I sent my trained 'attack panda'" he made air quotes in the air, "to eat your prize and humiliate you after you had won some kind of tournament in your village? And you think this because it left a sign behind saying it was the property of Ranma Saotome and was in no way liable for anything it did under his orders?" He wondered if she was one of those Amazons Herb had mentioned, and shook his head at his father having come up with another way to foist his problems and issues on his son.

The girl, whose name was Shampoo, nodded, wincing a little as Kasumi put some burn lotion on her hand. The boy was handsome, but also obviously interested in the kind girl sitting next to her if the violent way he tried to defend her when Shampoo tried to go through her to attack him was any indication. It wasn't like he had beaten her after all, merely disarmed her violently, then the girl's aura had done the rest, and Shampoo found herself sitting here calmly drinking tea. "Yes that's it exactly. The stupid panda barged in, knocked out one of our warriors who was on guard, and ate the prize, a feast in the champion's honor that had been set aside. When we tried to attack it, it knocked me out, then fled as some of the older warriors and the Elders joined in the chase. It was most fleet of foot for so fat an animal, but it left behind that sign, and I was ordered to hunt you down and get to the bottom of this." Shampoo replied in the same language, hating the fact she sounded like a bimbo when she tried to speak Japanese, grateful that the boy understood and spoke her native tongue.

"Well I hate ta inform ya, but that ain't an attack panda, whatever that is. It's my old man, he fell into one of the Jusenkyou springs." Ranma reached out and poured a cold cup of water over his head, triggering his own change. "And he knocked me into the spring of drowned girl. I had nothin' ta do with whatever he did in yer village, sorry. I'd be willing to pay money if that was enough, or maybe I could make you another weapon ta replace the one I destroyed, or help ya skin the panda."

Shampoo frowned thoughtfully wondering what she should do now. She knew of no law that covered anything like this situation, and was at a loss as to what to do. As she was tired at the time and he wasn't in his human form her loss against the cursed man didn't count as grounds for a kiss of marriage but... "Could tell me what your father looks like in human form?"

Ranma did so and Shampoo was horrified that it was the same fat ugly man who had pointed her in the direction of Ranma and Kasumi as they were shopping earlier. She definitely didn't want to challenge him to a fight, that would be a fate worse than death. "A new weapon would be fine if you can make one, that and telling the elders we were duped would be enough."

Of course it wasn't, mainly because Cologne and her fellow elders could spot quality when they saw it. The naginata Ranma forged for Shampoo was of the finest quality, and was made to enhance ki attacks, something that no blacksmith among them could do any longer. A weapon like this was worth an Amazon's weight in gold to the tribes of the steppes that still practiced that way of forging. And Cologne had noticed some moves from the panda that indicated he might follow the same school as her old adversary Happy. So she was sent along with Shampoo and a few others to ally with Ranma. He, in return for being taught martial arts, agreed to forge more weapons for them and to help them if the 'ancient evil' ever showed up. Later, when Kodachi began to chase Mousse, Shampoo was even more grateful than before, and their alliance strengthened further.

Other things changed as well, some for the better, some for the worse.

OOOOOOO

Ranma pushed the door open carrying the tray of hot soup in and paused, staring at a few posters on the wall. Kasumi, who was in bed with a cold, blushed at his finding out about her secret. Ranma on the other hand didn't realize what he was looking at and asked "What the heck is up with the light sword thingies on this poster?"

Yes dear readers, Kasumi was a closet Star Wars fan. She had even dressed up as a few of the characters when she was younger. But when she had been forced into the role of mother figure she had decided to hide it away lest it undermine her image in the eyes of her sisters or her father.

Now however she was happy to fill her friend in on the greatest movies ever made, and did so over the next few days while she was bedridden. During this time, Ranma came to a decision.

OOOOOOO

"Look doc, I know ya have a thing for Kasumi," He watched the man's glasses fog up and quicker than Tofu, no mean martial artist himself could follow, slapped him upside the head, breaking his momentary stupor. "But I got to tell ya, if ya don't get over this whole lose control thing you've got, I'm gonna start making a play for her."

Tofu blanched. He didn't like that idea at all. "B-but what about the other two, surely Akane would be a better match, she's a martial artist like you after all."

"If yer tryin' to choose yer future wife on the basis of one thing ya got in common that's damn sad." Replied Ranma bluntly. "And Akane only thinks she's a martial artist, that doesn't make it so. She doesn't follow The Code, and she thinks that bashing bricks makes her something special without putting in the time. Nabiki's a snake, and I ain't willing to let her close ta bite me. Kasumi's kind, intelligent, a hard worker, funny once you get her ta open up, a great cook, and gorgeous ta boot. Need I go on?" Tofu shook his head glumly. "Now, I think she might have feelings fer ya so I'm gonna man up and step aside, but that's only if you an man up yerself alright?"

"I'll, I'll try Ranma. Thank you."

"Don't thank me doc," Ranma said, almost glaring at him. It was obvious to the older man that he had already developed feelings toward Kasumi. "Just, if ya do get over it and the two of you get together, treat her right okay? If ya don't have ta **really** hurt you." Tofu nodded and the younger man turned and walked out of the clinic.

This move was the right thing to do, but it had far reaching consequences. Tofu, now motivated by the fear that his love might be taken away from him, cured himself within six

months of his odd reaction to Kasumi. He then began to seriously woo her and the two were quickly engaged. Soon after Kasumi moved out of the Tendo house and into the clinic, and without her around to talk to Ranma became more and more depressed dealing with his father, Soun and Akane. Nabiki had actually stepped up to the ball and helped him out around the house, but there was no closeness there unfortunately.

This made Ranma react far more harshly than he would have when his old friend Ukyo showed up for his head, and even after knowing the reason why he wasn't interested in renewing their friendship. He became close to Shampoo and the Amazons when they showed up again, but they and the new couple were the only ones he could really call his friends.

When he finally found his mother it became even worse. Her insistence on carrying her family katana around, her odd and perverted ideas of manliness, made Ranma remark that in a way she was even worse than his old man. Maybe things would have been different, but this Ranma had already had it with people trying to make him conform to their ideas, and was having none of it now. So he remained in female form whenever she was around, using the skills he had picked up creating martial arts acting during the play of Romeo and Juliet (which he joined at the behest of the fathers, but more to make certain Kuno didn't wreck it for Akane, who he could tell was much more passionate about acting than about the martial arts) to fool her into thinking he was in no way related to her.

Happosai showed up and that too went differently, with Ranma allied with the Amazons they were able to drive him off, and eventually capture him using Ranma in a negligee as bait, something the Amazons paid for by training him in a few of their most dangerous techniques that they would never have otherwise taught to an outsider. Unfortunately while things in Nerima were different, other things proceeded as normal.

OOOOOOO

Herb had gone through with his plan to dunk an animal into one of the Jusenkyou springs to get used to the female form, not having found any girl who was willing to let Herb study her body among the Mongolian tribeswomen. Again he had chosen a monkey, and again the monkey had grabbed the Ladle Of Locking and splashed him with water from the same spring transforming him into a girl and locking him as a girl at the same time.

This time he was again unsuccessful in keeping his people from finding out about his curse, and again he was ostracized. The anger and rage built up in him, made all the easier thanks to his draconic heritage, and he lashed out at all around him until he found clues that pointed to the resting place of the Kettle Of Opening in Japan.

OOOOOOO

"I warn you old crone, do not try to play me false. Elder of the Amazons you may be, but I will still rip you asunder if you lie." Herbs voice was both frayed and angry, showing something dark and vicious in its depths, the true rage of a dragon.

Colognes voice sounded older and more wary than any of the youngsters that normally hung our around her had ever heard. "What reason would I have to lie to you Prince of the Musk? That could well lead to war between our nations, and that is not something I would ever want."

Herb nodded, her face hidden in a cowl. "Then our business is concluded."

The door to the café opened and a familiar redhead walked in, wringing her hair out from having yet again been nailed by one of the ladle ladies that seemed to infect Nerima. The sight of her red shirt clinging to her curves caused both Herb's guards to shout and rush toward her, shouting "Boobies!"

Ranma moved faster than any of the Musk trio had ever seen him, tripping Mint then grabbing the larger Lime, pile-driving him into the shorter warrior. She flipped up to her feet shaking her head at the two downed warriors. "Damn you'd think you guy's would've learned not ta do that after all the times I smacked ya around fer it." He turned to the cloaked figure and groaned. "Don't tell me, that's Herb right, and by the shape under that cloak"

That was as far as the redhead got before a ki blast slammed into her stomach, lifting her off her feet and throwing her out of the door to slam guard rail above the small stream outside. Ranma shook her head dazedly, but before she could really recover a hand resembling a small steel clamp locked around her throat. "I spit upon your warnings Saotome, you have no idea what that cursed place has done to me, but you will learn." Something splashed her again, and she was released to gasp for air, her butt hitting the concrete.

Herb turned away from the female snarling out orders to his guards. "Come you two, we're leaving."

Ranma groaned and got to her feet, her eyes aflame with battle-light. "Alright you overgrown lizard, if that's the way you want it, I'm gonna just kick your ass and then tell ya I told ya so, you baka!"

Cologne shook her head in wonder. "You know Herb of the Musk Ranma?"

Ranma nodded, reaching and heating up a flask of water she kept on her person at all times in what she called heaven space. Ranma had come up with it after watching Kasumi pull items out of thin air so often, and watching Mousse do the same on occasion. It was small, much smaller than Mousse could do, but it helped him. "Yeah when my old man went right after leaving Jusenkyou I went left and ran into them eventually." She poured it over her head,

but rather than triggering the change, nothing happened. Ranma's eye narrowed. "What did that asshole do to me?"

"I believe Herb locked you in your cursed form." Cologne filled Ranma in on why the prince was in Japan and where the trio was heading. Ranma nodded and promptly turned around, intent on heading after them. Cologne's voice stopped him however. "Ranma, watch out for Herb. Those who have the blood of the dragon in their veins are dangerous beyond belief."

Ranma grinned, her eyes still lit up with battle-lust. "Don't worry about me granny, so am I. You ain't seen even half the stuff I can do."

Cologne shook her head but let her go without further word. Unfortunately for Ranma and Herb, another had overheard this, a little black pig, who had been cursed to that shape when Ranma had chased off his father at Jusenkyo. Ryoga had a plan, and now that Ranma was heading out to such a remote location it seemed the perfect time to implement it.

OOOOOOO

Ranma had bypassed Mint and Lime by the simple expedient of tossing two porno magazines in their faces, then racing on up the mountain. He found Herb in front of the shrine which held the Kettle Of Opening.

