

I don't own Ranma or Mass Effect. This should be obvious by this point.

Chapter 4: ...And Moving On

About a week and a half after Benenzia left Ranma finished the armor. Herb stood staring at them for a moment rubbing at where his long sideburns had been before he cut them off, a habit he had gotten into in the past few weeks. "Their design looks somewhat familiar Ranma, but I can't quite place where I've seen it before."

"That's strange...Though there're only so many designs for armor in the universe y'know." Ranma said in a butter would not melt in his mouth tone which Herb missed thankfully. Actually Ranma had gotten most of the design for the armor from a videogame called Halo he'd played once. It showed most in the design of the helmet, which was dominated by a visor under a small lip that looked like a metal cap and a strong metal jaw underneath the visor.

The armor was a full body type, with a formfitting undergarment made of the local equivalent of silk with small tiny wooden scales woven into it here and there. On top of that were connected breastplate, greaves and gauntlets. "This is the one that holds the new omni-tools that Benenzia left for us." Ranma said holding up the left-hand gauntlet of his own suit. I figure since we were both right-handed having it on order offhand was a good idea.

"Make sense." Herb nodded still staring at the helmet. "What systems does this have on it? And what is the visor actually made of?"

"That's made out of what they use here for viewing platforms in space an' stuff like that." Rama said shaking his head. "I can never remember the damn name of it sorry. Since its rated for space work and even combat it should be good with only a bit of ki strengthening durin' combat. The metal alone is as tough as what they have on their spaceships and it'll become tougher when we strengthen it with ki, though that'll take quite a bit of energy to do that. Steel doesn't hold a charge like wood or silk'd, so it'll be a continuous drain durin' battle."

"Not a problem for me." the dragon descendent responded with a small smirk. *Or you at this point*, he thought to himself. Ranma couldn't renew his ki as quickly reservoir as Herb could, but his actual reservoir was actually almost as large as Herb's.

"Anyway," Ranma went on, returning to the first question that Herb asked. "The helmets have a suite of the regular scanning equipment they use here. Some of it will map out your environment then display it on a small heads up display on the interior of the visor, and it'll also note how many enemy's there are in a set distance around you. "I've connected it to our the tools, so you can enlarge, expand or whatever you want on it and it'll show up on the visor rather than on your Omni-tool and I had one of the sisters do the programming.

He turned to the breastplate portion of the armor turning it around to show Herb the back plate of it pointing to a small metal container of some kind set high up on the back of the sui. "The batteries are stored here, along with a few spares."

"What kind of batteries?" Herb asked sharply. He had run a test on a small bit of unrefined Eezo, that he'd asked Benenzia to loan them before she left. It'd only been the size of a thimble, and had to be kept in a special tube. However even that small bit had been enough to show the two martial artists why they were uneasy around it: Eezo sucked in ki from anything nearby, including them. Herb had gone into one of the normal supply ships engine rooms a week later, and had discovered that the Eezo that they were using also sucked and he in even larger amounts.

"Not Eezo." Ranma replied grimly nodding his head. Neither martial artist was very happy about that crap,, the ki draining aspect of it gave them a feeling of wrongness, though nowhere near what they felt that time they had been using ki sight when *Sijou's Eyes* had gone into the gate. "The batter'll have to be replaced every few days of usage, but we can enlarge this space here to carry more." He said tapping one of the thigh plates, on the outside of whihce there was a small storage area.

"Unfortunately doin' that'll be the same with the armoring technique, you'd have ta be pumping a small stream o' ki into it constantly. Not a lot but still..." Ranma shrugged before going on. "Once metal's formed, it just isn't as willing to take a ki charge as it is when you're actually working with it. You can power attacks through it, and even projected attacks through it, but keepin' the attack inside the metal." Ranma shook his head.

"Interesting." Herb murmured. "You realize though that we wouldn't be able to get away with wearing this entire getup as normal streetwear without attracting attention correct, especially with their paintjobs. At least not on most planets."

"Yeah, but we could wear the skintight bit underneath our normal clothing, and we could get away with may be the gauntlets and greaves."

