

I am not moronic enough to work at modern BioWare, nor am I Japanese.

Howdy all. For those wondering, I have yet to hear from Tomon on the **Stallion of the Line** chapter. Regardless of if I do or don't, I will post it on Christmas Eve.

As for this update, astonishingly, despite GDWHOM getting the carry over effect for the Ranma fic poll this month, Effect won by a decent margin. Kind of funny. Anyway, here we go.

Chapter 12: A Horse Goes Stomping, Part 1

Glancing over at her companions as they boarded the ship that would take them back to Mostromos, Usagi held back a snicker, shaking her head as she saw how anxious the other asari were. "You all need to relax, you know. We did it. We're away from the Citadel, in Asari Space and heading back to Mostromos."

"I'm very glad that you ended that statement they are rather than saying something stupid like nothing can go wrong now, or were completely safe," Herb muttered, not looking up from where he was reading on his omni-tool. "That would be tempting fate like waving a red flag in front of a bull."

Herb had changed into his male body as soon as they were on an asari planet. In fact, several of the others hadn't even seen him move so fast had he exited the ship they had all been on. At which point, the asari had all spent several hours gleefully coming up with a disguise for him, up to and including dying his hair black-blue for a bit.

Unfortunately, the group had found they were somewhat stuck on Sanves as there wasn't routine traffic between Mostromos and this planet, and none of them had any wish to go planet-hopping in order to get back there. So they'd been forced to wait here for several days for the next ship that would stop at Mostromos, which also offered room and board to passengers to come through.

During that time, Usagi had found herself in the very strange position of acting like a minder for the younger asari, watching over them as they went from one library to another, ransacking them for books, movies and other things to put on their omni-tools for when they got back to the monastery. Despite the fact that all of them had decided to go back, including, unfortunately for Herb and Ranma, O'taku, which would deprive them of a pilot going forward, all of them wanted to make certain that they had gathered enough material to last them for the next few years.

Their newest companion, Wrex, had decided to go on a drinking binge, while also catching up on the news of the Human/Turian War against the batarians. Meanwhile, Herb

found several gambling establishments and, using his insane level of hand-and-eye control, earned a good bit of money on dice and other such games of chance.

This resulted in one place with an apparently crooked table being burned to the ground, after it had closed for the night later that day, none of them looked too closely at. Since no evidence had come out to the contrary, O'taku and the rest were more than willing to let the locals try to solve that mystery on their own without bringing to attention the so-called 'descendent of dragons' they were traveling with.

"Funny. I think every race but the squids have sayings like that, about tempting fate. Our phrase is 'like going naked into a rachni pit'." Wrex chortled, shaking his head as he sat back in the extra-large chair across from the others in the small passenger area of the ship that would take them to Mostromos. Apparently, this ship had krogan on it before, which was nice. *And I wager, I know the reason, given the looks I got from the captain. Either an ex-merc who worked with krogan before or... heh.*

"Honestly, I can't believe we made it off the Citadel so easily!" one of the other asari muttered.

Her name escaped Herb for a moment but felt it was Ra'ca or something like that. She wasn't exactly an important member of their little group, simply a shiphand who allowed Inu and O'taku to do the talking for her. He nodded at her words now, though. "Honestly, escaping from the center of an intergalactic government should not have been that easy."

"Just because they're the center of the government doesn't mean they're all that efficient," Wrex argued.

Usagi simply grinned, flashing a V sign. "What's the phrase? A bit of grease goes a long way?"

Shaking his head, Herb recalled how easy it had been to escape the Citadel. After they'd spent a good few hours sneaking and moving into position, while Wrex and Inu had worked on getting the spyware into the local security system, getting off the Citadel had been almost ridiculously easy.

Flashback:

Watching from where they were currently hiding away on top of a restaurant near the hallway leading into the dock where the ship they were due to board was waiting for them, Herb had to shake his head. "There is no way this is going to work. This kind of thing only works in movies."

"Actually, I'm afraid Honey Trap bullshit kind of works more often than you wanna think. Far too damn many youngsters can't think past their quads," Wrex argued back, shaking his

head. "Mind you, I've never worked with Usagi before, so I don't know how good she is at this, but there's a reason why asari commandos are also trained in seduction skills. They're damned hard to ignore. Also, remember the time. This is the middle of the night and one of the most organized and upscale dockyards in the Citadel. An area that doesn't have much crime at all, at a time where it is almost dead."

"Yeah, those two aren't exactly going to be the brightest bunch C-Sec has produced," O'taku mumbled, watching as Usagi moved down the hallway. "Still, I have to wonder if Usagi is just a bit too direct about this kind of thing."

The other asari all nodded, and the group fell silent, watching. Herb's eyes narrowed as the view they were watching on their omni-tools switched from one camera to another, following Usagi's progress. At the same time, the spyware programs Wrex and the others had inserted into the local system, courtesy of his connections with the Shadow Broker, covered Usagi as well as their own connection to those cameras.

However, that shift wasn't what had caused his eyes to narrow. Rather, it'd been how Usagi had gone from striding forward like a woman on a mission to suddenly swaying and bobbing her head to the music of the large headphones she wore. These huge headphones were coupled with a woman's exercise outfit. *Well, the outfit of a woman without any shame whatsoever, anyway. And it was quite obvious when she left that Usagi removed her bra to boot.*

Almost unconsciously, Wrex used the zoom function on the camera, something that controlled the feed to all of their omni-tools. Not that any of the others, even Herb, complained. They watched as Usagi continued down the hall, singing along to a song coming through the large headphones she wore on her head. Such devices hadn't really changed all that much, which somewhat amused Herb. Usagi's eyes were also closed, and she seemed to be completely immersed in what she was listening and singing to rather than taking in anything from the world around her.

Zooming back out, Wrex watched as the two turians standing guard at the entrance into the docks stiffened, then relaxed, staring. One of them shouted something, but there was no pickup on the video cameras here, and it was very evident that Usagi hadn't heard what they were shouting either. The two security officers tried to get her attention again, then looked at one another, and one of them walked forward, while the other one stayed in place.

That was actually quite smart, and probably in the Citadel security handbook, one officer covering another from a distance as another approached what might be a problem. Their position by the dock's inner hatch had also been well thought out. The hallway leading up to it was long and without any cover, which would have let anyone trying to sneak near be seen with relative ease. Even Herb would have had trouble closing with them before they could hit the alarm, at the very least, something that would have been far more annoying to him than their guns.

Eventually, the officer that had gone forward tapped Usagi on the shoulder, causing her to blink and open her eyes, but Usagi kept on singing. She did so until the end of the song, apparently, while the officer waited, grinning in his people's fashion. She said something, and the two of them exchanged a few words. Usagi flashed up her omni-tool, showing a fake boarding pass for one of the ships in the dock ahead of her. Herb watched as Usagi grinned wickedly, looking at the turian and his companion down the road, licking her lips. Within moments, both she and the officer she had been talking to were walking back towards his companion. Then, all three of them disappeared into the docks.

"What the heck did she say to them?" O'taku wondered.

"Who cares? It got them out of position. Come on," Herb stated, standing up.

"They could still be hiding someplace nearby. Maybe they knocked Usagi out and are just waiting for everyone else to show up," one of the asari maidens dithered.

"They'd have to have a major force on the other side of that bother me. That doesn't even mention your companion here," Wrex grunted as he followed Herb to his feet. "We would've seen signs of that when we used the spyware moments ago to look at the docks. Come on. If we're not going to stay on the Citadel and go around picking fights, I don't want to be here."

"Seriously, I can never get a handle on Usagi," Inu muttered. "She's an insanely well-trained commando and occasionally shows these flashes of extreme intelligence on one hand. Yet she is so ditzy all the time and can act like a complete **whore** at the drop of a scarf! I can understand why other asari are so uncomfortable around her once they get to understand her mental issues."

Moments later, the group walked into the docks, then to the ship that the Consort had gotten them room on. They were met by an asari matron, who was looking over their shoulders towards one of the corners of the docks with a mildly censorious expression on her face as they walked up to her. When they did, she held a finger up in front of her mouth in the universal gesture for silence.

It hadn't always been universal. That was one of the many human body language/mannerisms that had permeated counsel space after the initial war between them and the turians had ended. Human body language seemed almost as pervasive and able to cross the cultural divide as finding asari sexy.

They all trooped into the ship, and after a few moments, Usagi appeared from between several empty crates, moving their way. She grinned cheerily at the matron, who stared back at her, then just shook her head and gestured with a thumb into the ship, keeping the finger from her other hand up in front of her mouth as she did.

The moment the hatch closed behind the matron, Usagi snickered, shaking her head. "Honestly, there's a reason why I don't sleep with turians, above and beyond the fact they're kind of ugly. I've never met one who wasn't a quick shot. I barely gave them a glimpse of the girls and a few rubs."

Wrex guffawed at that, while the other asari looked a little torn between laughing and shaking their heads at Usagi's attitude. Herb, on the other hand, looked down at her hands, a look of revulsion on his face and Usagi snickered at him. "I already cleaned it off, don't worry. After I knocked them both out for a bit. They'll think they fainted after finishing, although what they might think at that point, I don't know or care."

"Nonetheless, if you try to touch me before you take a full shower, a water shower rather than a sonic shower, I will be forced to hurt you," Herb growled back.

End flashback

"I don't see what you all are complaining about. I'm the only one that had to sacrifice anything, and it's nothing I've not done before. More importantly, Herb, you still look a little down in the dumps again. Getting that same feeling that Ranma is doing something you really think he shouldn't?" Usagi asked cocking her head quizzically.

"Worse, the feeling has evolved," Herb rumbled. "I now feel as if the entire galaxy is shafting me out of something I would dearly like for some reason."

Despite Herb's misgivings about what his erstwhile companion from another dimension was up to, the trip to Mostromos passed uneventfully. So much so that Usagi laughingly shouted the dreaded term 'And nothing can go wrong now!' just as they exited out into Mostromos' star system. Despite the glares sent her away from everyone else there though, the gods decided to smile upon them and not take up this gauntlet. The ship's shuttle touched down on this planet, and they were home-free.

However, at that point, the galaxy decided to get back at Usagi for the temptation. There was a message waiting for her from Abess Joldrea'as, telling her that the abbess had full trust in her to watch over Usagi and the other Ardat-Yakashi until they could be returned home.

That, once more, stuck Usagi in the uncomfortable position of making certain that none of the younger asari caused trouble of any sort. Which in turn pinned her in place until the next supply ship arrived. Not even Usagi was willing to head to Tuchanka when they didn't need to, and that was Herb's next destination.

In contrast, once Herb touched base with the ship designer, Rane'Ile, he was free to move on. The unlucky pair of the ancient krogan Battlemaster and pretty-boy martial artist did so quickly, finding a tramp freighter captain who was willing to take them to Wrex's home world. In return for a good deal of money, anyway. A significant amount, the equivalent of what

he would've paid for the entire group to go to several different planets one after another. Wrex's home world wasn't exactly a tourist destination, although it was no longer under interdict by the rest of the Council, at least. Getting back would be an issue, but Wrex felt he could figure something out there.

Not a day later, the pair were off again, leaving a pouting Usagi and the rest of Herb's asari companions behind, unaware that they were being followed...

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Despite the fact that several of the security officers working for the Council were not exactly up to standard, there was nothing wrong with their counter-electronic espionage division. In less than an hour of the group leaving the Citadel, the malware they had been using to cover their traces had been discovered and erased. Soon after, the solid-state recordings were recovered and analyzed. Not that the analysis took that long.

This was followed by several hours of recrimination and the two turians on duty that had been so badly hoodwinked by Usagi being discharged from the security forces. Even the trio of council members spent the better part of another hour shouting about whose fault among them it was that Herb had been able to get away so easily. Ass covering and finger pointing was that universal in any government.

Udina, the Alliance ambassador to the Council, was not there. While he had been part of the debacle with Herb, he had decided to ignore the imagery that Herb had later released and had washed his hands of anything further to deal with Herb. Officially, anyway. He had sent a data package home that the salarians hadn't been able to decode just yet, but what that could be, no one had any idea.

Meanwhile, Tevos was questioned very closely by the other two because of the simple fact, it was an asari who had helped them escape. It was asari, who had apparently assaulted the group of security officers sent to take command of their ship and gotten away and then an asari ship that they had left on. In defense, Tevos pointed out that she was in no way some kind of absolute ruler, able to command and control every asari in the galaxy, reminding them all that Matriarch Benezia had backed Herb and Ranma's initial disappearance. She then shot back that it had been entirely the fault of Valern that the three of them had been so busy dealing with 'the fallout of those tragic pictures getting out!' Seriously, Valern, what were you thinking?"