Herb sighed in relief and reached forward, pulling it out and turned to the hot spring, but before she could splash herself, a ki blast caught her in the back and thrust her forward. She turned, whipped off her ruined cloak, revealing the light armor she wore underneath it as well as the extent of her change. Herb as a girl was far less busty than Ranma's female form, but taller, and looked stronger too.

Ranma stood behind her cracking her knuckles eagerly. Ranma had been looking for a good fight, one where no one would berate him for hurting his opponent and where he didn't have to hold back, for weeks now, and Herb's arrival and subsequent bellicosity were just what the doctor ordered. "You blindsided me the last time, and I don't let anyone sucker-punch me and walk away, no matter who they are. I hope you're ready for round two you lizard bitch!"

Perhaps if Herb wasn't truly a descendant of dragons Herb could have backed off and they would have talked it out. The two had been friends after all. But then again if Herb didn't have the blood of dragons in him, he would never have been so full of rage as to attack his friend in the first place. So with a roar she closed with her foe.

The two traded blows faster than most people, including the one watcher who had trailed after Ranma, keeping in sight of him the whole way, could follow. And it was surprisingly Herb that stumbled back her head ringing from a kick. Another follow up kick was blocked however, and Ranma found herself flung into the air.

Unfortunately Ranma was as home in the air as one the ground, and dodged the follow up ki attack. Herb took to the air to meet Ranma, but found her opponent almost as good in the air as she was. The two exchanged punches and kicks, and both fell into the hot spring. The Ladle Of Opening was still there, and its interacted with the water to remove the locking on their curse. The two now male martial artists stood up, but ignored their body's changes and kept hammering at one another.

Neither let up long enough for the other to use any techniques. It was simply a hammer and tongs fight, with Herb now pushing back Ranma but taking shots in return. It was a contest of speed, endurance and skill and Herb found his anger slowly fading into wonder that this was the same boy who little over a year ago was so much weaker than him. Now Ranma was matching him blow for blow. It remained to be seen which of them was more durable though, and he pressed in grimly.

Their fight was interrupted however by a light suddenly beginning to grow around them. Both warriors looked around from where they were locked in combat and it was Ranma who spotted the interloper. "What's the piglet doing here?!"

Ryoga stood about twenty feet away pointing a small piece of metal at them with one hand while the other held up a scroll reading words off it. "Let the target of this spell be flung from this place, let him never walk this land again, and let him forever be lost to this plain!"

With the final word the light around the light around the two warriors grew, and suddenly it and they both disappeared, transported elsewhere.

Chapter 1 We Aren't in Kansas Anymore, Toto

The light faded and the two warriors found themselves somewhere else. Where before they had been locked in combat on a rocky hill top with forests around them they were now in a city, or so it looked. But something was off about it. Ranma had seen a lot of cities in his time on the road with his old man, but this one didn't look like any of them, not even Hong Kong. Luckily for them they appeared to have teleported in a empty alleyway, full of the fuse of all such places.

Herb moved away from Ranma, looking around their new surroundings wildly. "Where are we Saotome! Where in the world have you taken us?!"

His words came out part roar part shriek and Ranma stiffened for a moment as he heard voices respond somewhere nearby. Swiftly he grabbed Herb. Some instinct, the same instinct that initially warned him about fighting the Musk prince when they first met strangely enough, was telling him to get out of here and he intended to follow it. Swiftly he hopped up into the darkness, hiding the two martial artists in the dark above the five story tall dwelling. He pushed Herb against the curve of the building abutting that one, wondering why the hell it seemed like

it was made of rock while below them some voices began to talk back and forth in an unknown language.

Herb quieted down, realizing what Ranma was doing, and still looking around, but he still hissed in a low voice "I say again my last Saotome, where the hell are we?"

"No idea Herb. Damn, if I didn't know any better I would say we just pulled a Hibiki."

That last had been muttered, but Herb still heard it and the older boy's eyes widened. "Hibiki, what does that family of cursed salesman have to do with this?"

Ranma's eyebrows rose in surprise. "What, are they famous or something? Ryoga, that's the guy who was standing by the shrine when that light began to grow, he's one of my main rivals but his sense of direction is so crazy it's like he teleports randomly around."

"If he's a Hibiki their whole family is like that. They were cursed millennia ago because they tried to swindle a god. Word to the wise Saotome, gods have absolutely no sense of humor and take a very dim view on trying to cheat them. Their curse can take them from one step and another to anywhere in the world, and only rarely to their actual destination. It's rumored that it's worse for those with both parents from the clan as they can even transcend space and time. But to bring someone else with them they have to be in physical contact."

Herb stopped talking and looked around cocking one ear to the sound of voices below them, but it was in no language he had ever heard. It was guttural, snappish, with far too few vowels for any language he knew. *Perhaps it's one of those European languages?*

"He was messing with some kind of scroll when he was looking at us," Ranma muttered. "Could he have sent us somewhere randomly somehow? You have any idea where we are?"

Herb was now looking straight up and the descendant of dragons shrugged. "I have no idea, but it's a good working theory. And I have no clue, certainly don't know anywhere in Asia that has a city built underground."

Directly overhead was what certainly looked like the top of some kind of cavern, though he could see someplace in the distance where there was open sky, nighttime from what he could see here but more than that he couldn't say.

"That's not all," Ranma's voice was rather strangled from where he had just stuck his head out over the side of the roof. "I don't think we're on Earth at all anymore. Unless brown and green skinned four-eyed people are from Canada or something?"

Herb swiftly joined him and the two of them stared down at the group of people in the alley below. They might have come out to investigate the shout, but it had swiftly become a shouting match between them. Like Ranma had said they were brown and green and had four

eyes set into faces that had no hair from what the two martial artists could see, and some kind of odd bony growth around their mouths. They seemed tallish from here, their bodies ranged from thin to fat, and all of them were visibly armed with what looked like some kind of sci-fi blaster, as well as numerous knives. All in all they looked more like bandits than some kind of police force, which was probably a good thing as far as it went, a police force would be much faster to react to interlopers.

The two martial artists looked at one another in shock, then backed away from the edge of the roof and leaned against the gently sloped roof at the back. For a few minutes all the two of them could do was stare straight ahead, trying to take in the enormity of the shit-storm they had suddenly been dropped into.

Ranma was the first to recover and he stood up decisively. "Come on," he said holding a hand out to Herb, who looked at him quizzically. "If we can get a good look at the night sky I might be able to tell where on Earth we are, if we still are on Earth. But we should probably change into something that'll let us blend in more first." Ranma pulled two sets of tight black shirts and pants from 'heaven space', passing one to the other man. They both turned away from one another getting dressed before making their way in silence over the rooftops towards the distant bit of night sky, making certain to stay out of sight and from below and around them.

They were about halfway there when Herb broke the silence. "Saotome?" Ranma looked over at him halfway through a jump from one roof to another but didn't respond verbally. Herb continued on, wanting to get this out as soon as possible. It was embarrassing enough without dragging it out. "I'm sorry. I should have never cursed you with the ladle, and I should have come clean with you about what I was searching for the moment I saw you again, and I apologize."

"Finally got over your dragon sized ego huh?" Ranma laughed quietly. "It's cool dude, most people I know have blown up attacked me at some point one way or another. Forget about it, and concentrate on tryin' to figure out a way home. And my friends call me Ranma y'know."

"If it was some kind of magical spell or something similar there might not be a way home... Ranma."

Ranma frowned a little at that but then shrugged. "In that case we find out as much as we can and figure out what we want to do with our new lives." His frown deepened as he remembered watching Kasumi move out of the Tendo house to move in with Dr. Tofu, mourning what might have been.

His expression lightened up noticeably however when he remembered his so-called acquaintances using him, his mother's self-important stupidity about that damn contract. All the honor obligations pulling his old man foisted on him this way and that, and his old man's

continued attempts to control him, like so many weights around his neck dragging him down. He suddenly was grinning, and wondering if this might have been the best thing that ever happened to him.

Herb was actually wondering the same thing in a way. His life at home had turned to hell the moment he came back cursed. His father had put him aside, naming one of his cousin's as the new heir to the throne, and all his so-called friends in court had abandoned him, even the majority of his retainers refused to be near him. Herb had entertained thoughts of running away, but would never have actually done it as that would have been admitting defeat, something no one descended from a dragon would ever do. But this way he was gone with no onus on him, and if he could never get back, well that was no fault of his was it?

Their thoughts were interrupted by a shrill scream from the road below, and the both halted their run and cautiously peered over the edge of the roof they had just landed on. What they saw below them actually shocked them more than their initial sight of the four-eyed aliens.

Below them were over a dozen of the four-eyes, and four humans, as well as what certainly looked like a third species. The four humans looked like a family, three kids, two boys and a girl, and a father, who had been the one screaming. From what the two observers could see he had objected to something, possibly one of his sons being taken away since one of the boys was being dragged away from the others as they watched.

The third species looked far more human than the four eyes, with two normal eyes and pretty good looking bodies. There were two of them, both looking middle aged, though of course neither martial artist could tell an alien's age for real. They were both looking away from the screaming man, but obviously weren't actually with the humans given the distance between the two of them and the other group, though the young boy being dragged their way indicated he was being added to their group. And it was obvious both they and the humans were slaves.

The humans wore rags as did the blue skinned alien's, though the females were obviously made that way to barely cover their assets and the human's looked as if they had been normal clothing at one point, but had become rags over time. They also all wore collars, though that seemed more a symbol of their slave status than anything else.

Herb and Ranma stared down at the man writhing on the ground far below them, who was holding his head in apparent agony. Ranma drudged through his limited knowledge of sci-fi trying to figure out what this meant. "Telepathy or something? Maybe a master race of telepaths has taken over Earth and other planets or..."

Herb shook his head, studied the group intensely. "No, there's something inside his head, look, that one who's doing the shouting has some kind of remote control in his hand. Something inserted into the brain, some kind of pain-giving device?"

Ranma growled low in his throat, sounding very much like one of the fury demons from hell that he hated so much. "I don't like slavers."

"Don't do anything rash Ranma," Herb said then went on as Ranma shot him an ugly look. "We don't know where we are, we have no idea if those are the only slaves around here or anything we need to know to be truly effective. For instance what if whatever they have in their heads explodes if they go a certain distance from their 'owners'? I want to free those people too, but we won't do them any good if we can't free them permanently."

Ranma stared at Herb for a moment then nodded. Herb might not follow The Code of the martial artist that Ranma did, but he followed enough of it and in this they agreed. With a last, long look down at the group of slaves the two sped off.

Within another twenty minute they had covered the rest of the way to the bit of sky they had seen, and they both stopped and stared for a moment. "Yeah we're not on Earth anymore," Ranma confirmed, looking out the dome at what looked like a small Jovian in the distance, almost blocking out the sight of a red star in the distance.