"Greaves only I think." Herb said shaking his head. "Still very good work. Is it ready for a full trial?"

Ranma smirked. "You bet lizard breath."

A moment later the two of them were moving out of the abbey and into the surrounding woods, followed by several curious sisters, the abbess and Usagi, all of whom were interested to see how the armor Ranma had created worked out. Many, not just O'taku and the sisters of the wood-crafting hall, had followed the construction process with interest, and were eager to try their own hands at it. If they could create similar suits for even a few agents of the 29, that could have a major impact, though it would take time before they could project ki in such a way as to actually create the metal in question.

The fact both suits were also like pieces of art added to the allure. While the two martial artists had chosen the colors, several dozen had worked with Ranma in designing the paint schemes for both suits.

Herb's suit was colored blue, white and green. The helmet including the visor was a blue that matched his ponytail, which stuck out of a hole at the back of the helmet to hang down his back. The blue continued down the skintight portion and the armor down his shoulders where it changed into waves segueing into white on his upper body before becoming green around the waist which it stayed down to his feet. Small designs of one or the other stuck out here and there on it stood out slightly on the regular background colors, green on white or blue one white and white on both.

Jerosa, the sister Usagi had, in her own words 'sexed into submission' had led the painting project, and she and the others were pleased with how Herb's suit turned out receiving compliments from their fellows as they followed the two martial artists. For his part, Herb was well satisfied with it, so long as the paint job actually stood up to combat.

Ranma's suit was much more utilitarian, not having as good an eye for art as Herb. It was painted blue and red in the symbol of the Yin Yang on the chest piece, with the undergarments simply black and the gauntlets and greaves being the same except for splashes here and there of red. His visor was gold colored.

The two martial artists stopped in a clearing well away from the abbey, turning to look at one another. "I hope these paint jobs last." Ranma said with a smirk inside his helmet, stretching his arms above his head and then moving through a series of warm-up exercises to make certain eh still had a full range of movement. "How does it feel so far?"

Across from him Herb did the same. "Since they use the same kind of paints use on their ships, and it apparently stands up to violence rather well in space that shouldn't be a concern. And the suit feels fine. A little constricting in terms of moving from the waist, but not enough that I'd notice it."

"Good." Ranma nodded then without further ado charged forward. Herb met him the two of them exchanging kicks and punches in the center of the small clearing before Ranma took to the air, hands and feet moving with Amiguriken speed down on Herb.

The former Musk prince simply planted his feet, guarding himself with his hands until one palm floated directly in front of Ranma's chest as it moved to block another punch. A small ki blast rocketed out, catching Ranma in the chest and hurling him backwards slightly, but doing no damage to the suit or even the paint job. "You see I was correct." Herb said simply.

That was as far as he got before he had to jump to one side to avoid another ki blast coming back at him, blue-gold fire instead of his own orange-gold smashing into the ground where he had been standing a moment ago. Herb rolled, ducking underneath another blast,

coming up and launching himself into the air to match Ranma where he had just launched himself from a tree limb on the other side of the clearing.

Even as they exchanged blows the two martial artists continued to comment on the suits. "Do the suits support any kind of weapons?"

"I've tested a few of their weapons, most of them run on batteries o' that Eezo crap. I think We c'd" Ranma had to stop speaking for a moment as he dodged a punch that might've smashed into his visor. Quickly he grabbed Herb's outstretched arm before he could retract it, locking the arm in a grip under one of his own arms, pulling Herb somewhat off-balance before slamming the elbow and his other arm into Herb's visor.

Before Ranma could do more Herb extricated himself from the grip, kicking out hard sending the two of them apart for a moment. This allowed Herb to fire off several ki blasts. "I meant, how does it do against them?"