"I will admit that that action was not well executed. And I will say that the public fallout from it has been beyond any calculations I could have possibly made beforehand," the salarian admitted.

"Fallout? The three of us are laughingstocks, along with the C-Sec! We've been getting reports for days of people laughing at any security officer out there, laughing at us!" Spartacus growled, shaking his head as if the words were a personal affront, which, in a way, they were.

"We've never dealt with so much public derision and low-key contempt before. Not in my time on the Council anyway."

"Smear campaigns against the Council rarely go as well as people plan, but I will admit, this one was unique in how quickly it gained momentum and the nature of it." Tevos grumbled. "Yet it will pass. Let the people find some new shiny scandal to look at, and it will go away quickly. We just need to wait. Time is on our side." She sighed, shaking her head. "For now, I think we need to table Herb, the missing Ranma and everything else to do with the odd duo. When she is well enough to fight again, we can send Vasir out after them once more. Tela's proven that she can ambush them once. She can do so again."

Sparatus snarled, putting a final exclamation point at the end of a stinging diatribe about C-Sec's training and operational procedures. The fact, none of the asari that had been on the ship Vasir piloted to the Citadel had their pictures taken, was almost criminal negligence in his mind. C-Sec's become arrogant, damn them. "I think we need to get to the bottom of the mystery about where Ranma is first. Given how much trouble Herb has gotten up to, I cannot imagine what Ranma is doing somewhere else," he said now, looking over at his fellows. "I truly doubt whoever wanted him did so for any legal or moral reasons."

Tevos shook her head then again. "True, but we are the Council. We cannot spend all of our time on this one issue. We have neglected some of our other pressing concerns, especially this idea of the humans setting up a government over conquered batarian worlds, which would become part of the Alliance. I think we need to address that. Herb and Ranma's abilities, the mystery of where they came from and everything else are fascinating, troubling and perhaps important to the future. But that potential is not important enough to take up all of our time."

And there, the three of them let the subject drop for nearly a week. Sparatus turned his attention almost entirely to turian matters, trying to analyze and fight a growing sense of camaraderie that was building between the humans and the turians who were fighting the Batarian Hegemony. Meanwhile, the others had their own work to deal with, Valern's, however, did include speaking to the leader of a new Special Task Group after it was put together, updated on all the information that was known about Herb and Ranma and then put on the case.

"Your mission," Valern stated, staring into the pickup at the head of the team. "Is to follow and discover as much as possible as you can about the one called Herb. We have no idea where even to begin to look for Ranma in the Terminus Fringe, so that is a non-starter. Observe what he can for a few weeks and record every strange ability he has. The better to fight him in the future. Write up any counters, any weaknesses and any tactics you think can be used against Herb's abilities. The end state of your mission is obtaining a genetic sample from Herb. How you get it is your own business, but it must be full and complete. Honey Trap or dissection, it does not matter."

Valern scowled. "We also need to know what Herb is doing traveling with a krogan, almost as much as we need to understand his esoteric abilities."

Valern was not stupid. He had seen Herb heal himself, and had already made the jump from that to staving off the effect of aging in his own people, what that could mean for them if the salarians could but discover this strange internal energy source Herb professed to use. Valern knew, though, that if both of those things were possible with the strange life energy that Herb mentioned, there could be more biological functions that Ki impacted. This could, in turn mean, that Herb could reverse the genophage. That was a truly horrifying thought considering how aggressively expansionistic the krogan were when allowed to reproduce as profligately as they had originally.

The head of the STD group had not made that leap just yet despite having several days to go over some of the information that Valern had been given. Perhaps that was why he made the quip he did. "Has it occurred to you to simply ask or pay for it?"

The look he got in return from his superior shut the man up, and he and his team quickly were on the job.

Almost instantly, the group decided to stake out Mostromos, believing that if the runaway were heading into Asari Space, he would head back to a planet he had already been on. They discovered the local data net was even better than most asari systems and keeping them out, but they did discover enough recordings of Herb and Wrex, a known bounty hunter and mercenary, to be able to track them. Why they were going to Tuchanka was something they could not discover, but it added even more concern to their mission. If Herb had decided to give Clan Urdnot even a clue as to how to cure the genophage, then their mission would become far more serious quickly.

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Ranma and Tali watched the asari cruiser coming towards them via the scanners. As it did, Tali cocked her head to one side in thought, making this neat humming noise that caused Ranma to shiver a bit whenever he heard it. "Hmm... it's completely alone. I don't think I've ever even read about an asari cruiser going out on its own like this. It is very much against normal doctrine. Asari are supposed to love their small ship unit tactics from what little I've read about navy stuff."

Ranma nodded understanding. He wasn't a historian like Herb, but he had studied some military history and understood that big ships could be taken out by smaller ships when they weren't escorted by their own. *Although this universe doesn't seem to have anything like subs, able to hide and attack from 'below'.* "I suppose it's a mix of necessity and firepower," he said aloud. "A cruiser's probably got a good deal of firepower, enough to make pirates leery of trying to take them on, and a single cruiser can disappear for a bit way faster than a group of frigates can."

“True. Cruisers are certainly the workhorse of our Heavy Fleet,” Tali agreed. “Although I think there’s been a push from some captains to come up with our own carriers like the humans have over the past few years. I remember my father grumbling about that whenever he was home.”

Ranma snickered, shaking his head. “Of course, it’s a human who came up with the idea of carriers in space. Heh, I bet it was someone Japanese or American who came up with that one. I can so see some o’ my countrymen shouting about Kido Butai in space or an American singing that Midway song and demandin’ one of them’s called Enterprise or Arizona.”

That mostly went over Tali’s head, although she did point out, “Well, one of your carriers is named Enterprise. Why is that name important?” Tali had found a lot of little snippets of information like that over the past few days from the Shadow Broker’s horde of information. He had a worrisome amount of knowledge of the various ships and fleets of the Council races, far more than, frankly, Tali was comfortable with knowing.

At that, Ranma began to snicker, and with an eye roll hidden inside her mask, Tali turned her attention to the information coming from the IFF system, looking up the name of the ship in the Shadow Broker’s database. “The Alleviating Breeze. It’s apparently some kind of emergency relief ship. Not an actual combat vessel.”

“Yeah, I’ll believe that when I see it.” Ranma snorted.

Tali nodded. “I’d wager anything that ships like that are built to be modified on the fly for numerous missions. Just like this ship, the asari will need a way to store all the data the Shadow Broker’s stored.”

“Yeah, you mentioned something about the stored information being the reason for most of the bridge behind that wall. I thought it was because of the enhanced comms gear when I first took out the bastard.”

“Little bit of A, big bit of B, really,” Tali stated, nodding, pleased that Ranma had listened to her when she explained that. *He always listens*. “Although, transferring is going to be interesting. None of this stuff is built to allow data transfer physically. Wirelessly, well, you know how many security systems I had to deal with to transfer some of the information I wanted. I’ve been thinking about that, and-- hold on,” Tali interrupted herself as a small light began to beep. She hit it, and a voice came through.

“Ranma, this is Benezia. I brought a few friends along, but I am here at last. I trust you have retained control of that ship?” Benezia questioned, her face appearing a second later as Tali shifted the incoming call from comms only to one of the screens. “Although the ramshackle vessel nearby is a new point of data.”

Smirking at Benezia's overly polite tone of voice hiding her concern about this golden egg suddenly having been cracked before she could get to it, Ranma held up a hand into the pickup, waving back at his older (far, far older) friend. "Hey Benezia. Yeah, I'm still here, although I've acquired a friend. That ship out there's a pirate ship that came after the merchant ship I called in, because I needed food like I told ya about. It's a whole thing."

"Oh dear. Well, since that was at least several days ago, can I at least presume that you've gotten rid of all the bodies?" Benezia was very certain that if Ranma had been able to get aboard the pirate vessel, no hand-held weapon would have been able to slow him down, even starving and out of ki.

"Yep. Out the airlock they went. This ship and that are ours now. I've got some plans for the pirate ship. Anyway, come aboard. I hope you brought some food along. We kind of ransacked the merchant ship for everything the two of us could eat without starving the rest of the crew, but it hasn't exactly been gourmet meals over here, and we're close to running out again."

"That's only because you have no idea about moderation, you bottomless pit!" Tali exclaimed, speaking up for the first time since Benezia's call had come in. "I hardly eat anything, and you eat more than any four of my people would at a single sitting."

"I still maintain you all don't eat near as much as my people, and don't look now, Tali, but I've seen your own appetite growing since I started forcing ya ta exercise," Ranma shot back.

"Th, that's beside the point," Tali stammered, and Ranma once more just knew she was blushing under that helmet of hers, grinning as he watched her getting flustered. "And I still say that the sheer amount of exercises you make me do turns them into torture!"

On the cruiser, Benezia fought back the urge to smile impishly at hearing Ranma arguing with someone with a feminine voice. Whoever it was didn't sound asari, but she still sensed the chance to either tease or matchmaker. Either would be fun.

"I do so enjoy the fact that your priorities are so easy to understand, Ranma," she said, cutting in before Ranma could retort. "Yes, we brought food. I even just ordered our chef to prepare some human food for you." While asari and humans could eat much the same thing, Benezia knew from experience that most asari mostly preferred blander meals than Ranma did. Specifically, they enjoyed a lot of different kinds of pasta dishes rather than traditional Asian meals such as Ranma was used to. Although from his personal experience he knew that they could also make a very nice pizza.

"That sounds good. How are we going to do this?"

Soon, Benezia's cruiser had moved to be resting alongside the Shadow Broker's vessel. The ship extruded a boarding tube, connecting the two ships. Several suited asari swarmed the

exterior of the Shadow Broker's vessel where the tube met the ship, soldering it in place as the ship had taken some damage there around the exterior hatch. Once that work was done, Benezia and nearly a dozen other asari came aboard.

One squad peeled off the moment they boarded, ignoring Ranma and Tali as they split into work teams. "Environmental and engineering, let's go, go, go! We know that the ship's still running, but let's make sure it keeps on doing so," the leader of that group growled out, pointing to each individual and assigning them jobs.

Tali stiffened a little, crossing her arms and scowling a little inside of her helmet. "Come on! As if I would've left anything that you all would need to be repaired after a week on the ship. That's almost insulting."

The leader of engineers paused and looked over to Tali, her eyes flicking up and down her body for a moment. Tali at first thought that the woman was looking down on her as a quarian, but after a moment, she realized the woman wasn't concentrating on her suited face as most would. This felt more personal for some reason.

"Maybe so, but more hands and more eyes is always better, especially more experienced ones," the woman said.

Okay, that's worse than being looked down on because I'm a quarian!

"HEY!" Tali growled, stomping forward, her clawed feet clacking on the metal beneath, affronted by this disparaging remark in a way she wouldn't have been by someone commenting on her race, looks or anything else. *Looking down on me because of my age, seriously!?* "I've got experience! I was given my first spanner before I could read and write! Most of my time might've been taken by this bosh'tet forcing me to exercise every day and other stuff, but I'm a quarian. I **know** if stuff's broken!"

The asari sniffed, then with a bow towards Benezia and another asari standing beside her, turned and left without another word.

"HEY! Get back here, you—" Tali shouted, about to go after the asari Matron, but Ranma took her shoulder in a gentle grip, holding her in place. The heat coming off that hand always startled her even when Ranma wasn't actively using his ki.

"Now, now, they don't know ya, and remember, asari are all way older than they look," Ranma joked. "She's probably had hundreds of years to fall into that kind of thinking."

Tali still grumbled a little at that before turning back to the rest of the group, as Ranma was introduced to the matriarch standing beside Benezia.

For her part, Benezia had been looking at the pair of them from the moment she came out of the boarding tube. A quarian being here was interesting, but she set that mystery to one side for now. They had work to do, and Benezia could feel her companion getting antsy. "Ranma, this is Matriarch Aethyta. She isn't one of the ruling matriarchs, like myself, nor is she tied into any one specific Republic. But, Aethyta is well-respected despite all that and is well-known to have her own web of informants and agents throughout asari and beyond space. She's also someone I can trust, and for this, that was a necessity."

"Let's get to work. We'll need to start acting as the Shadow Broker quickly, or his information network is going to come apart at the seams if it hasn't already. We'll have our work cut out for us as it is after a week of not giving out any orders," Aethyta stated.

The second matriarch seemed a mass of contradictions. She had broad shoulders, smile lines around her mouth, and her body language was almost lazy looking. Yet she was also currently wearing a grim attitude in comparison to Benezia's more warm and mobile face.