Herb looked lost for a moment, all his knowledge of ki techniques, languages, culture and diplomacy couldn't help him here and the enormity what had happened hit him again like a hemmer blow between the eyes. Again it was left to Ranma to get them both moving again. "Come on, we need information, and I know one way we can get some."

The dragon prince moved after him automatically. "And how is that? Realizing that we probably won't be able to talk to anyone here other than the human slaves?"

"Mugging someone and goin' through their pockets," was Ranma's blasé reply.

Moments later they had found a back alley, and three of the four eyes who were disposing of a body of one of their fellows. None of them even had time to reach for a weapon before Ranma was on them from above. His fists and feet lashed out at what he would term friendly speed, the kind he would use against Kuno or some of his less durable opponents. Even Akane could get up eventually after a punch of kick at that level, heck even the normal assholes from the pervert brigade at school would only be knocked out. But the two he struck in the head had their heads completely caved in, and the third who took a kick to the chest flew back to slam into the wall with his entire chest crushed, his innards perforated by pieces of his own rib cage.

"Wh-what the hell!? These things are so damn weak!" Ranma looked down at the dead bodies, almost freezing when he realized he had just killed a living person, but he was able to overcome it by remembering that these people were slavers, almost certainly murderers and rapists too. None of them were like his insane but not evil rivals back on Earth. After that thought eventually wound its way through his mind he joined Herb, who was busy stripping all three of his victims of everything they had on them.

Herb looked up as Ranma broke out of his daze, not saying anything to the younger man. He had gone through the same thing after his own first kill after all, and Ranma was handling it as well as could be expected. "They don't seem to have ID or anything like that, but their weapons seem fully charged from what I can tell, and then there are these things on their wrists..."

He lifted one of them up to show what looked like a vambrace until he slipped it on his own arm whereupon what looked like a translucent orange keyboard popped up complete with screen. As he moved to touch it a program seemed to pop up, and after a moment the characters on the screen had changed to English. "Well that's handy." Herb muttered.

Ranma shrugged and joined him. He could read and speak English well enough, but it wasn't exactly second nature of anything. They took several cards from them, which sort of reminded Ranma of credit cards, three versions of the thing Herb was fooling with and the weapons.

The moment they were done they jumped up and faded into the darkness of the upper areas of the city. Not five minutes later they were well away from their assault and were hidden in what looked like a collapsed heating and cooling unit over one of the more derelict looking buildings. They had to kill off several large doglike creatures with impressive fangs, but that had been the work of mere moments.

Ranma got to work on the weapons, wondering where the ammo was and what the things fired. When sounds of what sounded like gunfire rang out in the distance he took a chance and shot one of them, frowning in disapproval at the tiny hole that appeared in the thin metal of the heating and cooling unit. Penetrating but not stopping power," he muttered. "I'd guess they've got other heavier weapons around here though, we'll have ta watch out for 'em."

Herb hummed in reply then without looking up tossed Ranma one of the things he had learned was called an omni-tool. Apparently nearly everyone had one of them, and they could even work as translators in a pinch. "You search for data on this place, I want to find out more about what universe we are in, and humanities place in it."

Ranma nodded and slipped the thing onto his forearm then as it settled down onto English he began to look for information about where they were. The two searched for around two hours before stopping. Ranma looked up at Herb first. "Alright, I'm good to go, heh, I even got a plan. What about you?"

Herb growled a little, looking up from a video of some kind of space battle, a 'vid' recording from one of the smaller ships involved. "While there is a lot of information here, far too much to cover in just one session, I think I've picked out a few highlights."

Ranma nodded and Herb began. "Well, humans are one of several races, and we are not a conquered race, though it apparently was close at one point. We had a war with our first

contact with a race called Turians, which are one of the three dominant species. The internet I was accessing was vague about the details, but it appears we were successful in beating off their first attack, causing severe losses both in personnel and face, but in return one of our colonies was nearly wiped out. Since then there's been peace between us, brokered by the other two dominant races, the Asari and the Salaris, but it is somewhat tense, and both races have their own hotheads of course. The asari are those blue females we saw earlier. The three dominant races form a sort of council, and their councilors make the decisions for the whole of the council, even those races that aren't represented, of which there are several. Humans are now part of the council but don't have a representative, apparently because we haven't done anything 'worth' it yet."

Ranma nodded thoughtfully. "The Batarians, the four eyed bastards around here, are apparently part of this council too, but don't follow any of its rules except when it pleases 'em. Slavery's integral to their entire culture, and they've been using pirate groups to raid the other races for slaves almost with impunity it seems until recently when they began to do it to humans in some territory of space or other. The other races are worried about goin' to war with 'em to stop their slave runs for some reason." Both of them sneered a little at the lack of moral fortitude this showed. "The humans're pushing back, but there haven't been any real clashes between their forces yet. The Batarians here seem to think that might change soon, and are gearing up for war. This whole place is run by dozens of competing pirate groups and is called Torfan. The whole place is buried in an asteroid. Oh, and we can eat their food, but I wouldn't recommend it. That shit looks like something Akane made."

Herb nodded thoughtfully, ignoring the food comparison as he didn't understand it, but had no desire to try an alien race's cuisine in any case. "Makes sense. The humans are new on the scene, wanting to make their place clear, and the Batarians see them as easier prey than the established races, a conflict made worse by the fact they are also competing over territory. Anyway, I also looked at tech, which is... disappointing in the extreme. No ray guns, no amazing technology really, everything is based around something called element zero, and no one has thought to look into anything that isn't. It's almost as if once they found this eezo, they stopped thinking about anything but how to use it, which is very odd, especially for humanity. The human race is lead by a Systems Alliance, whatever that is, the news I could access here was very vague on the details there, as well as general human history. I will tell you one thing, I wasn't able to find anything about ki, martial arts or anything else."

"What the hell man, here I thought I'd be able to build a lightsaber or something." Ranma laughed then went on more seriously. "Did you look at any of the aliens with yer ki sight? What did you see?"

Herb shook his head. "Hadn't even thought of it actually. You said those three were weak?"

"Extremely weak," Ranma confirmed. "In comparison to you and me anyway, maybe, just maybe to soldiers and other sorts back home. But I don't think that's because humans are stronger than the four eyed assholes, I think it's just us, as martial artists."

Herb smirked evilly. "That raises some possibilities."

"Don't it though? Anyway, I think I've come up with a plan to turn this whole place on its head."

Herb raised one eyebrow in query, and Ranma grinned. "I call it divide and conquer."

OOOOOOO

Ranma's plan was deceptively simple. They would go out and start ambushing small groups of Batarians, making the whole of them paranoid, then would start leaving clues among the bodies of one group of slavers evidence, a marker a patch or a body wearing the colors of another group, to indicate that it was that group's fault they had lost members. Eventually all the groups would be so paranoid they would start fighting. Once they were all fighting one another, the two of them could first start muddying the issue, targeting any group that seemed to gain an upper hand or starting to back off, then when the fighting died down due to lack of bodies, start freeing and arming slaves.

Herb had one caveat to add, that they find a way to disable all the starships here in some fashion except for one of them they could load up with slaves and head somewhere safe for them. Ranma didn't have a problem with this, but both of them were severely underestimating the number of slaves on Torfan and later just decided to wreck all of them.

It took them over a day to scout everything out, but thankfully the Batarian arrogance worked well for them. So secure were the four-eyed slavers in their stronghold that they never even considered that there would be someone else moving around that shouldn't. All the pirate groups watched each other like hawks, but had no attention to spare for anything else (except their slaves and getting drunk of course).

They found that the city was centered into three interconnected caverns, with the spaceships in a separate large cavern. The city was run as a waypoint with bars, bordellos, hotels and other things like that, along with dozens of auction houses for slaves and ten 'medical centers' where the slavers surgically implanted their slave's control devices. They also found that the slaves were bartered and sold between each group, and each of them had a specific frequency they used to control their slaves. During a transaction the batarians used collars instead of the control chip, but both worked equally well. Those 'medical centers' would be their first targets after they got the pirates fighting one another.

Because there was no real overarching control, maintenance of the area was done only when one group or other was willing to put in the time. The buildings' interiors were all kept up

as most were owned or paid money to one of the slaver crews, but lighting and overall maintenance of the caverns was horrible, which greatly helped the two martial artists, allowing them to move around in the darkness of the rooftops easily.

The slaves were mostly kept in pens in the city. Of course the bordellos 'tags' were also slaves, but they were actually kept in better condition than the others. After all, ugly or dirty girls didn't bring in any money. There were three separate pens in smaller more protected caverns that only connected to the main caverns by a single tunnel each, which apparently the slavers shared together or on some kind of rotation or something. One of these held the majority of the children of all races that had been taken in raids. Apparently placing a cranial inhibitor led to permanent brain damage, and while the batarians didn't care for their slaves, a brain damaged slave couldn't command the price one without any could. Another was set aside for those taken in raids that might be sold back to their governments in return for a ransom. The third was simple called the 'specials' cavern, and neither had heard anything more about it other than that term.

There appeared to be seven large pirate groups numbering over eight thousand each, with dozens of smaller crews whose numbers ranged below those numbers. One of the largest was led by a Batarian named Kurdack, who was trying to gain control of the whole asteroid according to scuttlebutt they heard/read (heard but had to read the translations from their stolen omni-tools). The small groups were touchy and prone to violence, as well as willing to join together to prevent any of the larger groups from wiping out any one of them. The larger crews were even more standoffish and wary of anyone outside their group then the smaller groups. The pirates never trusted anyone outside their own crew, and any hint that they were being targeted by another pirate outfit had them up in arms. That was enough information for the duo to start their depredations.

First they began to pick off small isolated groups of pirates and slavers out alone, and it quickly became apparent they had underestimated how quickly the pirate groups would turn on one another, which both of them were thankful for. Ranma and Herb had estimated that it would take at least a week of on and off attacks, and that they would eventually have to try some of the local food. After looking at some from outside a bar/food dive, neither was looking forward to that. But thankfully the speed the pirates turned on one another let them get away with only a few days of not eating.

The two of them had taken out about a hundred or so pirates from various groups over two days when they saw the first signs that a general war was going on.

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Herb and Ranma watched from the shadows above what appeared to be a firefight between four different groups, each with over a thousand or so troops crammed fighting it out right outside one of the hostels with their strange guns. Neither had been hit by a bullet from one of those things yet and weren't looking forward to the experience but felt that they could

take it as long as they weren't struck in the head. Ranma had the strengthening technique that he had learned with the Mongolian blacksmith, and Herb had the ability to use his ki to strengthen his skin well beyond steel which should be enough to see them through most of the small arms and infantry sized weapons they had seen.