"Oh, pretty damn well!" Ranma said as he rocketed back into the fight dodging the ki blast flung at him easily before sliding on his feet right in front of Herb and blasting him off his feet with a close range ki blast. "I tested the trial plates with every weapon I could get my hands, and thanks to Benenzia that was a lot! Basically any weapon anyone, even one of the krogan can carry won't be able to damage it overmuch, at least not with one shot, and most won't be able to do much even with several rounds. Tanks or the local equivalent'd be able to eventually, if we stand still and take it. Just remember the suit ain't powered, so the first we'll know if the armor is breaking is when the pain hits."

"That's fine, neither of us are the type to stand still in a battle anyway." Landing easily on his feet Herb held up his hands in a halting gesture and nodded reaching up to his helmet to pull it off gently, careful to work it his ponytail through it's hole at the back, which was rather difficult. Two of the abbey's sisters came forward to help him and he nodded at them gratefully.

"I think these worked out very well Ranma, they're a tribute to your skill. I would recommend however that we at least get some small all-purpose knives for ourselves. and pick up some gun training as well for long-range combat. We won't always be able to close with our enemy, and ki blasts are somewhat limiting in their scope."

"Benenzia left several weapons for us here, and I bet I could whip up trench knives easily enough."

O'taku spoke up then, having watched the brief combat avidly. "You have about four days before the next supply ship arrives, are you two going to leave then?"

The two martial artists looked at one another and Ranma spoke up for them both. "I think so. Our time here's been great but, well you've learned all I can teach you about my type

of smithing, ya just need ta build up your ki and your endurance ta heat, which ya don't nee me here fer. Herb?"

"I'll talk to the abbess later about the progress of my classes." Herb said with a nod. "But I think that they are far enough along they can start teaching themselves, at least for a few years or so."

Later that evening while Ranma began to work on the trench knives that Herb had recommended Herb reported to the abbess. "At this point most of the sisters I have been teaching are far enough along that I don't need to be here for more continued instruction. I think it is time my companion and I head out into the rest of the universe once more."

"Yet none of them have been able to produce any of the attacks that you and Ranma throw out occasionally." Joldrea'as replied cocking her head to one side. "Other than Usagi I mean." Usagi had begun to throw out tiny ki attacks a few weeks back, and the speed she healed from wounds had skyrocketed, coming close to that of a krogan.

"Attacks like that take a long time to develop. I have a certain advantage there that no one else does thanks to my family while Ranma is a bit of a freak in that area." Herb replied tartly. "The fact that Benenzia and Usagi were able to produce any kind of attacks so quickly was astonishing, you shouldn't use them as a baseline for the rest of your sisterhood. Instead look at the fact they are all able to heal from wounds far faster, and that they are physically stronger and faster. If they all keep working on getting stronger and faster that will build up your inner energies and eventually you'll be able to produce attacks. I wrote out some notes about a few attacks they could try eventually, as well as further exercises and meditation techniques they can try."

Herb raised his hand and the abbess did the same, their omni-tools appearing for a moment. Joldrea'as sighed. "You two will be missed. I must admit to you, I wasn't happy that Benenzia brought you here in the first place, but the two of you brought new life to my abbey, and I am thankful to have known you."

"Both of us have enjoyed our time here abbess." Herb said with a bow. And if you ever need help, I'm certain you can get in touch with us but I really do think it's time for us to leave."

His eyes gleamed slightly and asari matriarch knew that the two humans were, what was that human phrase, feeling itchy feet or something? Their equivalent of the normal asari maiden's desire to experience new things and explore. Wander something?

"Very well, Benenzia left codes for several bank accounts that you could use to pay for the ship she promised you, and the name of a small, but well-connected construction company that would be willing to build a one-off ship design to your specifications." She held up her hand again and Herb did the same. After a moment the abbess nodded. "I just transferred the names

of the company and the people you should talk to there as well as the account numbers to you. Now, I'm certain we'll have more time in the next few days, so if you'll excuse me?"

She waved Herb out of her office before turning to the abbey's accounts. Paperwork waited for no woman. But she only had a few moments peace before the door to her work room banged open. "Hi, Joldrea'as!" said Usagi smiling brightly at her as she walked in. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to go with Ranma and Herb when they leave, okay?"