Ranma and a still-fuming Tali nodded, turning to lead the way up to the bridge. As they went, Ranma explained more about what happened with the pirates, putting off talking about why Tali was with him for now rather than having left with the High Stakes. He wasn't certain how either of these ladies would react to the fact that Ranma had allowed Tali to use the Shadow Broker's gathered information for what they might think was very little in return.

Soon, they ran into the problem that not all of them would be able to fit into the bridge at one time. Thankfully, the asari were prepared for this.

Aethyta instantly took charge, ordering two of her fellow asari into the bridge with her, gesturing them to get to work as she slid into the chair, bringing up the various computer screens quickly and looking at the data still flowing in. "Alright, folks, we need to put a story in place to make certain that no one has become suspicious of how long the Shadow Broker has been silent for. If we can't, a lot of the good the Shadow Broker network can do for us going forward will be negated."

Within seconds, several of the information streams coming into the various screens in the bridge, something that had been going on for almost all the time Ranma and Tali had been aboard the ship, screens had been transferred over to the other asari behind her in the hallway. Several went to work there while others set up small chairs for the moment.

"We've got some action orders here. Let's clear them through the system quickly. Remember, ladies, we're acting like the Shadow Broker. Ruthless, efficient, deadly. The information coming through is everything." With that, Aethyta sent out two kill orders for Shadow Broker informants who had apparently been found informing on the Shadow Broker's own activities to a local government. Another drug dealer had refused to pay the Shadow Broker for some information rendered to him. He, too, would be murdered.

In fact, in a stroke of irony, that order was almost sent to Wrex as he left Mostromos with Herb later that day. Yet since he was so far away from the target in question, his decline of the mission didn't raise any eyebrows among the group of asari who, by that point, were acting as the Shadow Broker.

Other orders went out so fast Ranma and Tali couldn't keep track of them all. Orders to give money to this group, transfer funds here, buy, trade, and specific orders to various agents or informants.

"Always act on the side of ruthless efficiency and calculation. The Shadow Broker doesn't have friends, doesn't even have associates. He has people. That's it," Aethyta continued as two more asari were assigned specific data streams in the hallway.

Meanwhile, the others with them, all of whom had brought oversized omni-tools and giant backpacks that, at least in size and weight, looked like a World War II radio setup, got to work as well. They started to create several bypasses into the stored information network, while the pair in the bridge began to create physical ports that would be needed to transfer the data held within the ship's massive memory to a new home. Meanwhile, another programmer went through the operating system top to bottom, making sure there were no security programs within it that would activate the instant the system detected physical data transfers or outgoing large-scale wireless data transfers.

Tali watched all of this silently, appalled by the fact that this asari was basically ordering the death of nearly a dozen people in as little as an hour. She understood the necessity but **really** didn't like it.

Ranma also understood. In fact, he likened it to, again, some bits of history he knew about. The allies breaking Japan and Germany's most secret radio codes had been a major reason behind several specific victories in the Pacific, including the one he'd mentioned earlier to Tali, although she obviously hadn't gotten the reference. And on the other front, it had been just as important, if not more so.

However, he could not let Aethyta's actions go without any comment at all, so he quipped, "Should we be worried that you know exactly how to act like a deadly information mogul?"

"Yes. You should," Aethyta answered bluntly. "No one's called me normally since well before I became a matron. There's a reason why I was already known as an information specialist before this. Empathy is something other people have, not me."

Benezia smiled a little tightly at that, looking at the back of Aethyta's head for several long seconds before turning away. When she looked at him, Ranma noticed her smile was a little brittle, but it seemed to become more real as she took in Ranma and Tali again. "Come. Aethyta can be trusted to keep the Shadow Broker's information network from collapsing now, and

there isn't any kind of hurry to get the information I want from it at the moment. Connecting it to our existing networks will be a finicky and long-term project. Right now..."

The matriarch's smile brightened as she took in Tali more thoroughly now than she had when the pair of them had greeted her and the others by the emergency hatch. *She's quite young, come to think of it. I wonder how young she is. I would wager that she is on her... pilgrimage, I believe is the term the quarian's use for their coming-of-age journey? But, how does she come to be here with Ranma rather than the crew she undoubtedly arrived in?* "I would like to learn more about your activities on Omega and whatever has happened here since the last time we talked in greater detail. You were very brief when you mentioned the pirate attack earlier. But I cannot imagine that that was easy to deal with despite your abilities, and you have yet to do more than introduce your companion."

Ranma nodded at that, and he and Tali led the way through the halls to an intersection. When the cruiser had first come out of hyperspace, they had stowed most of their camping stuff here to allow the asari to have more room near the bridge. There still wasn't anywhere else aboard the ship just to sit and talk. The Shadow Broker didn't even have any kind of furniture anywhere in the ship bar the chairs in the bridge and engine room. Well, there were a few tables in the cafeteria, but Ranma had torn them out and tossed them out with the rest of the yahg's 'supplies.'

Benezia didn't seem to care overmuch about the state of anything as she settled down onto the makeshift chair made out of mattresses, while Ranma just crouched next to Tali as she claimed the other pile. *This isn't all that different than what my daughter has to deal with while on archeological digs.* "So, tell me your tale and of young Tali."

At that point, the story about the pirates came out. Ranma first described how he had sent out orders to the High Stakes. He then explained, how the pirates had shown up and his first attempt to warn them off in the Shadow Broker's name. How it had backfired a bit, and then how Ranma had taunted the pirates into making a mistake trying to board both vessels at once. "If they'd just ignored me and gone for the other ship, they might've had hostages when they attacked me, and that would've been seriously annoying to deal with."

At that point, he looked to Tali to add some things from her perspective. She did so reluctantly, seeming to be a little leery about Benezia herself and the other asari. Which was understandable given what the young quarian had probably been putting up with since leaving the Migrant Fleet and how the chief engineer had dismissed her earlier. She gave no details about her own part in things, only skimming over how many people had made up the crew of the High Stakes, what had happened afterward, and the repairs needed to fix the Shadow Broker's ship.

At that point, Ranma explained how Tali had basically volunteered for his ship, and then about how they'd been camping out on the Shadow Broker's ship since the High Stakes had left. "I see. Well, I certainly don't have a problem with that. Your ship is your own. You can crew it

however you wish. And so long as you both are all right with the agreement you reached, it isn't my place to second-guess your decisions."

In point of fact, Benezia wanted to do anything **but** that. She wanted Ranma and Herb to continue to act just as they would without any exterior control whatsoever. They'd already made several large changes to the galaxy in this manner, and she felt that their chaotic nature would continue to do so going forward. *Truly, in a way they are what the Spectre Program should have become.*

"That's nice to hear er, miss, ma'am? I don't know what's the appropriate, er, anyway, it's nice to hear although... why are you, well that is I know that the Asari Republics recently reached out to the fleet, but I've never run into any asari who didn't look down on us. I mean, Ranma, you saw that look the nurse was giving me, so why..."

Benezia shook her head, holding up a hand to stop Tali's words as the young quarian tried to get across her concerns about why Benezia was being so welcoming of her and the deal she'd made with Ranma without outright asking for an explanation. "There are two reasons, one personal and one social, that explain why I do not look upon you with distrust, child. First of all, while you probably had left the fleet before this and might not know this, but I was the central matriarch trying to push for your Migrant Fleet to join the Republics recently. Your admirals decided against such a move, but we still were able to draw up several agreements that would enrich both our peoples."

Benezia shrugged, having long gotten over her previous anger at the stubbornness of the Admiralty Board. It was not up to Benezia to help those who refused to give up dreams for a more solid reality for their people. On a political and social level, that is what I see the Migrant Fleet was. An untapped resource that the rest of the Council seems hell-bent on allowing to fade away in isolation. I do not think that outcome is in the best interest of my people, let alone your own."

Tali's eyes widened behind her visor to the point that Ranma could actually notice a difference in the size of the glowing points that were normally the most he could make out of her face. "Oh. I, I didn't realize that, matriarch. I guess that makes sense." *Although, wow, this woman sure has her fingers in a lot of different pies, doesn't she? Being Ranma's friend on the one hand, or rather maybe his patroness? Then getting involved with diplomatic talks with my people?*

She didn't voice those questions, though, knowing that for asari, that was kind of normal at the matriarch level, especially if, as Ranma had told her, this woman was part of their strange overarching governmental body. At that age, either asari had either ultra-specialized in one field to the point of grand mastery or were jacks-of-all-trades. *And honestly, I suppose dealing with Ranma could be seen as just another kind of diplomacy?* That felt like a reach to Tali, but it was enough to put her mind at ease a bit.

“Matriarch or ma’am is more appropriate, yes.” Benezia then smirked a little. “And on a personal level, do you know how long my race lives?”

“Um, yes. You and the krogan are supposedly the longest-lived races, right? You can live for a thousand years or so?” Tali asked, confused about the non-sequitur.

“Correct, although some of us have lived to reach a thousand five hundred years. I am nowhere near that age, of course, but I am more than old enough to remember a time when quarians were well respected, an up-and-coming power with a grasp of engineering that no other race, not even the salarians, could match. I will not say that the time since the war against your own creations and now is a blip to me. That would be both hubris and inaccurate in the extreme. But I still remember fondly being on Rannoch myself when I was younger.”

This caused Tali to gasp, and she stared at the Matriarch in shock. *Keelah, that’s, that’s amazing! Being able to remember that long ago, remembering walking on the homeworld, that’s, I don’t know, I mean, I know other races don’t believe in the veneration of our homeworld as we do, but still, she’s been there, on Rannoch! Would it be all right to ask what it was like? Or would that be too much?*

Seeing Tali lost in thought suddenly, Benezia, feeling a desire to tease, looked over at Ranma. “In case you were wondering, Ranma, that means the asari old enough to remember and had dealings with quarians know what they look like underneath those suits of theirs. On Rannoch, it was we outsiders who needed suits or at least antibiotics. In fact, my older sister was deeply involved with a quarian. I have a downloaded version of a picture of her that my sister took, actually...”

This was enough to bring Tali back from her sudden quasi-religious confusion, and her eyes widened again behind her visor as Benezia pulled up an image quickly from her omni-tool, setting it to display the image up into the air between the trio. It showed a quarian. A female quarian, to be precise.

Tali’s mind shut down, and she stared, a flush going through her entire body as she stared, unable to turn away for a moment. Seeing someone else’s face was something that only happened when a married couple were, well, having married couple time. To see someone’s face without being married to them? This was lewd, lewd to an insane degree! *Keelah and Ranma’s looking at it!!!*

Ranma also stared. The image was, frankly, stunning. The woman in the picture looked a little over middle-aged, maybe. There were a few crow’s feet under her eyes, a few wrinkles around the mouth showing a life led both smiling and frowning in equal measure. Those were the only signs of age in the picture, and the overall image was of ethereal alien beauty.

The female quarian looked slightly elvish almost, with high cheekbones and a slightly pointier-than-human-chin along with a pair of normal-looking lips and a human nose, if flatter

than normal, although if that was a species thing or from a fight, Ranma couldn't tell. The quarian woman had violet-colored skin, swept-back blue hair, a deeper, darker blue than Herb's that began above a high forehead, showing several small marks that looked almost like tattoos, but not quite. There were also two tiny, curving horns leading up into the hair. Just like Ranma had seen underneath Tali's visor, she also had luminous eyes. They were literally luminescent, light topaz color eyes that gleamed as they looked back into the picture, a wry, warm smirk on her face.

All in all, she looked like a cross between an elf and a woman Ranma had once seen on the cover of a strategy game in a computer store he'd ducked into to avoid Ryoga. Although, none of the elvish pictures he'd ever seen or that woman had the same kind of impish smirk that this woman was wearing. It was the look of someone who was thinking about getting into trouble soon just for the sake of it.

Just as that final observation registered, Ranma found himself smacked in the side as Tali hurled herself off of her chair into him. Normally, her weight wouldn't have been enough to topple Ranma over, but his brain wasn't working quite right, and her sudden shoulder charge, along with her shout in his ear, broke Ranma out of his stupor and pushed him off the cushions. "No, no! You can't, it's too lewd! Don't look!"

With a grunt, Ranma found himself on the floor of the hallway. "Gah, Tali!?" he began waving his arms to either side. "What in the--"

Tali was in no mood to listen and frantically shifted her weight on top of him, her hands covering his face as much as possible. "You can't look, you can't!"