Now however they were not looking at the guns, rather the carnage the pirate groups were dishing out to one another. This was the fifth group they had spotted in the last hour, and the fights were only growing larger. "I think we've stirred the pot enough for now, we should start targeting their ships."

Ranma nodded grimly. Both of them knew this part would be much tougher. Out here there were always shadows and places to hide, and with the ninja clothing Ranma had shared they could behind into the dark easily. In a ship though, they'd be attacking a large group of enemies in a very enclosed space.

The pirate vessels were set aside from the main 'city', in a single large hanger in a cavern connected to the city by a large open hanger door about as wide across as two city blocks. On the other side were the spaceships parked every which way, with dozens of smaller tunnels leading out to the surface of the asteroid and space. These tunnels had multiple doors and automated defenses, more than enough to hold off any exterior attack until the pirates had organized. On their own ground, with the warren of passages leading in, all of the rock houses, the alleyways and the sheer number of pirates, Herb could see Torfan would be a incredibly tough nut to crack with any exterior assault. That was, if they all worked together, as it was now the pirates were proving their own worst enemies.

Sneaking into the hanger bay was difficult but not impossible, and the two martial artists were able to sneak in a by stowing away in a crate of food being carried out to one of the ships. The ship they were carried on to was an old tramp freighter, whose aged lines belied the fact that it had a modern shield and drive on it. That didn't matter to the two martial artists however, as they were just here to destroy it.

Once in the freight they the two exited, swiftly killing the three guards that had taken them onto the ship in the first place, and breathing the relatively clean air deeply.

"Ranma if you ever suggest something like that again I will rip out your spine and use it as a hat rack." Herb said his face and voice serious. The Batarian food smelled even worse than it looked, and moving around in a box that had contained it had not been pleasant. Add to the fact Herb had some of his ancestors sense of smell, and it was just this side of torture to his olfactory system.

"Then you can figure out the way through the armed guards next time," Ranma said equably, wincing a little as he looked away from the dead bodies on the ground. After the last few days and seeing how the Batarians treated their slaves and even each other any qualms he had about killing them had disappeared like smoke in a hurricane. He wasn't happy about the

necessity but he would do it. Herb looked at it even more simply. These people needed to die, and he was going to do it. The lives of the four-eyed aliens meant little to him.

The two exited the hangar bay, and soon ran into the problem they had expected i.e. trigger-happy and very narrow corridors. After ambushing a few patrols a came under fire from both sides of the corridor there were currently in. Both martial artists took shots, but swiftly closed one going towards each side of the corridor regardless.

The normal weapons used by these Batarians fired small bullets, but at extreme velocity. Normally they would punch straight through any unarmored skin, but Herb had a key technique that allowed him to strengthen his skin enough to take the blows. Ranma's training under Elder Cologne strengthened him against impacts like this so he could ignore most of the shots, though they hurt like a bitch even with the Bakusai Tenketsu training.

Ranma ducked under the wildly swinging arm of batarian with a knife in his grip, grabbing the alien's wrist easily as it passed above his head and slamming a fist into the knife-wielder's diaphragm, with enough force he was lifted off the ground and into the air 6 feet his insides crushed. A sweep kick sent both of his fellows to the floor, and Ranma slammed the dead body down on them with concussive force.

The initial danger dealt with Ranma grabbed up their guns and blazed away down the corridor at several more Batarians worst charging towards him from out of a elevator. One of them raised some kind of blue shield, his arms glowing blue, but the other three died under Ranma's hail of fire. The blue shield came down and the Batarian made some kind of gesture and blue light flared from his fist coming towards Ranma.

Ranma instinctively summoned up his ki into one of his fists and smashed the blue light aside, the orange gold fire of his fists seeming to surprise and terrify the Batarian, but he didn't have any time to react as Ranma swiftly brought his hands together and shouted "Flame Shot!"

The orange ball of ki zoomed down field towards the batarian, and he once again raised that strange blue shield. For a moment it looked as if it was going to stop or at least dissipate the ki attack, but after that second the shield shattered and the ball went straight through slamming into the pirate's head. Where Ryoga, Shampoo, his father or Cologne and Happosai could take a shot like that and keep on coming, this batarian could not and his head disintegrated.

Ranma winced, hoping that was a far less painful way to go than it looked but he shook it off before picking up two more guns and racing up down the corridor. He knew Herb could handle himself, and this was proven seconds later when he joined the pigtailed one as they raced through the third level of the freighter. Luckily the ships had been stripped of their 'cargo' to be sold off in the auction halls in the city, so they didn't have to worry about innocent bystanders.

"You head down, I'll head up," Herb barked, and Ranma nodded, turning around and racing toward the back of the ship, then making his way down, trying to find the power core.

He did so and looked at the thing a little askance for a moment. Ranma had no clue what he was looking at, but even he could tell the thing was much more advanced than the rest of the ship, and it looked as if it had been squeezed into place in some ways. The pulsing energy it gave off was enough to tell him what it was though, and he started to move around, pulling apart and smashing any controls or anything he could see. After a moment the energy flickered then went off and he nodded satisfactorily then raced back to the entrance to the engine room.

Moments later he found Herb standing in the room that must have been the bridge of the ship, a dead Batarian with several empty bottle around him slumped in a central chair. Herb shook his head disgustedly. "That was almost too damn easy, only one guard on the bridge, what is up with that?"

Ranma shrugged. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth bud, let's just smash this stuff and move on."

Herb growled a little but nodded and the two set to work, ripping apart panels, shattering everything they could, ripping apart all of the computer stations and smashing anything electronic they could find.

While Ranma finished up Herb had turned his attention to the roof of the room and burned through it with a steady assault of his ki blade attack, the Hito-Ryu-Zan-Ha letting them out back into the hangar bay. Ranma soon joined him, standing in the dank, but still dimly lit room of the hanger bay. "Split up or stay together?"

Herb thought for a moment then shrugged. "I think we need to do this quickly, and now that we're up here we can start at the top of the ships and take them from surprise. Split up."

Ranma nodded and the two jumped away, each landing on a different adjacent ship. They took a moment to figure out where the bridge would be, nodded at one another over the intervening space, then began to burn through the outer hull each in their own way. Herb once more used his ki blade attack, while Ranma used one of the techniques he had learned from Master Vulkan, burning through the side of the ship with hands whose temperatures had been raised to white hot levels. It took a little longer, but not much, and soon he was in.

After that it was almost anticlimactic. None of the ships had more than ten guards on them and the two martial artists went through them like a thresher through wheat. Taken by surprise, and with their communication smashed within moments of each assault, they stood no chance. It still took them over four hours but eventually they were nearly done wrecking all of the ships present in the hanger.

Ranma shook his head wondering about a lot of this strange future? alternate dimension? wherever the hell he found himself. The ships were a lot smaller than he had expected. Most of them didn't even seem as large as a lot of the oil tankers or luxury liners he had seen it a few times back on Earth. But what they lacked in size they made up for numbers. Maybe it was a pirate thing?

Regardless there had been over 70 ships parked in the hangar bay of various sizes, but most of them were now just wrecks, their control interfaces smashed, their engineering sections a mess, and at least one hole somewhere on their surface. Any one of them would take weeks to repair, and with the fighting going on it might be days before someone realized what was happening.

He looked up from exiting the final ship of his side of the hangar, having spotted Herb out of the corner of his eye waving at him from the top of one of the largest ships there. It wasn't quite the largest, there were two others that were larger, more in keeping with the size Ranma felt was appropriate for a spaceship, but the one Herb was standing on was certainly much more new looking than those two. Also those two seemed to give off some kind of vibe. If Ranma was the kind to be superstitious he would say they reeked of the Dark Side.

Regardless, when Ranma had boarded one of them he had given it **special** attention, and had noticed the sheer number of slave pens, the blood on a lot of the walls, the disturbing 'medical center' like those ten they had found in the city proper and the even more disturbing paraphernalia therein. He smashed it all, with a sort of grim determination that would have reminded Herb of watching Vulkan work at his smithy.

He jumped up to join Herb on top of the new looking ship, making certain that there's nobody around. He shook his head at the stupidity of the Batarians, leaving forces on your ship was good, but they should've been outside the ship too. Only three ships had thought of that, and they had fallen easily to Herb and Ranma's attacking them from behind. "What's up? I'm done with my section, how about you?"

"Very much so, but this ship," said Herb, thoughtfully "is a little bit better made than most of the others, or at least it looks it. I think it's some kind of prize ship they haven't gotten to taking apart or whatever it is pirates do. We may wish to leave it intact."

"For a given value of intact, sure," said Ranma trusting Herb to know what he was talking about. "What did you do to it?"

"I ripped out most of the gear on the bridge, but left the engineering room alone. With that I think we're done here." He stared off at one of the Dark-ships as Ranma called them in his mind, twitching a little. Then he looked back almost glaring at Ranma. "I trust you've gotten over your remaining issues with killing these people now?"

"Oh yeah," replied Ranma, his face a bleak mask. "These bastards definitely need some killing." Herb nodded grimly, and the two of them made their way out of the hanger back to the rest of the city.

Here their bout of good luck ran out again, and they ran straight into a fifty-strong group of pirates coming back to their ship. While the tunnel entrance to the hangar bay was large it wasn't large enough for the two martial artists to evade the group.

The moment the pirate spotted two suspicious black-clad individuals coming their way pulled out their guns and laid down a withering hail of fire. The Batarian didn't know who the two beings were, but they had just gotten back from a firefight, and were jumpy, so losing a few rounds at two moving shadows seemed a perfectly reasonable thing for them to do.

Herb growled angrily, pushing his ki into his body to reinforce it and into his hands as he prepared one of his most devastating attacks. "Ryu Sei Hisho!" A second later several spheres of golden fire shot out of his hands, exploding among the pirates where they were crouching and firing at the two martial artists.

Ranma had actually gone down for a moment, having taken a shot to the head. Luckily his head had also been reinforced both by constant attacks from the mallet wielding one and the Bakusai Tenketsu. He rose to his knees, and began to lay down cover fire from his stolen guns. After they ran out he charged forward, trusting Herb to give him some cover fire until he was in amongst the aliens.

Herb did so, now shooting out small ball sized bits of ki and ignoring the storm of fire come his own way. He winced a little as one of bullets struck his forehead making his head ring, and he could feel a trickle of blood running down his forehead but that was all.

This would've changed as two of the Batarians pulled out much larger caliber guns. One looked almost like some kind of futuristic shotgun, while the other looked like a sniper rifle with multiple barrels. By this point however Ranma was in their face and both those aliens went down to his flashing fists and kicks their weapons unused.