The abbess shook her head with a faint smile on her face. The internal child Usagi was amusing to have around, but in many ways Joldrea'as would be glad to see her go. Several of the older and even a few of the younger Ardat Yahkshi sisters here had never really warmed to Usagi's odd nature despite their own nature, and those who had warmed to Usagi were in some ways worse. They had tried to one up each other by trying to wear her out in various 'exercises' and had all failed miserably. Their egos had been hurt, and the senior sisters had passed on more than a few rumblings against Usagi because of that.

"I am not going to try to stop you Usagi, I will simply wish you well on your journey. In fact, since you are not part of the abbey, you didn't even have to inform me you were going. Though I will warn you, those two seem to think that they'll be able to simply slip around here and there in the galaxy fighting the good fight or whatever it is they wish to do. But I doubt that the powers that be are unaware of them at this point, and those that try to do good often gain the attention of those that are not, especially if doing good means attacking the status quo."

"I know Usagi said, and suddenly her normal happy childish attitude was gone, in its place leaving a hard and dangerous warrior. "I'm hoping for it." The abbess looked at her for a moment head cocked to one side and Usagi chuckled, back to normal. "But that not why I came here, or at least telling you I was going wasn't the only reason. You see someone else wants to go tooooo." She caroled, then reached out past the doorway, to pull in O'taku. "O'takkie's got something she wants to ask you." With that Usagi pushed O'taku into the room, and vacated the premises quickly.

OOOOOOO

John Sheppard, Lieutenant first class Alliance Marine Corps groaned aloud as she saw the marking for his captain turn from green straight to black in an instant. The captain shouldn't have even been assigned to this mission in the first place, considering there was only a single platoon assigned to taking this ship, but he had decided to go in with John's command, saying that intel had said this ship was carrying valuable information. That had made sense at the time since the captain was a damn fine tech and code cracker, something none of the other officers or noncoms in his rifle company could say. But it had cost him.

But John would have time enough to mourn after the battle, and time to organize after this firefight was over. With a crack from his rifle John took out the batarian that had been playing dead among the piled bodies of the ship's defenders. Then he moved down the

corridor, joining two of his fellow marines in peering out from behind a doorway there where the remaining defenders were trying to hold the attackers up.

He poked his head out for a second, taking the scene in before ducking back, taking it all in at that instant. Replaying it in his mind with a mental trick marines were taught to memorize the battlefield, he nodded, reaching down to his belt. "Fouker, Pisskwaney, grenades! One flash, one smoke! Toomey, Glass, with me!"

The two marines thus named thumbed their grenades, then rolled them around the corridor. John threw his into the air of the ship's corridor, with took the defenders attention away from the two on the ground. A moment later smoke billowed out, along with a bang that had hopefully blinded this pack of defenders.

"Now!" John and the other two marines moved out from the corridor, laying down a murderous fire that took out the last of the ship's security that had been in position to intercept their entrance.

Taking ships like this was always tough, but taking slaver ships, even ships just transporting slaves from one place to another rather than taking them, was worse. First because the ship's crews was almost always larger than the size of the ship would normally have, which this firefight had shown. Over forty batarians had tried to stop the marines from gaining a toehold in their ship, cutting down a full fire team before they fell in turn, and even at the last one of them had gotten the captain

And second if you there might still be slaves aboard, which the slavers wouldn't hesitate to use as hostages or meat shields. Over the past few months John had seen both tactics, and knew how to combat them. That didn't mean they'd always been able to save the slaves in question though, and John knew he wasn't the only one who had nightmares about the men and women they couldn't save.

Luckily this ship didn't have any slaves on it. That made it a straight up fight, and one that the marines had trained for since before humanity had left Earth. In a straight up fight, the batarians couldn't match the marines, not in training, not in arms, not in rage.

John stood a moment, looking down at his captain shaking his head, then, stiffened his shoulders, turning to the noncoms and his second in command and got to work. "Squads Ensign DuPree, your objective is task force Beta. Two, you're with me, we're going for Able. Three under Gunny Kaser and Sergeant Miyakami, spread out and hunt by fire teams!" Three had already lost a fire team.