Recovering from the sudden surprise of the attack, Ranma's hands flicked upwards, poking into Tali's side hard enough to be felt through her suit. She began to whoop, rolling away from him with a snarl, cursing the fact that Ranma had discovered she was ticklish. Despite that, she kept her three-fingered hands over his eyes, blinding Ranma as best you could.

"Now, now, children. Behave," Benezia chuckled, greatly amused.

That laugh and the teasing note in her voice caused both youngsters to look over at Benezia, and the look the Matriarch was giving them caused both youngsters to freeze for a moment. It reminded Tali of her Auntie Raan when she was doing something stupidly childish but still somehow endearing. "Um..."

As for Ranma, well he didn't exactly have the best relationship with either of his parents. His mother's insistence on waving around her honor blade and perverted views of 'manliness' had meant Ranma hadn't wanted to get close to her at all, even after going to the trouble of finding her. This all meant that the look was even more effective in his case, despite it being the first time Benezia had used it on him since they had met.

Looking at the pair of young folk, Benezia barely held in an urge to cackle with good humor. *If I had any doubts that Tali was harboring a flame for Ranma, that certainly put paid to it. As for Ranma, it's quite refreshing seeing him so off-balance and out of sorts. He's so horrifically capable physically it's sometimes hard to remember that both he and the young 'prince' are not all that experienced with things beyond combat.*

She pushed a button on the holographic controls of her omni-tool again, and the image that had been hovering above them disappeared. "Well, have I answered your question about why I am so intrigued by your people, Tali? And I do apologize for surprising you so, I didn't anticipate you having that strong a reaction to the painting of Creya'vol'Dora."

Blushing so hotly that the environmental program in her suit activated automatically in an effort to cool her off as if it thought she had suddenly begun to have a fever, Tali nodded her head rapidly, looking anywhere but at Benezia or Ranma. *Keelah, it's been so long, so long since I've seen even my own face, let alone another quarians. Were, were we quarians really be that good-looking?*

Very little art from before the war against the geth survived among the fleet, and even less in terms of news broadcasts and other things from Rannoch. After all, the exodus had been a hasty, ill-planned flight from their genocidal robots. Indeed, to call it a single exodus was to underplay things. Every city across Rannoch, every space station, had begun to lose the war at around the same time. There were just so many geth, and they were so ubiquitous across society. Most of the recordings or newsreels that survived had to do with the war against the geth about how it had begun and how badly it had turned against the quarians so quickly.

And with their immune disorder issues, no quarian could afford to look another quarian in the face without two pairs of visors between them most of the time. To see a quarian who wasn't part of a historical newsreel or a history lesson had been beyond startling. To see that unknown woman's full face, the smile, the lack of clothing shown on her shoulders, all of that had been well beyond anything Tali had ever seen before. *Although, I suppose if we really did look like that, there might be old quarian porn out there, but I for **sure** am not going to go looking for it! The very idea makes me want to throw myself out of the airlock and open my suit to space!*

A thought occurred to her then, and her blush began to deepen, so much so that a warning popped up on her suit's HUD at the sudden rise in temperature. *But, but did Ranma like what he saw?* Why that idea had occurred to her, Tali didn't really want to think about too hard. Yet that thought sat at the back of her mind like a weight that refused to go away.

"I **am** sorry, child. I did not anticipate you would react like that," Benezia apologized, her smile only diminishing slightly as she nodded in apology toward Tali.

“Um, well, I, I didn’t think I’d react like that either,” Tali grumbled, trying to get herself under control. Only then did Tali realize that she was basically straddling Ranma’s body at the moment. “EEP!” she yelped, scrambling off him back onto the makeshift pile of cushions.

Ranma looked up at the ceiling for a moment, counting to ten slowly. While Tali’s suit wasn’t fully skintight, it was close, and Ranma had still been able to feel a lot there, which coupled with her weight right on his crotch, well, Ranma wasn’t a virgin any longer. Usagi and the other asari who had ambushed him on the *Sijou’s Eye* had seen to that. But despite that, a few of the Ardat-Yakashi flirting with him, and the little bit of flirting Shampoo and others had done with him back in his old dimension, Ranma’s self-control in that area wasn’t actually all that good.

He could stop himself from reacting to asari dancers and verbal flirtations, but that was a mile away from feeling Tali basically grinding on top of his crotch. *Damn glad these pants are so loose on me.* Ranma was wearing one of the pairs of pants he’d taken from *High Stakes* rather than his own at the moment.

*Also, yep, nearly skintight clothing is a thing for me. Thank god, Tali’s suit isn’t **really** skintight, or else she might’ve felt my response there, and I would’ve had to commit seppuku. Down boy, she’s your friend, not anything else. It doesn’t matter if she’s funny, strong inside and out, intelligent, driven in her field, and all that, you can’t just pop a stiffy in front of her, let alone Benezia. Pops naked, Nodoka cheering you on as you become Happosai, down, **DOWN.***

Slowly Ranma sat up so no hint of his current issue could be seen and decided to change topics quickly. “Er, so, we know that your friend’s acting as if the Shadow Broker still around, and I understand the reasoning for it. But, is that what you’re going to be doing going forward? You’re not going to fold his network into your own or whatever?”

“We’re going to need to play this as if the Shadow Broker’s network is completely separate from our own. Aethyta and I took so long to get out here because we had to vet every aid we also brought out here, including the cruiser’s crew, so that we know that none of them would give the secret away. Almost all the utility of the Shadow Broker’s network will be broken if even a hint that it is connected to a more lawful information network gets out,” Benezia admitted. “Thus, we need to continue to act as if it is both independent and criminal. We’ll also only occasionally be able to truly act on information that can only be gleaned from the Broker’s network.”

“But do you have any specific plans for that data network?” Ranma pressed.

“Moving the central computers, to start with. While the nature of the Extranet allows for remote access even all the way out here, and a certain amount of anonymity is worth its weight in precious metals, we will still need some measure of oversight on the individual who is sitting in the center of the web. It will be moved into Asari Space. Aethyta and I are still debating

where actually to set it up again, as well as who should be in charge of it. But, it won't be on this vessel for very much longer. At least, I hope not."

"It will probably depend on how tough it is to get specific folders from the existing databank onto portable databanks. I ran into several different security protocols, and we weren't really doing much more than changing the operating system back to common and looking up stuff for the Migrant Fleet and then Ranma's targets. A few of them, in particular, were actually behind security walls," Tali pointed out, her voice far meeker than Ranma had normally heard it, and she seemed to be shifting in place, possibly still blushing as well inside of her helmet.

"True. Regardless, Aethyta and I will also be going through the data, looking for specific bits of information. Aethyta will mainly be in charge of giving out whatever orders and everything else that has to be put in place to help the Shadow Broker's network to continue as it is and looking at a few... incidents over the years along the Salarian/Asari Border. While I will be analyzing some of it, in particular, looking for examples of malfeasance among the Spectres."

"What, like Vasir getting the drop on me and Herb and handing me over to the Shadow Broker? We figured out that she also handed over Herb to the Council, and what happened there, too." Ranma snickered.

"Yeah, I **really** don't want to think about those pictures he put out on the extranet." Tali groaned. "I've never wondered what a froggy looks like without their clothing on, and now that I know, I very much wish I didn't."

"Hah! I told you to look away," Ranma teased. "The second I saw the headline, I knew no amount of censorship would help me sleep at night ever again."

"UGH!" Tali huffed, reaching out to shove Ranma's shoulder. Over the past week, her body language and willingness to interact like that with Ranma had grown, and now she showed no sign of being as body conscious as she had been. "I **wish** there'd been censorship in the version I looked at."

"Both of the other primary Council races are acquired tastes it's true," Benezia laughed lightly. "But I am afraid that Vasir is not going to be my primary target."

"I remember. You were after another Spectre, Saren, right? You were investigating him before you met me and Herb. Still, you just mentioned Spectres, plural so..."

"I'd rather like to get back on that trail, although there have been other things that have been grabbing my attention of late. And not just the Migrant Fleet issue either. Thanks to you and Herb, I wanted to research my own people's past and the concept of Bera'van'Tuwan. During which I have been getting some interesting pushback." Benezia allowed herself a dry

little chuckle at that understatement. "Indeed, your little call to me came on the heels of an assassination attempt in a temple cum museum."

"Wait, what?" Ranma asked, confused, while Tali also leaned forward, staring at Benezia in confusion. "The heck, what's so dangerous about researching your people's version of ki?"

"It is not so much the Soul Fire that is dangerous, but rather that knowledge of it is adjacent possibly to other secrets. Secrets that have to do with the old asari religion of the Goddess Athame." Benezia smiled thinly. "It's been a most interesting time."

Benezia would have said more but paused as she saw one of her commandos come down the hallway toward them. "Shiala. I take it the meal I asked for is prepared?"

The young Matron, who was the head of Benezia's commando corps, made to reply, but before she could, both Ranma and Tali's stomachs growled, with Ranma's dominating the room so much it sounded as if a wild lion had suddenly appeared. Tali's sounded more like a wildcat in comparison.

Both Shiala and Benezia laughed at that, standing up and gesturing to both young people to follow her. "Well, that proves that you, at least Tali, are still growing, whereas Ranma, you're still just a bottomless pit. Come. We do not need to stay aboard this ship now, after all."

Moments later, the group of four entered one of the cruiser's small commissaries. Unlike other races, who usually only had one large commissary, asari cruisers and above frequently had smaller sitting areas, more like small bars with soft chairs set in the center of a few equally small tables, letting more of the crew take turns cooking different meals every day. It was a cultural proclivity that the larger vessels at least had room to spare to indulge in. Tali looked a little askance at the setup, knowing precisely how much space this wasted and how much tougher it made any kind of logistics for the ship.

Not that this mattered to Ranma, who stared at the site of a giant steak almost big enough to fold over the head of the plate, complete with a side order of salad, bread sticks and other things laid out. Steak like that wasn't Ranma's normal kind of meal, but he could forgo rice and fish in favor of pure protein for once after so many subpar meals. *And I swear the last target I'm gonna get out of the Shadow Broker's database is whoever made those ready-meals we took from the High Stakes. We will have **words**, oh yes...*

While she hadn't minded the food so much over the past week, even Tali stared. Tali was looking at several different small food bulbs ready for her to connect to her eating tube, thoughtfully labeled with what they contained. "Oh, wow."

"None of our cooks have ever needed to prepare a meal for a quarian before, but Alia enjoyed the challenge of finding something that was like a human smoothie but which actually

tasted of various different meals,” Shiala announced, smiling and leaving the room with a bow towards her patroness. “Enjoy.”

Benezia nodded in thanks towards her, watching in some amusement as Ranma seemingly automatically pulled out a chair for Tali. The young quarian paused, staring at the chair and at him for a second, before gingerly sitting down, looking confused. Evidently, pulling out chairs for other people wasn’t something that the quarians did. The sight of that was telling, as was how close the pair sat together at the table, with Tali actually shifting her chair sideways a little to be closer to Ranma. Given how small the table in question was, that movement was subtle but still noticeable by someone like Benezia.

“You were saying?” Ranma asked, looking up from taking his first bite of food at Benezia. “And don’t worry, I can concentrate on eating and listening at the same time.”

“Ooh, don’t strain anything,” Tali murmured as she finished connecting the first of the bulbs to her eating tube.

Ranma gave her a dead-eyed stare for a moment, and then looked pointedly over at Benezia again, wincing a little at the sound that Tali began to admit as she ate. Despite the week they’d spent together, Ranma had not gotten used to that sound. It went straight through Ranma an entirely different way from her laughs, and he did not like it at all.

“I was saying, yes, I won’t be going after Saren just yet. You see, while I have deep concerns about him in general, I am also concerned about the overall Spectre program. Not so much its necessity, the Spectres are very necessary. My problems lie with the vetting process and the oversight of the Spectres once they earn the title.”

“Yeah, I suppose I can understand that. In ancient days, way back in the Han Dynasty period of China, wandering martial artists and monks were known to solve problems they ran into one way or another before the local government became aware of them or even occasionally if the local government was the problem.” After speaking to Herb, Ranma knew that this was more myth than reality, but even Herb had acknowledged that such people had existed, if not in any great numbers. “But if Saren is corrupt like you think, then that makes two Spectres out there that are. How many other Spectres are there, and why the heck are they corrupt in the first place?”