Between Herb's continued attacks and Ranma the fifty strong pirate band went down quickly, but knowing that they had to get out of here before they were found the two martial artists ran off and soon disappeared into the dark of the underground city again.

The bodies of their defeated foes they left their, making certain to drop some of the markers from one of the larger slave group, further igniting the ongoing chaos with this and with the assaults on the ships.

OOOOOOO

The next day both martial artists were beginning to feel the pangs of hunger. They could've gone for longer if they weren't constantly using their ki attacks, but using them and not eating was taking its toll.

However the chaos and combat continued unabated around them. As the battles raged, the two of them joined in on one side or the other when it looked as if one group or the other was going to gain a decisive upper hand, keeping the kettle boiling nicely and not incidentally destroying all ten of the 'medical center's that performed the 'surgery' to emplace the obedience chip into the slaves. Neither trusted the batarians to actually stick to their guns if it looked as if one of them was going to come out on top. More often than not they had come in on the side fighting Kurdack, whose troops were better equipped and led.

The Batarian in question had openly run one of the largest slaver bands, had clandestine connections to several of the smaller bands, and had pull with the Batarian government which got him a lot of the latest and greatest goodies to use in his raids on the humans. Now however if he had hair he would be pulling it out, the chaos and carnage that had erupted in Torfan had come at him out of nowhere, and it seemed utterly random. One moment all the groups were separate, distrustful of one another but relatively peaceful, the next dead bodies had been showing up and everyone was fighting. There had been a little less than 80,000 Batarian slavers and hangers on here. After only a few days of this chaotic melee of a war he estimated that they were down to a quarter of that.

He'd even lost one of his shock troopers that the government had sent him as part his personal core of commandos and his own ship had been totaled some days ago. The prize he had taken on his last jaunt into asari space a few days back wasn't as badly damaged, but it would still take several weeks and most of the specials working on it all at once to make it spaceworthy again.

The two martial artists however thought things looked to be going great, and they decided it was once more time to add another random element.

OOOOOOO

By this point both Herb and Ranma had noticed that the batarians didn't look up, much like humans most of the time. Right now they were taking advantage of this again, crawling along the ceiling towards the batarian at the end of the tunnel guarding the prisoners that were waiting to be ransomed or taken out and implanted with control chips. If any of the slaves would have the will and ability to fight back if given the opportunity it would be these prisoners.

A moment later they reached the entrance to the smaller cavern, and Herb reached down and grabbed the Batarians by the back of the neck and snapped his spine with one hand.

Once inside they dropped down, and began to attack the slavers in the pens, which was made far easier because even most of the slavers here had been called out to help with the general fighting.

At the moment the only ones in the ransom pens, as they were called, were a large group of Turians, banged up and looking much the worse for wear, and several Elcor. Ranma took a moment to study them. The Turians were human sized, but slightly more bulky looking, with scales and strange looking humps on their backs, though that could be because of the shape of their spines. Their legs were put together differently, and they had odd looking mouths, which seemed to hinge open on the bottom and had two bits to the side that the pigtailed martial artist couldn't put a name to.

The Elcor was big, bigger than any human the two martial artists had ever seen, maybe even Taro in his alternate form. They gave off a sense of immense, ponderous strength, but not speed. They also seemed to move along on all fours as they were put together much like a gorilla. Unlike a gorilla however they had multiple vertical small tentacle looking things where their mouths should be.

The Elcor and the Turians had been watching the two humans with astonishment wondering where the hell these two humans had come from and why they weren't using any guns, instead relying solely on their hands and feet. After seeing Herb use a ki attack to take out a slaver armed with a sniper rifle however most of them came to the conclusion that they were a strange new kind of biotics, may be something like the Justicars of the Asari.

Ranma finished killing the last slavers in the area then walked up to the cage where one of the huge aliens was kept. "Yo," he said raising one hand in greeting "don't suppose any of you can understand me?"

This particular elcor's name was Khundra. He was a prominent doctor on his planet and had been on his way to a medical conference on one of the human planets in the Skylian Verge until his ship was attacked by slavers. As such Khundra had one of the hot best translation chips available, and so did understand the human, though he had never heard that particular human dialect before. He was astonished however that the human didn't understand him, as most humans did have the normal universal package. "Astonished query: yes human I can understand you, but you cannot understand me?"

The human looked at his omni-tool and the translation appearing above it and shrugged. "Sorry no, good to know the reverse ain't true. I don't suppose any of you would be interested in breaking out and wreaking some havoc would you?"

A Turian wearing a patch of some kind on its shoulder armor in the cell next to the Elcor grinned evilly, the side flanges of his facial armor opening to lend the expression even more menace. "Get us some weapons human, and we can at least hold this place against the slavers. I'm Captain Sukat, of the Turian registered luxury liner Aselbre. All of us were taken from the

same ship, and if you get me and my crew some weapons we can hold this position against the batarian scum. Is it just the two of you though? What's happening?"

The human read through the translation on his omni-tools screen then gave the Turian a thumbs up, one of those odd human gestures that had strangely begun to spread to other races since the humans had come onto the galactic scene. Then as he told the captain what was going on he reached out and gripped the first cell door. The prisoners waited for the flare of biotic power, but didn't see one and the human simply ripped apart the cage's doors as if they were so much tinfoil.

To further their astonishment both humans reached into their backpacks, and began to pull out a large number of guns, far more than could ever have actually been in there. To save their sanity the prisoners simply put this down to biotics again. I had made sense of them, Asari commandos were always pulling some new and interesting trick with biotics after all, that was what they told themselves and next to it. Even when the human who had freed them pulled out a gun that was almost as large as he was, a heavy duty served crew served weapon they kept with that story. "You think you can use this big guy?" He asked looking up at the Elcor.

"Amused response; While I have no training, I am at least intelligent enough to know to point it and pull the trigger." said the Elcor, reaching down slowly and taking the weapon, which in his hands looked like a normal rifle.

"That works," the human replied after reading the translation of what the Elcor said. "My friend and I are going to get out of here, we've got other places to be and people to kill, but if you guys can hold here we'll see if we can start funneling some of the other slaves out to you, though I gotta tell ya, you might be under attack here sooner rather than later."

"Concerned objection; I would ask you to be careful, but as you both at seem to be able to handle yourself I will nearly warn you that the slaves hear have obedience chips installed. They did not install them in us as they were waiting to see if they could get any ransom money for us, but many of the other slaves have them installed even before they arrive here.

Herb had followed this is well, and shook his head, sending his odd colored hair this way and that. He was thinking of cutting it at some point, but that would wait until it was all over. "We already know about that, but they have to be activated don't they? They don't have some kind of distance thing inhibitor or anything?"

"Firm answer: Correct. Altruistic worry: but most of the slaves here will not be able to fight as effectively as the captain and his crew. Freeing them too early may be dangerous for them, and for you."

The two martial artist looked at one another and nodded then without further discussion moved out of the small cavern down the corridor or and out back into the city grinning evilly as they heard the sounds of gunfire in combat in the distance.

By this point Kurdack and all the other pirate leaders had realized they were slowly starting to run out of troops. While Herb and Ranma had been the sparks that ignited this conflict, they hadn't actually contributed much in the way of numbers to the death toll. The hundred they had slaughtered by the doorway to the hangar bay had been the most they had run into, and all told they had only killed about four-hundred or so, an amazing number for just two people but not a lot when compared to the number of batarians in Torfan. The pirate groups themselves had systematically been wiping one another out, and after only three days of the conflict there were only around twelve thousand or so batarians left. The entire city was a war zone, the only safe zones ironically enough were the slave pens, as each pirate crew felt that if they could come out on top they could take all the slaves for themselves. A few slaves had tried to use the chaos to escape and hide or fight back, but they had been put down easily, and most were smart enough to keep their heads down and wait it out.

This made taking on the next one of the separated slave pens as easy as the first except for one little problem. This was the pens labeled the special section and Herb and Ranma were surprised by what they found there. This section was broken into two large jail cells, separated by a wide walkway between them that had contained ten Batarian guards until the two martial artists killed them all, dropping in once more from the ceiling into close range.

One cage held humanoid looking beings encased in what looked like full body environment suits. They were all apparently male, though neither Herb nor Ranma had read anything about a species like this, so couldn't tell for certain if the lack of breasts implied that or was a species thing. They were slightly built, almost as short as Ranma's female form, and had odd looking knees, not as odd as the Turians but still strange looking. Their suit's faceplates weren't see through, letting none of their features be seen. The suits looked ragged, and all of them looked like they had been used hard. But that wasn't the little problem.

In two separate sections were a dozen Asari of what looked like all ages, ranging from cute looking teenagers to buxom middle aged women. And all of them were wearing rags that in most cases failed utterly to hide their womanly attributes. This had caused Ranma to blush and turn away, closing his eyes swiftly.

This odd reaction to them actually caused one of the asari, the oldest there, to ask incredulously. "Are you actually blushing human?"

Herb groaned and smacked his forehead. "You've had your female body for nearly two years, why in the hell are you still blushing at something like this?" Herb felt all of the Asari on display here were attractive, but they were also slaves, which killed any enjoyment he might have had at the display. That might not have been the case if he hadn't been cursed with his own female form, but it was now.

Ranma's blush spread across his face and he resolutely kept his face turned to the wall. "I-it ain't the same lizard-boy and you know it! A-and I know they're slaves and I shouldn't look at 'em like that, but gah!"

One of the Asari had been following this with her advanced translator chip and had been translating for the others. Now despite their ongoing predicament here more than one of the Asari in the cage were giggling, saying things like "oh so cute," and "'I don't mind if you look you know".

It didn't help matters that every Asari there thought these two were among the most handsome humans any of them had ever seen. They were both of average height, but that was the only average thing about them. They were slender yet obviously possessed immense strength if the broken bodies of the Batarian guards were any indication. The one still able to look at them had a regal, aloof bearing and sharp, intense brown eyes set in a attractive face. His hair was also the most exotic any of them had ever seen. The other one was slightly shorter, but just as strong apparently, and had a handsome, honest face from what they could see before he turned away, as well as the deepest blue eyes. And from this angle they could all see he had a very tight butt to go with the rest of his apparently amazing physique. The suits the two humans were wearing left very little to the imagination.

All in all these humans were a welcome change from the Batarians and Quarrians the Asari had been seeing since they were captured a week ago. Still the oldest one, a Matron on the cusp of entering her matriarch years kept her mind on the business at hand. "Excuse me, but what is going on? Are you two part of some advance human force, or what?"

The younger asari with the translation program asked curiously "And what did you mean when you said the other one had a female body for two years?"