While the others nodded Gunny Kaser made to object, but subsided as John cocked his rifle, then checked the pistols he had strapped to his hips. Fact of the matter was that John was one of the best shots in the entire Marine Corps, as well as a biotic. Even better, he was ambidextrous, and was the only man Kaser had ever known who could use two-gun mojo in

real combat. So despite it being against regs his leading from the front was probably a good idea.

"Let's move people!" John said, racing down the corridor. Around him his men spread out from there with the squad assigned to target Able heading towards the engines while John led his men towards the bridge. Luckily the layout of this ship was one they had on file, which cut down on the surprises they could run into.

That didn't mean it was easy-going, fast, or that they didn't run into any surprises of course. The first was a larger than normal corridor or set near where the bridge was supposed to be, with several areas high up designed for security teams to fire down into the central area. There were at least two dozen slavers there, and the second surprise, a krogan.

"Shit!" John muttered, watching the giant lizard alien rumbling towards them bellowing a challenge. It's shotgun went off, nearly taking one of his men out right there as it destroyed the bit of cover he had been hiding behind, only his shield saving him as he scrambled back into another piece of cover, some kind of crate. But John could tell it's power had nearly flatlined from that one blast. Those giant damn shotguns of the krogan packed one hell of a punch.

John clicked his rifle onto it's mag holder, grabbing up his pistols, going to full fire on both aiming at the krogan. "One concentrate fire left, two right, three go to grenades and clear out the bastards up high!"

As the grenades began to clear out the defenders from their heightened positions the krogan simply bellowed in laughter, a biotic shield appearing around him to block to block John's attacks. "Damn it!" Even while the bataraish all around him died from the marines devastating fire the krogan simply laughed louder racing toward the nearest fire team, which was two, having taken up cover behind some crates stacked in the center, possibly as cover for other defense teams.

John scowled, but knowing that the krogan would butcher his men if he got in among them he decided to do something a little crazy. Concentrating he pulled out a biotic shield around him then he Charged forward, slamming into the Krogan shield to shield. Both their shields disappeared, and John's momentum took the larger alien to the ground for a moment.

The krogan however responded quickly, grabbing John around the waist and headbutting him hard. John saw stars, but using his biotics he was able to break the krogan's grip, then grabbed up his knife from his waist plunging it into the alien while around him his men continued to exchange fire with the slavers.

However the Krogan simply laughed. "Hah, your puny little pig-sticker can't hurt a krogan warrior fool!" So saying the krogan flipped them both around slamming John into the ground and raising both fists clenched together to bring them down on his head with bone shattering force.

Desperately John Pushed and Grabbed the korgan at the same time, sending him up into the air. Before the alien could use his own biotics to break John's Grab John pulled out his pistols pumping the alien's face full of bullets.

Yet even that wasn't enough to put the Krogan down permanently, since he raised his shield to slow the bullets down they lacked penetrating power. The krogan rushed in again when John's Grab dissipated, only to gape at the grenade John had just thrown at him, making it hover in the air for a moment before a biotic pulse slammed into it igniting it and taking the krogan's head clean off.

As the krogan finally slumped to the ground John did so, going down on one knee and gasping heavily. Using biotics always took a lot out of him even if he had the latest chip the Alliance had developed in his mind to help control them.

"Sir, are you all right?" Asked corporal O'Mallen, the lead of fire team two.

"For now." John muttered, "though I'll be having the mother of all headaches when the adrenaline wears off. "Give me a sit rep." Even as he asked this John had pulled up his platoon's med stats, frowning as he saw another marine had fallen in first squad, and three of his own were reading in the yellow, one bordering on orange.

"Hostiles cleared for now sir, I've taken the liberty of reorganizing around our wounded. I think we're nearly at the bridge Sir, so I thought we could leave the wounded here with the heavy weapons and move on." The corporal replied, trying not to look awed. The krogan John had dispatched had been an older looking lizard, and with krogan the older they got the more dangerous, but the LT. had killed him one-on-one!