“For Saren, that is something I will eventually seek to discover. At the moment, all I know is that he has made to some unusual moves out near the Perseus Veil and... may or may not have been involved in some industrial espionage activities against the Alliance and against certain corporations in order to help other corporations rise to dominate local markets on corporately owned worlds.” Benezia watched as Tali stopped eating for a moment, turning to look at her, the term Perseus Veil having grabbed her attention. “I need more information, and hopefully, the Shadow Broker’s network will give it to me. As for the Spectres, that is partially why I explained that I have a problem with how they are run. They’re not really given much in

the way of a budget. They're supposed to be completely self-sustaining. Which lends itself to less than legal means of sustaining themselves far too easily. I was never sold as to the reasoning behind that, either."

"Eh..." Ranma waved a hand in the air, finished chewing his steak, and set down the fork, shaking his head. "If a Spectre's the sort of person to care about money, living well and using cash for more than his job, anyway, then he shouldn't be a Spectre at all. None of the wandering martial artists and monk types, those who were worth the name, cared anything about worldly matters like that. Living off the land, so to speak, shouldn't mean that you become corrupt."

"Perhaps not in a perfect world. In this one, though," Benezia shrugged, then smirked. "In all honestly, Ranma, you and Herb have acted more like Spectres than most Spectres would. You found and infiltrated a slaver base, freed the slaves and took it over. You then proceeded to get involved with Omega. Yes, I know that was not simply by choice on your part, but you did it anyway. There, you overthrew the criminal empire ruling it, and helped to instill what is now, generally speaking, a legitimate democracy. You also got rid of the Shadow Broker personally, Ranma, and those pirates out there. For someone who isn't a Spectre, you're certainly doing a good job of cleaning up the galaxy like one."

Ranma flushed a little at the praise, unused to being praised for what he thought was just his punching shit that needed it, while Tali reached out and patted his shoulder nonverbally, showing her agreement with what Benezia had said. "Ehh... Yeah, but most of that was, well, chance and my Code. Herb and I found ourselves in Torfan, and once we saw what was going on, we couldn't have stopped ourselves from sticking our noses in."

"What do noses have to do with it?" Tali murmured.

"It's a human phrase, dear. It means to get involved when you don't really need to or have any actual stakes in the problem you want to solve, I believe," Benezia supplied, "but what about Omega and Aria? That particularly vile representative of my race has been a blemish on our collective society for hundreds of years."

"Eh, something like that. Er, as for Omega, that was Samara needing help and me seeing a reason to go punch the krogan. Everything else is kind of incidental, Herb killin' Aria especially. I mean, don't get me wrong. My Code won't let me walk away from someone in trouble. And Tali will tell you that I had her looking up a lot of targets for me going forward. I'm more than willing to go hunting slavers, drug dealers, pedophiles and such. Those kinds of people need a good punch in the head."

Ranma smirked, showing a bit of teeth in a way that had both Tali and Benezia flinching just a bit. "And it won't be my fault that they don't have a head afterward." His smile quickly faded, though. "But corporate espionage, dealing with politics, corrupt politicians, that kind of thing? That's not something I'd be interested in doing or even good at. And then there's the whole having to answer to a higher power idea. That would be hard no for me."

"Eh... I agree in principle that it's probably a good idea for the universe in general that certain people don't, er know keep breathing. I don't think our first recourse should be to just punch people—"

"That's okay, Tali. You can use a shotgun, don't worry," Ranma stated, waving a hand magnanimously. "You're much better with that than your fists, for sure. Remember the way you were holding up those pirates in the cafeteria?"

Tali ignored him, continuing as if her companion hadn't spoken. "But maybe bring them in for justice? She nodded her head over to Benezia. "I don't think we should pile bodies behind us wherever we go, and I'll do my best to convince him to think first, punch second. Me, I'm going along for the technology. I can't wait to see the ship he's helped design."

"He is right here, and I'll wager you're wanting to see the technology and design of the ship I helped design is like, forty-five percent of why you want to sign up with me. The rest of it is because you want to see planets, too," Ranma teased.

"I won't deny that. Although I still think the idea of running water, streams and even rivers and oceans are just a little weird to me. Starting off with a nice solid planet with lots of landmasses would do be just fine," Tali confessed with a giggle, causing Ranma's smile to widen at the sound.

"Ehh, once we have our own ship, I suppose that we won't be bothered so much by distances, so that's okay by me. Although how are you with the cold? Wasn't there that one planet that was supposed to be locked in a year-long winter or something? Where there were corporations doing experiments on living people?"

"Since most of the people there live underground or in large hub buildings, that'd be fine by me. My suit can keep me warm in most environments. I've never seen snow, obviously, but the cold won't bother me. Just so long as we don't go out of our way to get on the local's bad side everywhere, we go while we're also trying to get close to your targets. Sometimes, a straight line really isn't the fastest way between two points."

"Blasphemy!" Ranma said, half-joking, half-serious. "If the locals haven't figured out there's a problem with this or that person, or what they're doing or whatever, then working with them will be pointless. Just figure out you know what's going on, whether or not something really bad is going on like slaving, drug dealing and what have you, and then move in and do what you have to, take his organization apart, remove the guy at the top, whatever."

"So you'd rather blast your way through solid stone than try to climb over a mountain?" Tali shot back. "We've got information already. It might not be reputable, but we can, at least in a lot of cases, get the locals on our side and thus don't have to build the starship by hand."

The pair continued to argue like this while Benezia simply sat back, watching them in some amusement. It was like both of them had forgotten she was there, and at least in Tali's case, Benezia doubted she could put that down to simply the fact they'd gotten used to it being just the two of them over the past week. *Hmm...Ranma might be interested in Tali, too, which is fascinating. To a certain degree, I'm actually quite grateful that he found someone like Tali. I would've hoped that he would find a nice asari girl, but Tali seems to have some common sense to her, as well as engineering expertise. And so long as she is strong-willed enough to force Ranma to look for peaceable solutions when possible, that is all to the good. Yet is she strong enough to survive being around him? That won't be exactly easy going forward.*

"Ahem," Benezia coughed delicately, causing both youngsters to start, turning to look at her as if they had forgotten she was there. Tali twitched a little, her whole body seemingly shrinking up inward, as she hastily turned back to her meal, while Benezia simply smiled at them blandly. "Shotgun? Taking on pirates on your own? You seem to have left out portions of your story earlier once more, Ranma. Although, perhaps this time, I should lay those words at your feet, Tali."

Tali stiffened suddenly, looking like she wanted to run away and hide, but Ranma gleefully spoke up for her, explaining how the two of them had met in the commissary on the High Stakes, causing Benezia to chortle, frankly, thinking that was just very Ranma. When he explained how Tali had actually shot Ranma at one point, thanks to his stomach going off at the wrong time, that chortle became a guffaw.

After regaining control of herself, Benezia gently tried to ease Tali's embarrassment, piling some praise onto her for her skills and ability to apparently roll with the punches before shifting the conversation back to Ranma's targets. *Hmm... I wonder, is her strength another reason why Ranma is interested in her? Because he certainly is, given how much deference Ranma's showing her, how he's talking Tali up. And here I thought it was a simple 'opposites attract' type of thing. Still, they could become an interesting couple if not for... well, all the physical reasons they can't become one. That is... that I have to wonder about, really. Drat it, now I'm wondering if I should warn them both about forming such an attachment, right after I was wondering if being together would be good for them.*

"We want to hit a local pirate base first. It's in both the Shadow Broker's records and in the ship's logs," Tali explained, suddenly all business. "Ranma was the one to come up with the idea. He called it a Trojan horse yesterday, although honestly, I don't know what that phrase means."

"It's from ancient times, a way back when my people were making war with swords and shields. Honestly, it might be a made-up story, but someone created a giant horse, a huge wooden horse that was all hollow inside. A lot of their people hid inside, and they left it outside the enemy city. Because the enemy city, Troy, revered horses, according to the legend, they thought that the statue was a symbol of their enemy's willingness to retreat. I doubt it really went down like that, but it made for a good story, and basically means to use the enemy's form

against him, in this case, a pirate ship, and sneak in. Once we're aboard the pirate base..."
Ranma shrugged.

That shrug was probably fully justified, Benezia thought. *If a horde of krogan didn't put Ranma down, I doubt anything else could, although he is without his amazing armor now...* Despite that concern, she nodded in agreement. "It sounds like a fascinating story. Yet you will need quite a bit of equipment, including a lot of automation, to make it work. Two people can't keep a ship of that size running, after all. And I have to remind you, Ranma, it's only going to be another two weeks at best before your own ship is ready in Mostromos."

"EEEEEE, so looking forward to that!!" the noise that Tali emitted at that news could barely be called sentient as she began to vibrate in her seat at the very idea of that ship. But she didn't argue when they kept on talking pirate hunting mission, even going so far as to lay out a few schematics that she wanted to make changes to the bridge of the pirate ship, as well as some other internal changes that would allow her and Ranma to man the ship on their own with enough automation.

OOOOOOO

Several hours later, Ranma remained at the table, idly munching on breadsticks as he talked to Benezia about some of their targets, specifically three of the asari on his 'List o' People Who Need to be Stomped On Until Dead™'. It turned out that Aethyta had mentioned one of the asari to her and would be able to pass on to Ranma the name of a local police investigator who would be more than willing to help him bring her in, so long as she remained alive to face justice.

Since Tali had already done her part in convincing Ranma that punching all his problems wasn't a viable strategy, she bowed out soon after the conversation shifted back to the targets rather than the pirate vessel. But instead of simply letting her leave, Tali had assigned two of the cruiser's engineers to help her prepare the pirate ship for Tali and Ranma. Thus, Tali found herself in the somewhat uneasy position of working alongside to practically unknown asari as they started work on the bridge of the pirate ship.

They were essentially slaving most of the bridge consoles to two of the seats. This wasn't easy, but it was work that Tali had done before. Making cutouts, making do, and cutting down on the space a given system needed to perform was all work that practically every quarian engineer learned early on. Thus, once assured the two asari also knew what they were doing, the young woman found her mind drifting.

Specifically, Tali's mind drifted to the topic of Ranma, and what had happened earlier that day, when Benezia showed them that picture of a quarian from Rannoch. Her treacherous mind kept on replaying one specific point: the blush that had suffused Ranma's features as he had stared at the image of Creya'vol'Dora, Creya of clan Dora.

Vot (shit), I should be thinking more about what it means for there to be asari who've stepped on Rannoch, but no! My freaking hormonally imbalanced mind won't let me do that! Tali lamented, trying to turn her mind to that revelation, only to have her mind begin replaying her tackle of Ranma.

*Ugh, get it together, girl! He's human, you're not. He is able to touch people without a suit in the way. You're not! Doesn't matter if his blue eyes are electric, or if you have to pull your own eyes away from his muscles every time he moves, let alone the respect he gives you, the fact he **always** listens or his sense of humor. Or, another part of her mind pointed out, that you've noticed him checking you out too, before being buried again.*

It's just not possible! Besides, most of this is probably because he's nice to you, Tali. That's been in very short supply since you left the Migrant Fleet. That, and being stuck with only the two of us... although, come to think of it, given our plans going forward, that might become the norm. Ugh, I don't know what to think about that.

"Hello, girls, I see you're making good progress. I've got the designs for automated repair droids that you passed over to the matriarch, working down in the fabber, Mrs. Rayya, if you want to take a look at them."

Blinking, Tali turned from where her hands had been automatically doing the work, while her mind was elsewhere to look over towards the hatch leading into the bridge, where Shiala, the same commando from earlier. Tali had gathered that she was some kind of senior assistant, although frankly, Tali had trouble figuring out who precisely was in charge and what everyone's roles were beyond the two Matriarchs.

I suppose I could put most of that down to the crew being made simply of people that Benezia and Aethyta felt they could trust rather than being assigned to this ship by its parent military, but even so, it's very weird how fluid everything seems to be. They all seem to have their own jobs, know what they're supposed to be doing or are waiting to be assigned to something that they have the talent to do. It's a vastly different thing from the Migrant Fleet. And don't get me started on how much space the ship has or how small the crew seems to be!

Realizing she'd been staring for a second, Tali nodded. Glancing down at her work, and seeing she was in a position where she could stop, Tali got to her feet. "Thank you, and it's just Tali. I can, I'm not exactly used to being addressed so formally and it's not like I'm a senior engineer among the Migrant Fleet or anything like that."

"That didn't stop you from giving No'rila a piece of your mind," Shiala pointed out mildly, falling into step beside the much younger quarian. *And at moments like this, that age difference really shows*, she thought with some amusement. "And just so you know, you were right. There wasn't anything that needed repairing in the engine room or the environmental section. Your workaround in the environmental section actually won some measure of praise from the

workers on that team, while No'рила looked torn between admiration and horror at the workarounds you put in the engine room to get it working again without the proper parts."