Herb grimaced after reading her question off his omni-tools "We'll show you after all this is over, providing you can answer some questions of our own at that point. As for what's going on..." Herb went on to explain what they were up to, giving the Asari just as much information as they had the Turians and the Elcor an hour before. He didn't bother explaining anything about Ranma and himself, seeing it as a pointless waste of time at the moment. "Can I ask what you are doing separated like this?" he asked that question looking both at the Asari and the other alien group. "And what exactly are you? I haven't seen any of your kind around here, but I have seen plenty of Asari."

One of the suited aliens spoke up, his voice coming out ragged, as if from lack of sleep or food or both, but it was also male, which told Ranma and Herb that they were correct in thinking there were no women among the bio-suit wearing aliens. "I'm Kaza'Far'vas'neema, you can call me Kaza, and we're Quarrians." He cocked his head when the name seemed to mean nothing to the humans. There was no flash of contempt or understanding, simply the same blank look. "Um, well to put it simply we have weak immune systems and so they can't crack our suits to install the obedience chips without killing us. We're also all good mechanics, so are too valuable to waste like that." He spat the words. "All of our people who don't prove good enough are killed almost immediately, and what they do to the women..." He shuddered, and all the other Quarrians looked down or away, shaking with impotent rage and deep, almost overwhelming grief. "If we don't obey they simply beat us and withhold our food until we do."

Ranma and Herb shared an angry look, and Ranma continued to look at the Quarrians, while Herb turned to the Asari. "I'm Giera N'yassa, and I was the captain of a defense frigate. All of us here are biotics." At Herb's blank look she elaborated, filling in the parts she thought he was confused about. "A trained biotic field interferes with the obedience chips the Batarrians put in their slaves." She fingered the collar they all wore, scowling, though on her the expression looked good. "These collars inhibit our powers, and they would normally have started to indoctrinate us in with what they call 'the old fashioned way'. Apparently though the drugs they would normally use on us ran out right before they brought us back here, and they haven't received any more. We're too dangerous to put with the rest of the slaves, and far too valuable to try and break without them, so they're just keeping us locked up for now."

Herb nodded, wondering what in the world a biotic was, and if it had anything with that Batarrian who had used that odd blue power Ranma had told him about. On a whim Herb used his ki sight, and was surprised that the Asari did seem to have more energy in their bodies than the Batarrians. But it wasn't ki, or at least not ki as he understood it. It looked almost artificial, but not quite, or maybe on a different frequency if he used sound as an example. It was odd, but not something he wanted to explore right now. "So if we free you from those things you can defend yourselves?"

Giera nodded. "Yes, but they are rigged to explode if anyone removes or tries to damage them. The one who captured us, Kurdack or something, he'll be the one to have the master control."

Herb frowned but nodded and began to pull out more guns from 'heaven space' motioning Ranma to do the same. This caused all of the Asari and Quarrians to gape in shock and mutter among themselves as to how the humans were doing whatever it was. Ranma finished first and casually ripped the door of the Quarrian cage. After that the two of them handed out the weapons. "Then we'll need to find some way to destroy it or disable it somehow. Until then I'm afraid you lot are going to have to defend this place. Hopefully you won't have to hold out for long, but that's the best we're going to be able to do."

Both the Asari and the Quarrians thanked the two humans for even this slim chance. The Asari took it further and promised to do all manner of things with the two humans in gratitude if they got out of this. This caused Ranma to blush and stumble, encouraging the maidens even more, while Herb simply smiled and bore their teasing stoically, knowing it was merely their way of expressing their hope that their time as slaves might be ending. He was wrong of course, that was only part of it. The rest was actual interest in the two humans, and the fact that most of the Asari here were in their Maiden Stage and at that time of life most Asari were driven by curiosity and the need to experience new things, which wasn't fully satisfied by their military service at present. Somehow they could tell that the two humans would be very much a good experience.

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At this point Kurdack had successfully pulled his crew back from the ferocious fighting occurring everywhere in the city, backing them up and securing the area around his own crew's slave pens, which abutted the outer rock wall of the cavern. There he dug in hard and bringing out some of the heavier toys he had gotten from the Batarian government for his raids on the humans. Of course he had also been using them on his other raids, especially the gas canisters, which made it so simple for him to take entire ships almost without a fight.

His heaviest guns, automatic defense turrets with cannons and heavy machine guns, were set up in a half circle around his fortress, and his crew were spread out between and in front of these guns. Still over four thousand strong they were bunkered down, killing anything that moved, with no way for Ranma or Herb to get through without being seen. The two martial artists were clinging to the roof of the cavern directly above the center of Kurdack's territory. Herb shook his head, "I don't see any way through, do you?"

Ranma shook his head. "Nah, not me either. And we ain't ready to be seen just yet." Herb nodded firmly. While the Batarians had done a damn good job jumping all over themselves, their numbers were still a little too much for the two of them and the freed slaves to take in an open conflict. "But we got to strike now, we've been lucky so far but sooner or later the slavers are gonna notice that we've broken the two groups out of the set apart pens, and they might realize this is all a smokescreen."

Herb nodded agreement, but still couldn't see a way for them to get at Kurdack without showing their hand. "I agree, but that brings us back to our current problem."

Ranma scowled a little, then frowned as he saw a single human slave with two guards moving through the city below them, and he suddenly smiled. "I think I've got an idea, but you ain't gonna like it." He was right, Herb didn't, but could see no way to succeed without taking risks.

The two broke up again, Herb traversing the city, taking stock of the remaining groups and figuring out who, besides Kurdack, seemed to be pulling out of the madness. When he found one, a crew that seemed around three thousand strong but which had allied itself with two other smaller groups he targeting that group. He took out any patrols he saw around with that symbol, and joined in several firefights against them, whittling down their numbers further.

Ranma on the other hand first ambushed the small group he saw, then, after stowing the hysterically grateful woman in among the 'special' pens with the liberated Quarrians and Asari (and dealing with another round of teasing that had him blushing so hard he felt lightheaded) went out and found himself a broken slave collar.

OOOOOOO

Kurdack had retreated into his fortress to rest and recuperate from the fighting, leaving one of his senior lieutenants in charge. At the moment however they were waiting for a messenger from one of the other pirate bands, a sign they wanted to join up with Kurdack now. The senior lieutenant thought this was smart of them. With the heavy gun turrets brought out and online, Kurdack's position was now the next best thing to unassailable. None of the other pirate crews remaining had anything heavy enough to breach them, not without taking atrocious losses. The bloody and chaotic internecine fighting over the last few days had seen to that.

The party they were expecting was late however, making the lieutenant very happy when one of his snipers shouted "I see movement, one slave girl approaching, but she doesn't seem to have any guards."

The lieutenant, whose name was Senjad, frowned at that and hurried over. Soon enough the slave girl, a short but very buxom human female with a magnificent head of red hair that fell loosely to her shoulders came into view, wearing thin skin tight pants and a tight white shirt that barely held in her assets. She stopped when he ordered her to halt. "Where are you guards girl?!" he asked brusquely, leering down at her. This girl was really something, even if her clothing was covering more than was normal among slaves.

"Dead master," said the girl in a broken tone, her eyes almost vacant. Senjad recognized the look, he had seen it before in slaves who were born into their rightful place, trained from birth to obey. Such slaves were prized, as their wills were so broken they could actually be trusted to perform without the threat of pain or death hanging over them. The girl's next words confirmed that as she held up a data disk. "I am to present myself here to my new master Kurdack and give him this." The way she held it up subtly brought attention to her bust, pushing her breasts together.

Senjad grinned evilly, showing his pointed teeth, by his ancestors this girl was a gem, where had her original master been keeping her? He was almost tempted to sample the goods for himself, but he knew Kurdack would have him flayed alive if he did. Maybe if he performed well in the next few days Kurdack would reward him with some time with this one. "Very well slave, one of my men will escort you to him."

The slave nodded and docilely followed after the man he had designated, making no sign that she felt the lusty glares of Senjad or his men on her backside, which was just as magnificent as the rest of her.

OOOOOOO

Ranma shuddered a little inside as she was led into the massive building that doubled as Kurdack's headquarters and slave pens and up five floors. The looks the Batarrians had been giving her were just vile, and it had taken all of her self-control not to start killing them on the spot. If it wasn't for his martial arts acting skills he would have too.

The guard that had been assigned to him reached a set of double doors at the end of a hallway. When he knocked on it he was answered immediately by a voice inside shouting "Come in!"

When the doors opened it revealed what looked like a strippers lounge crossed with a managerial office of someone who was way too full of himself. There were two sets of poles set into raised circular platforms around which circular sofas were placed. Four batarians lounged around one pole, watching the Asari dancer there, who looked a little older than most Ranma had seen, if her bust line was anything to go by anyway. Thankfully for Ranma she had evidently just started her routine, and had enough clothing on to keep Ranma from blushing, if barely.

At the far end was a huge desk, covered with different screens, the wall behind it filled with scenes of what Ranma took to be the owners various exploits over the years, and one wall was covered end to end with a drinks display.

Another batarian, this one looking a little older than the norm somehow, with hard eyes and a cruel set to his mouth, sat there and Ranma fought back a shiver when he saw her and leered at her. "It's about time, trouble?"

The guard who had escorted her up shook his head. "Not on our end boss, her guards bought it at some point before they reached us though. But she's a borny boss, so she just kept right on moving."

Borny was the slang term for a slave born to it and Kurdack's eyes lit up avariciously, taking that in and Ranma's figure, waving the guard back to his post. As the door closed again he took the data chip from Ranma's outstretched hands and then nodded to the free dancing pole. "Well then, let's take a look at the merchandise before I see the rest of what your previous owner is offering. I think I can use a bit of entertainment after the last few days, and new meat is always better than old."

The Asari dancer seemed to pout at this, and pouted even further when the Batarians who had been watching her moved over to join Kurdack at the other station.

Ranma took note of this out of the corner of her eye, but stepped forward, her movements as always flowing like water as she began an acrobatic dance even before she reached the platform. She pirouetted, letting her shoes fall off, then grasped the pole and flipped herself upside down, holding the pole between her legs as she dangled there, twisting around it, her loose fitting shirt falling and letting the bottoms of her breasts be seen. It was obvious then that she was not wearing a bra.

All five of the Batarians were now watching her avidly, waiting for her to start stripping, but instead, Ranma pulled her legs from around the pole and did a handstand, extending them out towards Kurdack and opening them.

Kurdack grinned and leaned forward, but before he could do anything else Ranma's legs slammed together trapping his head between her thighs. A single twist, and his neck snapped. Ranma's legs then shot out in both directions, kicking the two Batarians on either side of him, crushing their heads in turn.