"Good thinking. Now, let's go knock on their fucking door."

An hour later the ship was theirs. John had lost four more men in that time including Ensign Dupree to another krogan down in the engine room. Indeed that entire squad had been hammered, with every surviving member injured in some way. It was only because John had sent the heavy weapons platoon assigned to this ship with them that they survived at all.

The news on the other two ships of this small convoy of pirate ships Wolf Pack 16, Torfan Antipiracy Fleet, had jumped was equally bad. "Going by what our code monkeys have discovered so far, these ships were going to be gifted to the Blood Pack as part of the payment for the mercs to come in on their side of this conflict." Lieutenant commander Anderson said, looking over at the young Lieutenant First class who had suddenly become company commander. "Several of the Blood Pack were scattered around the ships. Krogan are tough at the best of times, when you're not ready for them, and 1st company took a lot of casualties. And our ships took a battering clearing the ships enough for you marines to do your thing. The commodore's made the call to have us pull back to Torfan for now, and the Brigadier will probably pull your men from the frontline, though not for long."

John cocked his head and Anderson chuckled dryly. "This anti-slaver campaign is pulling up a whole lot of worms, and it's getting bigger every month. The Hegemony is doing everything it can to back the slavers bar sending in their own ships, and that might well be coming. With that going on, we might need all the men we can get out here in the Verge rather than back in Alliance space."

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Anderson didn't know it, but he was somewhat behind the times. While their ambassador to the Council was still bleating about their rights as a people and the human's 'unilateral and completely unjustified assault on Batarian interests' the Hegemony had already decided to commit some of its ships to the war against the Alliance.

The first sign of this was occurring in what had been a simple ambush of a small slaver convoy heading deeper into the Verge space.

The battle took place in a nameless star system with four gas giants, an asteroid belt and no livable planets or even any resources that could have attracted attention before this. It was only one of many systems that were important because they led elsewhere rather than on their own merits. Intelligence had discovered this slaving convoy, that was due to assault a mixed turian/salarian colony on the Verge's inner rim with council space, weeks ago, it had only been where along it's route to intercept it that delayed things.

That and, as one Intel officer put it later, "because Hackett is one paranoid bastard." Though that wasn't really fair. Being paranoid was only a bad thing if people weren't really after you.

But what their intelligence had said would be six slaver ships had turned out to be six almost new Hegemony cruisers which Alliance Intelligence later discovered had been 'mothballed' six months prior. The flotilla that had been intending to ambush them here in the system was composed of two frigate Wolf Packs of six each and three cruisers.

It would have been an even fight if not for the second batarian fleet that popped out from the relay leading deeper into Verge territory. That second fleet was composed of six frigates and a dreadnought. The dreadnaught loomed, larger than all the frigates around it combined, at least in weight of firepower, armor, and menace. Almost as soon as they appeared, the new fleet made for a direct line across the system to the next relay, the one the humans could use to fall back toward Torfan.

Sitting on the cruiser Hawaii which was his temporary flagship rear Admiral Stephen Hackett frowned, then calmly ordered the human fleet to retreat. "The jaws of the trap seem to have shut on us, but not quite. Their timing isn't perfect, which is something that we should note for the future. Instantaneous communication between relays is one thing, but unless the

secondary fleet is ready with its engines at full bore, the timing will still be off in any kind of complicated maneuver."

His flag captain, a man of Hackett's age named Nelson Logama, nodded. He had served in several anti-pirate campaigns before this and like Hackett had served during the First Contact War before that. "True, the KISS Principle is still applicable in space."

"Up to a certain degree yes." the rear admiral replied, before turning to business. "All ships start falling back slowly galactic north, heading 220 but keep the speed down for now. Cruisers to shield the frigates, let's see if we can get in a final few shots at that first group before we have to pull back. Signal the Athena, hide the burst signal as if we're trying to send a signal through the gate. My compliments to Captain Halas, and tell them that the big fish has arrived."