Tali's body language felt smug to Shiala a feeling, which grew as she continued. *My word, but quarian body language is quite close to our own, isn't it? It's like reading an extremely young maiden.* "I convinced her to leave your work in place since that allowed me to assign No'рила and the rest of her group to repair the pirate ship. Or at least making it more space-worthy than it already was. Pirates aren't exactly known for keeping up with their ship's maintenance."

Shiala had been moving from one group to another, making sure everyone was on task and had everything they needed, bringing in more equipment or assigning more hands if need be. Aethyta didn't have a head of security like Benezia did, which left Shiala as the two matriarchs' second in command, with only one of the other asari, another Matron who had capital ship combat experience, as a senior advisor. As such, Shiala had also been helping Aethyta for a little while, giving her opinion on some of the action orders that Aethyta was making.

While Aethyta was ruthless and excellent at figuring out information and making decisions under her normally easygoing exterior, she hadn't really been trained very well as a commando before deciding direct combat wasn't for her, so occasionally, Aethyta needed to be reined in when it came to what was possible and what wasn't. *And she really wished to make it clear that the Shadow Broker is still in business, Shiala thought distastefully. Some of the murders and other things she ordered, well, if not for Aethyta's reputation, I would be afraid we'd created a monster.*

Shiala fell quiet as Tali snickered inside her helmet, walking through the silent corridors of the pirate ship together or silent to Shiala anyway. Tali seemed to be listening to something, turning her head this way and that as if the background hums of the vessel told her things that Shiala could not interpret. *Which it probably might. I've not spent sixteen years or more stuck on vessels, just one more breakdown away from decrepitude.*

Shiala had been with Benezia when they had met with the representatives of the Admiralty Board. She'd seen the readouts the local asari vessels had been getting from the Migrant Fleet. Even the Heavy Fleet, the ships that had been retrofitted into combat ships, were falling apart in many cases.

Shaking her head at that, Shiala hummed, getting Tali's attention before speaking. "So, you appear to have fallen quite deeply into Ranma's sphere of craziness. Most would call it a sphere of influence, but with Ranma, it is definitely more 'crazy' than simple influence. In fact, if you find yourself starting to think like Ranma, I'd suggest you find the nearest shuttle and escape as quickly as possible."

"Hehe, I can see where you're coming from, but it actually hasn't been all that bad. Oh, the initial, you know, fight with pirates wasn't exactly fun, but Ranma listens to me. That's not

exactly well, Nor-whatever's response to me wasn't as bad as most I've gotten, more nuanced anyway, but still that probably gives you an idea of what quarians out on their Pilgrimage are treated like. He's also helped me help my people a lot, and then there's that ship that he's apparently helped to build and design," Tali nearly babbled for some reason, her body language becoming slightly timid almost? She certainly seemed embarrassed to Shiala's eyes. "And then there's this ki stuff, which he's explained to me."

"Oh, he did? Good, ki is interesting." Shiala held out her hands in front of them just as they reached the engineering room. In one hand, her hand began to glow with biotic energy, while in her other, a small golf-ball-sized ball of ki began to appear. It soon dissipated, and Shiala shook her head, winded. "It is extremely useful, I will admit, although using it like that, outside of your body, is incredibly difficult. I've been using every free moment I have to train with ki, and that tiny ball is all I can create."

She frowned then. "Although, I'm curious as to what it could mean for your folk. No offense meant, but I would assume that with your race's immune deficiency issues, training to be able to manipulate your ki would be that much harder."

"Er, well, I don't actually understand it all," Tali began as the hatch to the engineering room opened ahead of them. "But Ranma says that I actually have a good bit of ki. He isn't certain why, although he once, um, scanned me? He doesn't really know what to make of it, but he thinks that eventually, I might be able to start using ki, too. To, to maybe even boost my immune system! That would be so absolutely amazing!"

Shiala stared at her for a moment, then slowly shook her head. "Huh. Well, good luck. Traveling with Ranma, you're going to need it in many ways." Tali's groan of agreement caused her to chuckle, and she listened in amusement as the quarian vented at her for a bit about the daily training Ranma had been forcing her to do.

Meanwhile, a part of Shiala wondered if Ranma was right. If this young quarian could learn to use her ki, then maybe, just maybe the budding romance she could see forming here had a chance. *And what would be more romantic than that, teaching a quarian how to enhance their immune system just so you could be together? Although, if such teaching spreads, hehehe, I wonder what the galaxy will think if the quarians can somehow learn to use ki, and the 'suitrats' start to leave their suits behind?*

OOOOOOO

Later, as Tali and Ranma were given rooms on the cruiser, the two Matriarchs met up once more in the Shadow Broker's den. Throughout the day, Aethyta had doubled the number of people she'd brought over from the cruiser to help pass on orders, while keeping the people who were copying and moving the data from the Shadow Broker's ship to the cruiser working without a break, filling the hallway outside of the bridge, and now, as Benezia stood beside her chair, Aethyta shook her head ruefully.

"I'm frankly astonished and although you might laugh to hear it, Benezia, humbled by how large the Shadow Broker's network really is. It literally reaches nearly every planet in Citadel Space and most of the ones in the Fringe too. Worse, it's got information on most similar networks, including mine! It knew where I lived, it knew of..." Aethyta stumbled to a halt, looking over at the other two asari on the bridge, then back to Benezia, using her eyes and face to try and get her meaning clear to the other woman.

Luckily, the centuries that they'd spent apart had not completely removed the other Matriarch's ability to read Aethyta, and she nodded, keeping her own face placid even if that connection was one that both of them had gone to some pains to keep private. "That is interesting. Do you have any idea about how he has done so?"

"Time and infiltration," Aethyta answered crisply, choosing to take that more as a broad question than a specific one about how the Shadow Broker had discovered their connection. She'd already gone to some pains to make certain that none of the other asari in the bridge had noticed that little addendum to the file the Shadow Broker had on Aethyta and would be making her displeasure in how the yahg had come to possess that information plain to the nurse who had apparently shared it with someone that they shouldn't have.

"You know how all of the mercenary bands have their own means of information. Most criminal groups, too, like the human Casa Nostra. The Broker finds a few people within those groups to pass on information to him and adds them to his own, either clandestinely or openly. Several of the mercenary groups are tied into his network willingly. For example, the Shadow Broker knows and was the individual to set up a few clandestine bank accounts that the Blood Pack is using as their sole source of operating funds. I'm thinking the first thing outside of my acting as the SB is to figure out a way to have someone else discover that connection and then sever it."

Benezia nodded. The Blood Pack was easily the most dangerous of the three mercenary groups, because it was the least prone to logical decisions and was completely comprised of krogan and vorchas. Ranma's actions on Omega had put a sizable dent into their funds and reputation, but it was still a major mercenary group with thousands of members.

Aethyta explained, it was also the only one of the three that was still taking part in the war between the turian/human alliance and the Hegemony. The others had pulled out after Omega had changed hands and most of their own funds there had been raided, understanding that the alliance had sent a message with that move, a warning they could not answer.

The Blood Pack didn't care about that. All they cared about was that the war was giving their troops endless opportunities to fight. Removing their operating funds might not stop them, but it certainly would make them much less effective. Ships needed fuel, guns needed mass effect rounds, armor needed to repair and so forth, even for krogan.

"That's one bit of intelligence we should act on. Anything else? I realize it's still early days, but..."

I'm going to take at least two weeks, maybe a month, to go over just everything current! That's not even mentioning the amount of old data stored here," Aethyta protested, then shook her head, her face grim but also enthusiastic, as it had been the entire time they'd been talking. "One thing I can tell you now is that there are more information networks out there than I anticipated. And one of them looks far too well-organized for my liking. I had always looked down on the Invisible Man and Cerberus, thinking they were just fringe lunatics. But judging by some of the hints I've already seen, they might be more involved in the Alliance government and R&D sectors than I previously thought."

"That's going to take a lot of time to go over on its own, and so is how embedded the Shadow Broker's information network was with the Special Task Groups, and of course, the Citadel's own espionage surfaces," Aethyta admitted. "He's penetrated all of those to a degree that frankly horrifies me."

"It horrifies me but does not surprise me, given what I know of at least two of the Council's precious Spectres. When I start going over that information, that's where I'll start, to see which among them can be trusted and which can't be," Benezia agreed before smirking slightly and, deciding that Aethyta needed a break from serious thoughts, she leaned in, her voice a low whisper. "You know, I haven't seen you this excited about anything since humans first came on the scene and they introduced, what was it, schoolgirl outfits?"

That earned her a thump on the shoulder and a heavy blush from the other matriarch, who turned away back to her work with a huff. They'd been broken up for centuries but had remained friends, and Benezia never missed an opportunity to tease her old wife.

Benezia looked at her thoughtfully for a few moments before shrugging her shoulders and heading back out the door into the hallway beyond. There, she settled down into a chair vacated by one of the younger asari who had been helping Aethyta up to this point. A quiet request followed, and soon, her omni-tool was linked to the ship's computer network, and Benezia was pulling up some information.

OOOOOOO

A day went by as work on the pirate ship quickly finished. Similarly, work in the bridge of the Shadow Broker's vessel to be able to transfer data to the portable memory banks had also finished, although it would probably take days to download it all. Yet, at the same time, Benezia and Aethyta had planned for this. Neither they nor the ship they had arrived in would be missed for more than a month and a half, by which time they hoped to have moved the entire operation into the Asari Republics, although the two Matriarchs were still arguing lightly about where to emplace it, and who to put in charge of running the day-to-day operations of the network. Aethyta had her own network to see to, and while she could fold some of the SB's

network into it, being the Shadow Broker was a full-time job. One that she couldn't dedicate all of her time to without letting her own network suffer.

Ranma and Tali weren't part of these discussions, thankfully, and once the pirate ship was ready, they were good to go.

Before they did, Ranma sent off messages to Mostromos and Omega. The message to Mostromos simply told Rane'lle that the owner of 'the ship' would be by within two weeks to take control of it. The one to Omega was specifically to John Shephard, who, thanks to the Shadow Broker's information, Ranma knew was still stationed there along with his team. Ranma had gotten along all right with John and the gregarious Garrus and knew they would be professionally and personally pissed at what had happened to him and Herb and wanted to tell them he was all right. He also wanted to use them to start recruiting more crew members.

Or rather, Tali had informed him of the need for such, and Ranma had decided to use the idea of reaching out to John and Garrus and telling them that he and Herb, without going into any details, although they probably already knew about her at least given the kerfuffle that he had caused on the citadel, to also recruit. "A doctor might not matter for you, Ranma, but will for others on your crew. We'll need someone to run the kitchen unless you want to be a cook, because I sure as heck can't be. Maybe someone to help me in the engineering room with basic maintenance? It's not necessary, but it could be a help. A pilot you might already have, but how about a sensor specialist? Someone to run the guns? I can maintain them, but aiming them right is another thing. You'll also, and I hate to say this, but beyond me, you'll probably also have to pay members of your crew. And buy fuel, air and water, too."

That last was a pure quarian issue. Getting water was an ongoing daily problem for the Migrant Fleet, and sometimes air was as well. However, most star systems within Citadel Space gave those out for free if they were available. On the other hand, fuel wasn't free and was something that Ranma would need to look into.

Or he would, except that Benezia had been there when Tali pointed all this out and she had laughed in amusement. "Ranma, Tali, I don't think you've fully understood the ramifications of the Shadow Broker's network for the two of you in particular. I didn't want to fund your travels through the galaxy before, Ranma, because it could be traced back to me and could either influence other people's perception of you or bring trouble upon me. But now? Now, I can use the Shadow Network to funnel you money easily. I'll give you a few passwords, to use a handful of bank accounts and that will be that."

Ranma, who would been about to say that he didn't really want to be funded by anything to do with the Shadow Broker, considering everything that the Shadow Broker did to get that money, paused, closed his mouth, and nodded. "That, that will make it a lot easier going forward. Thanks, Benezia."

“Given everything you’ve done to help me and the galaxy at large, I think this is a small price to pay. Just don’t go buying expensive artwork or anything like that, will you?”

“How about expensive guns and other weapons?” Ranma asked, waggling his eyebrows dramatically.

Benezia shook her head with a laugh as Tali gave him a light slap on the back of his head with her claws.

After those messages were sent, Ranma and Tali bid farewell to Benezia and the others, and headed aboard the pirate ship. The ship had initially been christened Dreadwind, but Ranma had felt that was far too chuuni for him to be comfortable with, while Tali had simply thought it was in poor taste. The two of them were still arguing about what to name it, but the Trojan Horse had stuck for now.