The two on the outer edge of this reached for their weapons but Ranma twirled on her hands, kicking one in the head hard enough he flew away, his cranium shattered under the impact. A short jump and a small fist took the other in the throat, crushing his wind pipe. Another fist to the side of the head ended his misery and Ranma stood up, breathing deeply and shuddering, but kept her eyes on the asari dancer, wondering how she would react.

The Asari reacted by jumping towards her but instead of attacking like Ranma half-expected after seeing her pout when the Batarians stopped watching her, she grabbed the much shorter Ranma in a hug around the head, pressing the redhead's face into her nearly bare breasts. The asari babbled something in her own language, but Ranma couldn't make it out, since he had to leave his omni-tool behind. Slaves didn't have them after all.

The redheads arms flailed around for a moment before finding purchase on the dancers shoulders, whereupon she pushed the alien girl away, allowing her to breath in deeply. The asari pouted at that put let Ranma go. After that she followed Ranma as she walked over to the desk and looked at the screens there.

One of them was an internal security setup, and he locked the building down, shutting the front doors. The next he could see were for the defense turrets set up outside, and he nodded grimly, then set the things to target anything that moved around them. Almost instantly he could hear the screams and panicked cries begin outside, and he smiled, but there was no humor in the expression. After that he walked over to one of the batarians and pulled his omni-tool off his arm.

At this point the asari dancer spoke up again and Ranma tapped the tool, one eyebrow lifting in surprised amusement at the translation in English which read 'Ohmygoshohmygosh, that thing you did was awesome! Can you teach me, please, please, please!' He looked up at the taller Asari, and asked "Can you understand me?" The look of blank incomprehension on her face was answer enough and he sighed. No point in having a conversation when only one person understands. He waved his hands trying to indicate the girl (with her attitude he couldn't think of her as a woman no matter her age or looks) should wait, and went back to the desk. He systematically destroying everything but the turret controls.

Then, with the as-yet unnamed asari dancer following behind him like a puppy he made his way through the fortress, killing any Batarian he found. There weren't many, and soon he had cleared out the entire building, while outside the guards had turned on the defense turrets. One the second floor he found Kurdack's slave pens, and killed the guards there. He looked over and took one of the guards omni-tools, throwing it to the oldest looking slave, a human female who looked to be in her thirties. It had not escaped his notice that most of the slaves

here were female. One of them was even of a race he hadn't yet seen, with an almost reptilian look to her. The human gratefully slipped it one and Ranma spoke in English. "I don't have a translator thingy, so you're going to have to translate for the others okay? My names Ranma, what's yours?"

The human nodded and set the omni-tool to translate into Basic, the language of the council races, a mix of Asari, with some turian and salarian mixed in. "I'm Louisa Morgan. What's going on, how did you get in here?"

Ranma quickly filled them in as he was breaking them out of their cells, being careful not to look at any of them, given their state of dress. Even this was enough to get her blushing however, and some of the women, especially the asari commented on it amongst themselves as they scavenged omni-tools of their own.

After that he led the way down towards the first floor, which was the armory for Kurdack's group. Most of the women and all of the few men there armed themselves, and followed Ranma outside.

The gun turrets and the batarians there had nearly wiped one another out, and Ranma was easily able to get in close and finish the job on the few batarians that were still alive. Little did the redhead know that the slaves she had just freed were now recording her fighting on their omni-tools. When Ranma pulled Senjad out of his hiding place and punched him in the chest so hard that he flew away to smash through a stone building's side, it caused shouts of surprise and awe to go up behind him.

Ranma ignored that though, and began to lead the group around the edge of the city. The fighting had condensed at this point simply due to the fact there weren't nearly as many batarians left to keep fighting, and they only ran into trouble twice on their journey around to the tunnel offshoot that led to the 'specials' section, which thankfully was pretty close to Kurdack's former fortress.

Herb waited for her there, and one eyebrow rose in surprise at the gaggle of slaves that followed him in. "I take it you were successful?"

"Yep," Ranma shuddered, grabbing the flask of water, heating it with his ki easily and dumping it over her head, triggering the change. He ignored the exclamations of shock and surprise that rose up all around them and went on while changing shirts, which earned him several appreciative looks. "After this is all over I'm going to take a fucking Brillo pad to my skin though, just their looks alone, brrrr." With a shake of his head Ranma concentrated on Herb again. "How are things going?"

Herb smiled grimly. "I Think we're almost ready to finish this. The batarians are down to barely eight thousand all told I think, without Kurdack's forces, and they're all gripped in battle

fever, unable to see the big picture. One more raid I think, and then we can start the end game."

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Tousha was in Asari child who had been moving to a human colony with her mother to be with her father, who had gone ahead of them to buy a house. They had been so excited, and so had she, wanting to be able to have a yard of their own, maybe even a pet, though her mother had refused to be drawn on the subject.

They had both been captured when the Batarians had taken their ship about a week ago and her mother, who had put up a fight with her limited biotics, had been separated from her. Tousha had been thrown in here with several other Asari and human children, and even one Turian child. They were all kept here in two cages, separated by gender and by a wide aisle between the two cages. Because of the growing process's impact on the brain of the Batarians were leery of putting a control trip in children's brains, since it could have unintended consequences later.

After all, it was bad for the slavers reputation if a few years on the control chip failed, or the slave somehow became psychotic. This problem was only heightened if the child was a natural biotic like all Asari were, so it was best to wait until at least the equivalent of the teenage years. Besides, children rarely needed an obedience chip to control them. Simply withholding food or random beatings delivered by leather-wrapped clubs so as not to leave marks or cuts was enough.

It had not been a fun time for her, knowing that she was in here until her owners found a person with 'special interests' or until she grew up enough for them to implant the trip in Her brain. The shock collar that fitted her was an issue all by itself, and she and the other children had been having a miserable time of it. They had heard the news about the combat outside, and had seen some of the guards race off join it, including their owner, who had rented this space along with two others. Yet for all that it seemed a distant thing, unable to really break through her fear and sadness.

All the children had heard about the fighting between the batarians, but it didn't seem important to any of them. None of them were large enough or tough enough to fight even if they got a chance to, and one master was as bad as any other to their minds.

A sudden noise coming from the ceiling drew Tousha's attention up, and she looked up for the first time in a while. Slaves, especially children were indoctrinated to not look up, as it seemed to imply they felt themselves equal to their masters and betters.

Yet at the moment her week's worth of indoctrination had disappeared because dangling from the roof right outside the cage was a human male with a single black pigtail hanging down and the brightest blue eyes Tousha had ever seen. A murmur arose from around

her as other slaves noticed but stopped when the human male raised a hand and put a finger to his lips in the universal gesture for quiet. He then winked at the kids and moved away.

The children giggled to themselves at the strangeness of that gesture, and for the first time in a long time Tousha felt a little bubble of hope arise within her. That hope blossomed and grew when the strange human reached down, and picked up a batarian by his neck, swinging him into two more. He dropped down on top of them and with gentle looking punches knocked all three out. He bowed toward the cages, and the kids all surprised themselves by cheering and clapping.

A second later another human with a very strange hair style moved into the cavern, dragging two more guards. Tousha knew for a fact that light purple, white and blue were not normal hair colors for humans. She had seen a few that had artificial hair colors like that, but even so this humans hair was done in a very odd style.

"And for my next trick," the first human said in English, a language Tousha and the human children could follow, "I'm going to make this door disappear." The children all gasped in surprise as he ripped the jail's door out of its place, tossing it to the side easily. The grin on his face widened waved grandly for them to exit. The kids all cheered and rushed out of the cages, then gasped even more as the humans, Asari and a few others he had freed from Kurdack's made their way into the area. Families were reunited all over the place, but Tousha, not seeing her mother anywhere, decided she would stick to the safest place around.

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Herb had left the cavern as soon as the parents had entered. He knew they would have been careful, none of them were going to risk their own lives and freedom let alone their children's now, but it never hurt to make certain. And he wasn't really at home with all that emotional stuff.

The turians had been much more proactive than he had expected, and he found himself a little impressed with them. None of them were soldiers, but apparently all Turians had to train in the militia for several years, and even turians like this were able to handle themselves. They had scrounged up some armor for themselves and moved out into the city, digging in well away from the cavern they had previously been locked up in. The Elcor had gone with them, his heavy cannon slow, but with a lot of stopping power. They had been attacked a few times, but repulsed both attacks, and with Herb's help while Ranma dealt with his target crushed both assaults, wiping them out.

It seemed clear however that soon the batarians would realize they had a slave revolt on their hands, and might realize they had been duped into fighting one another. It certainly looked that the time for stealth was passing.

Herb looked up from his musings as he heard someone walking his way. He turned and twitched a little seeing Ranma standing there with a little blue alien girl perched on his shoulders. "Ranma, what the..."

"Don't ask dude," Ranma shook his head, causing the girl to giggle a little at the tickling sensation of his hair. "She's got a surprising grip on her, and refuses to let go. I even got a few of the other adults to try and talk her out of it, but none of them were able to. She says she's going to stick to me until we find her mom. It was all I could do to get her agree to perch up there rather than keep holdin' onto my leg."

Herb winced at that, but nodded reluctantly. Behind them the rest of the slaves and the children filed out, and he nodded. "Let's get this over to join up with the turians and that elcor then I think we should try to hit the batarians while they still aren't aware of most of the slaves escaping."

Ranma nodded and the two moved out, leading the slaves to link up with the turian crew. Here however they ran out of luck again, because they ran right into a group of two thousand batarians charging toward them. The slavers had found out that the slaves from the separate hangers were freeing themselves, and two of the larger remaining crews had put aside their differences and joined up to recapture them all. The plan was then to use the Quarians and their services as bargaining chips to make the other crews stop fighting. One crew of a little under a thousand attacked the turians, running into all the tricks and traps they could have devised, along with the Asari-biotics trained soldiers.

The group with Ranma ran into the crew of batarians sent to grab the children and the escaped slaves from Kurdack's, as well as figure out what had happened there. One minute it looked like Kurdack was strengthening his position so much that none of the others could attack him, the next he was dead and his crew mauled, almost wiped out except for the few that had been away from his base. It looked like a slave uprising had taken him out from the inside, and they were determined to figure out how such a thing was possible.

The children and the ex-slaves all went to ground, some firing back with stolen weapons, some of the asari using their barely trained biotic powers as well as they could, but it was Ranma and Herb who did the main fighting.

Ranma dodged out of the way of a spray of gunfire not even having enough time to set the little asari girl down, filling one hand with cold ki and the other with heat using one of the techniques he had learned from Master Vulkan. It was hard, but he had actually experimented with this before, and now he moved the hand holding hot ki in a spiral pattern. "Dragon's Tornado Roar!"