The journey to their target would take a few hours, during which Tali started to teach Ranma about piloting. She was an okay pilot, but not a great one, usually simply creating a program to help her along. Shifting that program into a teaching model for Ranma was simple enough, and Ranma had far, **far** better hand-eye coordination, reflexes and speed than she did. Admittedly, on a ship like this, that didn’t really matter, but if they ever actually got into a space battle, Ranma might eventually prove to be a very good pilot.

Coming out of hyperspace near the pile of habitat units, which had been haphazardly welded together over centuries to create a pirate base on a desolate moon in the middle of nowhere, the vessel instantly found itself being locked up by several gun platforms on the moon. However, Tali and the asari who specialized in programming had prepared for this.

After examining the ship's recorded logs, they understood that several electronic passwords needed to be sent instantly after nearing the pirate base. These were sent out now, along with a prepared program: a made-up version of the pirate captain informed the locals that they’d had severe engine trouble and had barely been able to repair them. Considering how maintenance was never a pirate priority, this worked, and soon, the ‘Lord Governor General High Marshall’ Patrosh graciously allowed them to land at the pirate base again. “We’ll even waive the fees until you’re nearly ready to leave again,” the fat looking batarian said with a smirk.

The communication cut off, and Ranma slowly shook his head. “Lord Governor General High Marshall? It’s official. All pirates are full of themselves.”

Tali snorted that, shaking her head. “Well, I suppose a predator in a small forest thinks that is the whole world.”

Ranma took a second to parse that out and then snorted. “With us, or at least in Japan, we would use the phrase a frog at the bottom of a well knows not of the ocean.”

“What’s a well? I know what a frog is. It’s a common enough slur on salarions that I looked it up the first time I heard it.”

“Heh, never mind. Let’s just get ready, okay?”

One of the old zero-vacuum-rated habitat units opened up at the top as they slowly flew down toward the pirate hideout. After the ship passed it by, the roof instantly began to close again. By the time it finished closing, Ranma was by the ramp leading out of the ship.

Outside, nearly a dozen pirates were scattered around the landing area, all of them helmeted, showing that they didn’t exactly trust the environmental controls of the hangar bay. While they might have been prepared for explosive decompression or lack of oxygen coming back in once the hatchet closed, they were not prepared for Ranma. Tali watched from the bridge as Ranma leaped out, a gun in either hand.

She had heard occasionally about people firing two guns at the same time, but mostly, it meant the user fired one and then the other in succession. It did not mean the ability to aim at two different people on two different sides of you at the same time and fire simultaneously. Ranma, with his crazy physical abilities, was able to pull it off relatively easily. “I am so glad I convinced him that handguns were useful rather than heavy ordinance.”

Five pirates went down before the others knew they were under attack, but all of them were armed and opened fire on Ranma even as he sprinted forward, gunning down more of them. Two of them were able to even track Ranma, hitting him in the side, but Ranma ignored the strikes, barely even slowing as he barreled forward, killing two more pirates who were near the inner hatch.

Two more died to the three drones that Tali had sent after Ranma. The small hovering disc-like drones, both her original and the two she’d built over the past week, had been completely ignored by the pirates until they opened fire in turn.

That finished off all the pirates in the landing bay.

“It should not be this easy,” Tali muttered, shaking her head, before pushing to her feet and heading out of the ship after Ranma. Clawed feet tapping down on the metallic floor of the base, Tali checked her shotgun, making sure it was loaded and the safety off, pointing it at the ground as she reached forward to join Ranma at the inner hatch. Behind her, all three of her drones began to hover, clicking this way and that around her in a protective pattern.

“You know, you could just stay aboard the ship and guard it,” Ranma said, shaking his head as he worked his fingers in between the inner hatch.

“Without my hacking skills, what’s to stop them from simply opening up a few habs to space to stop you? It might not be enough to kill you, but explosive decompression would slow

even you down, Ranma. Besides, I'm not sure I trust you to know what not to shoot or punch," Tali teased gently. Then she became serious, nudging him hard in the side with her shoulder, showing again that she was becoming more and more willing to engage in gentle contact like that. "Besides, I'm not a tak'tal that needs to be left behind when the going gets tough. I've got your back."

The disdain that Tali used when she spoke that word made Ranma twitch, but a second later, the meaning of it translated on his omni-tool. A tak'tal was the equivalent of a useless ornament, something that was a waste of space despite looking good. And while Ranma would accept the fact Tali was good looking the rest of that made him snort in laughter. "Heh, as if anyone'd ever call ya unnecessary with that big brain of yours."

Concentrating on getting his fingers in between the hatch's doors, Ranma didn't notice how his words had caused Tali to twitch a bit, unable to see the sudden wide smile on Tali's helmeted face at his compliment. The next second, Ranma wrenched the hatch open with a low growl of effort, causing an atavistic thrill to go through her. *Gah, stop it hormones! If I'm not staring at his body, I'm blushing at his words, but I can't. Nothing can happen between us... right? The whole ki thing is just a, a thing, right? There's no way I'll be able to learn to use it like Ranma says.*

A second later, they were through and, astonishingly, didn't find anyone waiting on the other side. Tali's hacking skills, which she had begun to use even as the ship started to land, told her why within seconds as they raced to the left deeper into the base. "The alarm didn't go off. We overwhelmed the pirates in the hangar bay so quickly none of them could shout for help."

"More likely, the people I didn't gun down instantly didn't even think of it," Ranma opined, shaking his head. "Ya were able to download a map of the place?"

"Eh, such as it is. They don't actually have a full map of the base. Or at least it's not on the common network," Tali replied, shrugging. "I can tell you where most of the powers going though, and where it's coming from."

"Where it's coming from?" Ranma asked, gesturing with one hand as if indicating which direction they should go.

Tali nodded firmly, gesturing to one side, and they raced down that way. "Funny thing, a lot of the power that generator's making is going someplace really nearby. Would pirates be stupid enough to put their command center near the base's generator?"

"Probably," Ranma answered with a shrug. "It certainly sounds like something they'd do."

They ran into a few pirates, but Ranma was so fast that he was on them before they could fire more than once at the intruders. It looked as if most of the base was actually empty,

which, Ranma thought, made sense if most of the time, pirates were always out on their ships, only occasionally stopping in here for rest and refit. However, they did run into several times were recreation rooms. These ranged from rooms with billiard, roulette and other game tables to bars, drug dens and, of course, the equivalent of the worst sort of whorehouse.

This startled Tali more than Ranma, who had seen by this point that both slavery and this kind of crap were far too prevalent in the galaxy. Yet there were actually several human women amongst them, which did startle Ranma, although not as much as the sight of several female batarians among the slaves. Indeed, the female batarians dominated. There was only a scattering of asari among them.

This did not mean that all of them were meek. When Ranma and Tali killed the seven pirates scattered around the room sampling the 'merchandise,' and the alarm finally began to go off, more than one of the women shouted at the pair to free them.

"The best thing you all can do is to hole up here for now. Tali and I can deal with the pirates easily, and truthfully, I don't want any of you to get underfoot," Ranma said hurriedly, looking anywhere but at the scantily clad women, something that Tali noted and approved of, even as Ranma pulled out weapons from his ki space. The sight of that astonished many of them, with one of the asari muttering, "Has omni-tool fabrication reached the point that it can simply create guns out of nothing now? I didn't think these assholes had me imprisoned here **that** long."

Not bothering to explain, Ranma left a pile of guns there and he and Tali raced on, now dealing with pirates who knew they were under attack.

This didn't help them much. With Tali's spy drones ahead and behind them, the pair were warned of two ambush points, dealing with them quickly. The pirates also weren't good enough shots to take out her drones, although one of them was damaged before the pair dealt with the second ambush point.

Their first real obstacle came not in the form of the pirates but instead in the form of an enemy that Ranma and Tali had not been prepared to see here. It turned out that the nearby power run from the generator was not going to a command center or the living quarters of the pirates. Instead, it was going to what amounted to a recharge station.

The combat droids that fired as they came out of the room ahead of them were bipedal, with long, narrow heads around what looked like searchlights in Ranma's mind. They looked vaguely humanoid, too, with what looked like fake skin, or maybe armor made to look like skin, over their more robotic bits. They were armed with blasters, and their hands and feet ended in three claws and talons, respectively, looking somewhat like a quarian.

Ranma had seen them before in recordings and knew what these things were.

So did Tali, although her response was a bit more visceral than Ranma's simple 'Huh?' of surprise as he began to take fire from them. "Geth!" she shrieked, pushing around to one side, diving forward onto her chest on the ground as she began to unload her gun towards the droids who had taken up firing positions ahead of them.

Two of her drones were smashed out of the air quickly, with the third being behind the pair and around the corner, watching their back and safe from the fight but not helping. Not that much would be able to help Tali's state of mind right now as she stared at the Geth Trooper, the mass-produced combat platform that had been the bulk of the army of geth that had slaughtered her ancestors, forcing her people to flee their home world. "Geth, here, why!? What the hell is going on!?"

"Don't blame me for this one. There was nothing in the Shadow Broker's database on this base that told us there were geth here," Ranma answered as he charged forwards. The droids had been splitting their fire between Ranma and Tali, whose dive down to the deck had saved her from getting hit.

In contrast, the light weapons these platforms carried were of no moment to Ranma, even without his armor. Their bullets stung like blazes but couldn't penetrate his skin unless they hit him in the face or eyes, and the troopers seemed programmed to go for the easier target of his center mass. He closed quickly, firing as he did, destroying two of the platforms, spraying white fluid like blood as his bullets smashed into their synthetic bits, although it took several shots to put them down.

One of them stumbled as Tali's fire hit it, doing little damage. Tali instantly realized she had to change out her bullets from the mass effect equivalent of buckshot to the solid-state large slugs that she had been using when she and Ranma had met on the High Stakes. Despite her quivering hands, Tali was able to change her gun so that it wasn't cutting the block of metal within so small any longer, and her next shot took one of the geth platforms in the face, destroying its entire head.

Then Ranma was among them, fists and feet smashing. Several of the platforms went flying with such force they crashed into one another or the walls of the corridor with enough force to come apart, while one blow lodged Ranma's fist into the chest of another platform. It dropped its gun and grabbed at his arm, holding it in place, but Ranma responded by using his ki to heat up his entire hand and forearm as Vulcan had taught him. Ranma's hand became so hot within seconds that it melted the metal around it, an effect that seemed to startle the geth so much that even as with his arm thrust through, it sloughed off him, the others backed away rapidly, pulling back into the series of small rooms that they had been housed in, firing as they went.

Within the room on the left side, a more advanced platform, white in color and slightly larger with equally larger guns, stood in the center of the area, bringing up its heavy weapons towards Ranma. Ranma ducked, allowing the rocket to flash over his head, then kicked up off of

the ground. A second later, he bounced off of the roof above and down onto the larger platform.

His hands still heated to the point that their mere touch sent the metal to melt away as if it had been hurled into a furnace, Ranma tore the large platform's head clear off, hurling it sideways in a way that sent bits of heated metal into several of the other droids, downing them at the same time.

Outside in the hallway, two of the Troopers from the other side of the hallway had raced forward as Ranma had entered across from them, but one of them went down from Tali's fire. The other turned towards her, and Tali hurled an overload grenade forward. The EMP grenade by any other name slammed into its body, and instantly, the controlling programs within it shorted out, the Geth Trooper collapsing to its knees.

Tali laid where she was for a second, hyperventilating, staring at the mass of destroyed Geth Troopers ahead of her before the sound of combat roused her. Hands still trembling, Tali resolutely pushed to her feet. *No! No way am I just going to lay here and wait for Ranma to finish them off. I am not a tak'tal!*

With that, Tali raced forward, catching one of the geth platforms as it tried to follow its two fellows out of the room, hurling two more of her overload grenades into the room. Three spasmed and collapsed in place, while another, larger platform, a Geth Prime, halfway towards powering up, caught one of her grenades right on its forehead, short-circuiting it entirely before it could pull itself out of the charging station.

"They must've been on some kind of rotation, with only half of them charged and ready to go at any time," she muttered, turning towards one of the other doorways, shotgun blasting another geth as it appeared there. This was followed by a second Shock Trooper pushing its way out of the doorway, crumpling the smaller platform's chest under its foot as it went. Two shotgun shells slammed into it but only caused it to stagger slightly as it brought its weapon, a large anti-infantry gun of some kind, around to point at the quarian.

That was when a hurled platform from the other side of the hall slammed into it, knocking the Shock Trooper off its feet. Tali instantly raced forward, hopping up onto the wreckage of the smaller platform on the larger one's chest before it could get out from under it. Three point-blank shotgun blasts rang out, and the Shock Trooper went still, missing most of its head and shoulders, white lubricant flowing everywhere.

Ranma stalked out of the room at the other side of the hallway, shaking his head. "I don't have those fancy grenades of yours, so I just sort of tore everything apart in there. Although..." he looked behind Tali for a moment into the first room that she had entered. "I didn't see anything as large as that big guy in there. Do you think we'll be seeing any more of these things around?"

Tali shook her head. Her earlier fear and loathing were gone now, replaced by focused anger and more than a little interest in what they might find here. "No. This, this explains where most of the power from the nearby generator was going. We might run into a few geth inside the generator room itself, but we shouldn't find any more stations like these. Although if you didn't destroy another Geth Prime, we'll run into one there, I think."

"Good. Anything you want to do to them in before we move on?" Ranma asked. He honestly wasn't all that happy about killing people, even scum like these pirates. The geth? Well, they were genocidal robots. Killing them was about as black and white as he could get.

Tali frowned pensively, looking down at the down platforms and shook her head. "No. I'll want to come back and look at a few that still have their heads in one piece; that's where they have memory cores, but that's for later. Let's finish this!"

Inside the habitat block housing the generator, they did indeed find seven more geth platforms. One of them was a Geth Prime, four were Troopers and two were Shock Troopers. It was also evident from the moment Ranma burst into the door that they had taken control of the defense of the generator. Both the robots and the pirates were dug in around the area, and several heavy weapons had been brought out from storage, facing towards the doorway as Ranma and his companion entered, attacking from a wide u-shaped.

Heavy cannon caught Ranma in the center of his chest, causing him to grunt at the impact. Yet beyond breaking some bones that instantly began to heal, it only served to knock him off of his feet and into Tali, carrying her back through the doorway. However, Tali had already hurled several grenades forward, smoke and overload grenades in this case. They went off, blinding the pirates almost entirely and forcing the platforms to switch to infrared, while the overload grenades caught one of the Shock Troopers.

Ranma barreled forward, still taking fire from the platforms but dodging most of it now, leaping up off of the ceiling of the habitat unit, then down into one of the groups of pirates with a heavy weapon. Landing, he lashed out with his fists, killing both of the pirates there, before grabbing up their large gun, which looked like an anti-material rifle to him. He held it in his arms as easily as a normal person would a rifle firing to the side, not even noticing the recoil as he fired into the group of robots.

Several of them were shredded, although the Geth Prime had something that the others that Ranma dealt with hadn't. A personal energy shield of some kind popped into existence around it, blocking Ranma's attacks. It returned fire, forcing Ranma to dodge, killing two more for the pirates on the other edge of the defensive U, who had been about to bring their guns to bear on Ranma. Its next shot caught him, hurling him the length of the habitat to slam into the outer wall with a groan of real pain. *Fuck, but I need to either get my armor back or make another set, that fucking hurt!*

Falling toward the ground, Ranma got his feet under him. Pushing off as he landed, he leaped upwards over another stream of mass effect rounds as the Geth Prime went through the air below him.

Meanwhile, Tali, using her last remaining drone, was able to direct her own fire to first finish off one of the remaining Geth Troopers, then pin down the surviving pirates around the other heavy weapon.

The Geth Prime made a mistake at this point. While one arm tracked Ranma through the air, firing at him and basically doing little but redirecting his leap slightly, the other came around and fired at Tali.

“Bosh’tet!” she shrieked, ducking back out into the hallway beyond, rolling to one side to avoid the fire.

Yet splitting its firepower enabled Ranma to get close.

Landing directly in front of the platform, Ranma dug his hands down into the metal of the deck beneath them, his heating technique flaring out through the metal plates all around him, and specifically underneath the platform, melting the metal to the point the Geth Prime’s feet sank into it. The droid wobbled, and its shield deactivated as it scrambled to keep its footing, allowing Ranma to hurl himself forward. His hands lashed around the platform’s ‘neck’ and, with his hands heated to the point where they looked almost white, he seared through the metal there with ease, tearing off the Geth Prime’s head and tossing it to the side.

“Hey, at least be careful with their heads,” Tali mock-complained as she finished off three more pirates.

“I’ll try to remember that next time,” Ranma joked, jumping back to land near her as he kicked the Prime with enough force to shatter the last Shock Trooper he’d aimed for. “What now? We came to the generator room because you just thought it was a good idea, and it really was, but can we do anything here to force the pirates to surrender or something?”

Tali raced forward to the controls of the generator. She quickly began to figure out what they were and shook her head. “We can turn the entire thing off, but we can’t really redirect power from any of the other units. The energy grid’s not set up to do that. We’re going to have to clear the rest of the pirates out. Let me just set up a few traps here so they can’t blow this thing and take us with them if they want to. I don’t think that’s a thing among pirates, but then again, I didn’t think they worked with geth either. “

Tali paused, her glowing eyes widening as a thought occurred to her. “And the geth might have left something in this place’s operating system. Fuck, actually, that’s probably the most dangerous thing. And it’ll be the one that takes me the longest to figure out. Since I don’t

know this specific generator type, I'll need to figure out what different aspects of its operating system do, then figure out if there's anything that shouldn't be there."

"Will you be all right on your own here. I don't want to give the pirates more time to organize," Ranma confessed. "Especially, if they have heavy weapons around here someplace. Damn, but those things hurt like a kick from a mule."

"I don't know what a mule is, but if it can kick hard enough to be compared to large caliber mass effect guns, I doubt I want to know." Tali directed her drone platform back out into the hall, slapping controls and putting the generator into what was known as a fast scan mode. This meant the operating system was too busy looking at itself to do anything. If the geth had left something in it, they would be able to hide from such a scan but not take over the operating system while it was going on. "Stay with me for a few more minutes as I put down some traps in the doorway, please?" After that, yeah, you can finish off the rest of the pirates, while I figure this out."

It turned out, that Tali's analysis on this point was quite correct. The geth had put one of their programs inside the operating system of the generator. It was created to destroy the generator if the base and geth's involvement with the pirates were discovered. Luckily, thanks to the time the fast scan gave her, Tali was able to get rid of it in time. By the time Ranma had finished with his Grand High Marshallnees, the generator was safe, and she even removed most of her traps and sent her drone out to get the slave girls.

Thus, Ranma walked into the engineering room to cheers from the slave girls and more. He blushed and waved them off, ignoring how even a few of the human girls were making him downright salacious promises, so grateful were they for their freedom.

Instead, he moved over to Tali, who was sitting on the ground of the generator room with the head of the giant platform in front of her, hooked into her omni-tool by several cables. "The local boss was hiding out in his room with nine automated gun turrets to defend him. He was kind of paranoid about his personal well-being, not that it helped him much," Ranma quipped, crouching down next to his friend, gently poking her in the shoulder. "You okay? Now that the adrenaline's worn off and everything, I mean. These guys are kind of like your people's Boogiemans, aren't they?"

"I don't know what a Boogiemans is, but I can get what you're saying from the context. And I would be lying if I said that it didn't bother me," Tali confessed, turning her head in his direction, her glowing eyes doing this strange crinkle thing they did when she was smiling that Ranma had noticed. "Thanks for worrying about me."

"Hey, what are friends for?" Ranma quipped, moving now gently to nudge her with his shoulder. "If you're ready to talk, I'm here."

"Eh, Right now, working on what they were doing here is keeping me focused. I think you might be interested in it too," Tali answered, trying not to notice how close Ranma was right now.

"Where there's one group like this, there might be more beyond the Perseus Veil," Ranma guessed, blushing a little as one of the human women moved into his line of sight and pretended to pull off her top, causing Ranma quickly to look down at Tali. Not, mind you, that crouching next to her like this was any better. At this angle, Ranma couldn't stop himself from looking at her chest just as much as her visored face.

Tali noted where Ranma had been looking initially and fought back a small snarl before it could become loud enough to be audible to her helmet's pickup. When Ranma resolutely ignored the human girl and looked back down at Tali, she fought back a flash of both relief and pleasure at the fact that he would rather look at her than at the human girl, despite the fact that the human girl was putting so much **more** on display than any quarian could or would have felt comfortable with doing even if they had the ability.

Tali realized what she was thinking again and quickly shook the thought off. *Stop it, girl! He's human, you're quarian, it just it just won't work.*

Not unless an insidious part of her mind thought Ranma can really teach you how to use your ki to help your immune system. Then, well, if historian quarian's were able to mate, then maybe...

Before that thought could cause her temperature to rise once more to the point where her suit would notice, Tali shoved it even further into the back of her mind, concentrating on the here and now. "That's right. This was one of several groups, all of them in communication with one another all the time. I think that the extranet is riddled with geth programs, darn it! I'm going to need to figure out a way to block them from tracking us or invading any systems that we're using. I don't think the Council really understood what the geth are when they decided to treat us quarians as lepers and just ignore everything on the other side of the Perseus Veil. Still, if they're not willing to listen, that's their problem."

"Too right," Ranma agreed, peeling his eyes off Tali's chest and concentrating on those white glowing eyes of hers. *Damn, her eyes are amazing too, and she gets so passionate about stuff like this it's really cool to see.* "But did you find anything else that we could use personally? Or would it be interesting to me?"

"Egotist," Tali teased, shaking her head. "But actually, yeah. Apparently, they've been in contact with a group of geth on the planet of Noveria. And they're working with..." Tali paused, her fingers flickering over her holographic controls over her omni-tool for a moment before the controls were replaced by an image of a middle-aged turian speaking to another platform. "This guy."

A second later, the small recording spoke, his voice gravelly but also strangely atonal, like someone devoid of emotions for some reason. "...Provide security for the Corporation there. You will have to remain out of sight, but the Ancient Machine wants..."

There, the program ended, and Tali shrugged. "That's Saren, right?" When they had been talking about Saren and Vasir, Benezia had supplied pictures of both Spectres.

"Yeah," Ranma agreed slowly. "And didn't Benezia also tell us that he was doing something out near the Perseus Veil that was making her suspicious of him? Although, what is an Old Machine? And why is he working with the geth?"

"No idea. But if Saren's also working with a corporation that might be experimenting on living subjects, then I think Saren might not be so corrupt but simply a traitor to the Council Races. I don't particularly care about the Council one way or another, but..."

"Yeah, whatever he's up to, it can't be good," Ranma agreed, standing up and gently holding out her hand to pull Tali to her feet.

Disconnecting herself from the platform head that she had been examining, Tali allowed Ranma to pull her to her feet but stumbled as she did so, grumbling, "Gah, my legs are asleep."

She stumbled into Ranma's chest, causing both of them to blush, although neither saw the other one doing so, thanks to Tali's hood and helmet combo. "Yeah, well, it's nice to know that other races sometimes get that feeling too. But right now, I think we should gather this lot up, grab everything we want from this place," Ranma stated, trying hard not to react to the far-too near-skintight armful pressing into him.

Ranma took a step back away from Tali, gesturing overhead towards the generator. "You rig that thing to blow, we get out of here, and then, I think that particular target's moved up my priority list. It was already near the top right behind that group of pedos, but..."

"While that group definitely needs to be brought to justice, this does seem to be a little broader in scope in terms of the evil it might represent," Tali agreed while also making a note on her omni-tool to report all this to the Migrant Fleet. It would be a nice follow-up to her first message to them about the resources she'd discovered, thanks to the Shadow Broker's network. "I know you didn't want to, but sending some of the information the Shadow Broker had on that group to the local authorities anonymously might be enough to deal with them. This one... well, Noveria's a corporate world, so the locals aren't exactly going to care about Council law and probably wouldn't even have the forces necessary to fight the geth if they did."

She then beamed up at Ranma, her entire body language suddenly becoming very happy as she gave him a thumbs up. "And I get to see a snow world to boot."

Ranma laughed, and the two of them turned towards the slaves, both of them shouting out orders as they went.

End Chapter

I think the combat scene could have been better here, as strange as that might be to hear from me. I need to go back and play ME again, but I bought it on CD well before Steam was a thing, so I'd need to buy it again. My computer doesn't even have a CD/DVD port any longer, LOL.

Anyway, that will be the last we see of Herb for a while, as the story shifts entirely to concentrating on Ranma, Tali, and how they are basically going to be wrecking Saren's plans just as they start rather than later. That shift will have consequences in terms of what they find on Noveria and elsewhere. I will also be able to bring John back into the fic for at least a bit. And maybe introduce some of the other canon characters.

Herb will have his own adventures, but it will take weeks of buildup for those to become actually interesting, I don't think we need to cover.