A tornado suddenly appeared from between his fists, shooting out in a straight path away from him, ripping and tearing with as much power as he put into it. Hundreds of batarians

were sucked up into it, and he brought his hand forward, shooting out several ki attacks to add to the assault.

Herb joined in, now using his ability to fly for short amounts of time. He threw in several dozen Hito-Ryu-Zan-Ha, the ki blades adding an even more lethal punch to Ranma's assault. He stayed up there providing long range firepower, while Ranma, with the little asari on his shoulders, closed in, killing a batarian with every punch or kick.

The freed slaves were utterly astonished and somewhat terrified of this odd new way of using biotic power, and many of them once more began to record it on their omni-tools. They recorded Herb slicing and frying dozens of batarians slavers as he flew through the air of the giant caverns. They recorded the utterly preposterous sight of Ranma smashing batarians left and right, so hard they flew through the air, their bodies becoming embedded in the rock or simply coming apart. All the while a strangely blood-thirsty asari child was sitting on his shoulders, apparently unconcerned about the number of bullets flying around after the first few minutes, shouting in English "More, more, hit him harder!"

For the batarians this strange assortment of attacks was utterly demoralizing, and most of them began to flee five minutes into the battle, only for the two martial artists to pursue them, with the freed slaves spreading out behind them. Those slaves freed others in pens across the city which had changed hands dozens of times in the fighting over the past few days, handing out guns to the slaves who were fit enough to fight. While it didn't happen like Herb wanted, the uprising was on.

The remaining batarian crews woke up to their danger too late, and the utterly terrified, completely demoralized remnants of the crew that tried to coral the escaped slaves didn't help matters. They banded together under one charismatic captain named Elthac, but that made the tales of Ranma and Herb's assault spread all the faster.

The asari matron Giera and her crew also spread out, their biotic powers. The sheer number of their strange attacks made Herb and Ranma's eyes widen in surprise, but Herb was the one who was most surprised. The Biotic energy didn't really look to his senses like ki, but what else it could be he didn't know. Still watching the Asari charge, use shields, grab batarians and throw them, and some attacks that looked much like small ki attacks (this one was apparently called a biotic orb) and others that looked the 'biotic' equivalent of thrown grenades was fascinating.

The growing numbers of slaves spreading out and hunting the batarians down allowed Ranma and Herb to take the fight to the largest concentrations of remaining slavers. When they did, they ran right over Elthac, who died by a boot-ta-da-head™ by Ranma which sent him flying through a building's rocky wall and out the other side. The rest of his group died under Herb's aerial assault, which completely bypassed their defensive positions.

The fighting continued for another seven or eight hours, but Elthac was the last captain to try and rally all the crew together. Without that, they were taken apart piece-meal as they tried to go to ground, a ridiculous endeavor against her and Ranma who simply blew apart any hard defense they came to. It might have been different if any of the crews had kept their heavier weapons in reserve, but none of them had, completely devoting their available arms to the battles between the crew before this.

It took a while, but eventually the last pirate was pulled out of his hiding place and killed. It took hours after that for all the former slaves to be gathered together and some order established, with Giera and Sukat taking over that aspect with the help of several humans who had been militiamen before they were taken captive. Families were reunited and Tousha finally clambered off Ranma when her mother was found in one of the pirate crew's holding areas.

Ranma and Herb were hailed as heroes, and for several minutes had to fend off hundreds of questioners asking about their odd powers, but were able to fend them off for a time. One of the Asari maidens came forward, boldly grabbing Herb by the upper arm. She deliberately snuggled against his arm pushing it between her breasts, causing him to flush. Nearby Ranma was being treated to much the same tactic, but in his case his face was nearly as red as his female form's hair. He had never built up the immunity to the female form Herb had.

"How can we ever thank you?" said the Asari in a breathy voice, pushing against him even harder. It was very evident that she had some very clear ideas on how **she** wanted to thank him.

Herb however had his mind on more important things, or more important things at the moment. "Ahem, um, perhaps later. I don't suppose any of you can cook human food can you? Only neither of us have eaten anything in a little under a week."

Ranma heard this over where he was trying to get away from another bunch of mixed Asari maidens and rescued kids, all of whom wanted him to carry them around like he had Tousha. His stomach answered for him, rumbling so loudly it caused the kids to scatter for a moment. He scratched his pigtail sheepishly, his embarrassed face causing a round of laughter and several Asari volunteering to cook for them. After that the floodgates opened and the slaves, outside the turians and a few others who moved to lock down the city, broke up into groups to search for food and other supplies.

It turned out that several of the slaves could indeed cook, and Ranma and Herb ate their fill of sandwiches and other things. After that Herb spent the most interesting night of his life with the asari maiden, whose name was Xenris A'carna, and it only got more interesting when several other maidens decided to join in.

Ranma avoided this altogether, amusing and frustrating several maidens by disappearing into the city. This however merely made them more interested in him.

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It was decided to send out the one ship which was closest to being space worthy to the nearest council planet and request aid be sent to lift off the other slaves.

This turned out to be the frigate that Kurdack had taken from Giera, and after the Quarrians got done shouting at Ranma and Herb for the amount of damage they had done to all of the pirate ships, they prepared it to head out within two days of the fighting ending. The quarrians, and their treatment by the other races in particular the turians after they were all freed pissed Ranma off and he made a point of threatening to beat the shit out of anyone he saw pushing them around or denigrating them. The quarrians had all looked at him as an ally at that point, even more so when he stood up for them against the Asari and turians who wanted to cut their rations and give them to their own people.

Giera and a portion of her crew would pilot the ship, taking with them as many randomly chosen ex-slaves as they could cram aboard. This automatically included over a hundred asari of all ages, some humans and one of Sukat's lieutenants to tell the government how much help they needed. Their testimonies would galvanize the planet's government into action, and help would be sent immediately, though it might take some time to have a military presence in the form of ships assigned to the effort.

Later it would turn out to not be necessary, as the human Systems Alliance had found evidence of Torfan's existence as a slaving trade waypoint and he sent a large force to expel the slavers. It would have been a brutal fight, with nearly as many casualties among the attackers as the slavers, but it was a moot point now.

Ranma and Herb went with them, not wanting to remain here any longer and wanting to disappear from the limelight as much as they could. They both wanted to get a better handle on where the hell they were, a future time or some kind of alternate dimension. There were a lot of questions they wanted answers to, not least of which was why all the aliens here had so little ki in them. Even the asari biotics didn't have much, proving that there was no connection between biotics and ki, or if there was Herb couldn't find it.

And some of the history they had read while they weren't busy helping the Quarrians and the others made them both distinctly uneasy, both in what was there, and what wasn't. The historical information on the human race for example was sparse in the extreme, and that worried both of them because neither could find anything recent about their nations, which could be good or bad depending. There was also the council's history, which was disturbing and worrying in turns. Ranma was concerned about how all the races here seemed to use the same tech without much variation, as well as the idea of the council "Just fucking finding this citadel thing and walking in and using it without understanding why the hell it was there or anything else". Ranma was very paranoid about things just left around like that his old man had gotten them both into trouble more times than he cared to remember. It was just too good to be true to him, and lazy as hell too.

Herb was concerned about a lot of things really, along with sharing Ranma's concerns about the oddity of the technology. The idea of Spectres secret agents utterly outside the law who had to rely on their own resources for money, answerable only to the three councilors was one such. It smacked either of naivety, to believe that these special agents would not become corrupt, or an astonishing level of laziness and lack of oversight, possibly both. The idea of three people having as much power as the councilors did, and without the morale integrity to do what they had to, bothered him more than a little bit.

Herb was from a royal family which ruled the Musk due to the primacy of their draconic blood, yet he knew that with that power came the need to make the hard decisions, the ones which were best for his people in the long term, the honorable decisions, not the easy ones. The batarians should never have been allowed to keep raiding other slavers, regardless of their reasoning or the hardship a war would have caused. To do otherwise was to buy peace with the lives of your citizens.

Both of them needed time to figure out this new universe and what they wanted to do with their lives, and had decided they wanted to slip into anonymity somewhere, but neither realized that much of the final conflict and their roles in it. The moment the former slaves could upload to the main communication net those videos would go viral and the two of them could kiss their anonymity goodbye.

As thanks for their part in freeing them, Herb and Ranma were given the best rooms aboard the ship, and both crashed there, looking forward to sleeping in decent beds. Herb was joined there by his paramour Xenris, who after that first experience had been trying to monopolize his time with little success. As interesting as Herb found the concept of sex, he didn't have any kind of emotional connection to Xenris but she knew a good thing when she saw (and felt) it, and was hopeful such a connection could be formed over time.

Ranma was going to have issues of his own in that area if the seven asari maidens and one matron that were after him and had gotten aboard the ship had any say in it. The way he was around the kids, his strength and his character appealed to them all greatly, and he was among the best looking human males any of them had seen. The fact that he flipped genders with a glass of water was also fascinating to them, and they had all been trying since they were freed a week ago to get close to him. The fact that he didn't seem to understand or simply was overwhelmed by their advances made him even more desirable in a way.

So they had conspired together, and hatched a plan.

Ranma was a very deep sleeper, primarily because when he was on the road with his father he needed all the REM sleep he could get. To combat this however his body had come up with Sleep-fu, a sort of automatic defense while he was sleeping to protect himself from anything that tried to attack him. Unfortunately this defense needed to feel that there was some malice in the air for it to activate. If it didn't, Ranma was helpless. And as the six asari who

had snuck into his room had nothing but good intentions (albeit hormonally driven ones) toward him it did not activate.

Ranma woke when he tried to turn over and felt his arm couldn't move for some reason. When he opened his eyes he saw he was chained to the bed by heavy metal chains, and eight giggling Asari surrounded the bed looking down at him. The oldest of them had already begun to strip her clothes off. Ranma blushed heavily and looked away, gasping out "W-what the heck! What are you all trying to..."

He was interrupted as one of the maidens, fed up with his up his obtuseness, leaned down and kissed him heavily on the lips.

Ranma's pent up hormones, which had been built up over the years, eventually breaking his father's indoctrination, broke through at last at that point, and his body automatically responded to the kiss, deepening it and letting his tongue lash around hers in the best kiss the maiden had ever had.

By the time the kiss ended Ranma's other 'attackers' had stripped off their clothing and when he looked up he saw acres of tantalizing blue flesh crawling onto the bed. "Oh."

End chapter

Heh, no worries, there will be lemons later, just not with nameless, pretty unimportant characters.

Names for some of the O.C. would be appreciated, though only three of them will be sticking around for long. I honestly don't think this was my best work but for barely a week...

Hope you all like this introduction and as always read and review.