Around them the two officers' calm appearance and the reminder that they too had allies nearby waiting in the wings did its work on calming down that moment of panic which the second fleet's appearance had engendered in the bridge officers around them. The Hawaii and its sister ships moved forward, shielding the frigates as they began to pull away, exchanging long-range fire with the six cruisers.

"Prepare to concentrate fire." said the rear admiral, looking at a message one of his staff officers had sent him on this ship. He highlighted the ship he wanted on the tactical screen, and Captain Nelson nodded, giving his men the order and relaying the command to his sister ships.

While the dreadnought continued its ponderous way forward toward its destination its surrounding frigates raced toward where the three human cruisers and the six batarian cruisers traded fire. However the six enemy cruisers had each targeted a random target, only switching to the Alliance cruisers when the human frigates were completely out of the range.

It was evident they had wanted to cripple the faster human ships to allow for the total destruction of the human force rather than allowing even the chance of a few to get back to the relay point before the dreadnought. Though if they had analyzed the speed of the dreadnought and the various course of it and the ships under Hackett, they would have realized that wasn't necessary.

That fire priority allowed the three human cruisers to cripple their target, blowing its shields off before Javelins and mass effect rounds ripped into its hull. The enemy captain tried desperately to roll or change course but couldn't get away from the human missiles before they smashed into his ship. A moment later it exploded under their fire, and Hackett nodded grimly. All three of his cruisers had taken damage and their shields were fading quickly. "Get us out of here."

The cruisers quickly turned coming about and for a moment showing their enemies their rear quadrants. Shunting all available power to rear shields they began to pull away from

the slower batarian cruisers. Alliance ships were routinely faster than Batarian ships, simply because the ships could be pushed closer to their design limits. Batarians had major quality control issues, and everyone knew it.

The human ships raced away, heading towards the outer reaches of the system, where they would be able to loop around and come back. Then they could either turn to try and race for the relay they had come from in an effort to get there before the dreadnaught could, or turn to head toward the relay the batarians had arrived from.

While the dreadnaught continued on its route, the frigates that had arrived with it cut the human's course, closing quickly. They made for a point in the asteroid field where they would be able to join with the original cruisers to chase the humans.

Hackett nodded. "They're afraid if we think we're trapped we'll turn and take out the cruisers."

"Makes sense Sir if you don't mind me saying. Frigates don't cost as much as cruisers, and I bet those captains are much better connected than the frigate captains."

"True but they are overconfident. Their dreadnaught's given them a sense of superiority. Sad."

Several minutes later Hackett ordered a course change that would take them towards the relay point which would lead them further away from human controlled areas of the Skyllian Verge. It was obvious that the move had not startled the batarian commander, the two fleets meeting up behind their new position coming after them hard while the dreadnaught continued on its way alone.

That this new course forced those Hackett fleet and the fleet of the pursuing batarian fleet to almost traverse the entirety of the asteroid field was simply pure happenstance, or at least the batarian thought it was. Twenty minutes of very tense flying later, the batarian fleet had closed with the human ships, though they had lost a frigate to the asteroids. They were recklessly pushing the engines of even their cruisers now in an effort to catch up to the humans before they broke out of the asteroid field to make for the relay. Elsewhere the dreadnaught had nearly reached its target, passing close by to one of the gas giants.

"That's just stupid." The flag Captain said shaking his head. "We're going towards one of their relays, they could come after us later at their leisure, and I bet they have other friends they could call in. There's no need to punish their ships like this to close with us."

"They're afraid if we get out of this system we might be able to double back somehow." Hackett said shrugged. "However judging by the time..."

Just then one of the officers who was busy continuously updating the tactical screen barked out "New contacts! Repeat new contacts, friendly fighters they just powered up directly below the batarian dreadnought!"

Watching the fleet that had been single-mindedly trying to close with his own Hackett could tell the moment those ships saw the fighters. The frigates tried to pull away, turning around and trying to race towards their beleaguered capital ship while the cruisers moved into screening positions.

The suddenness of the course change however cost them. One of the frigates suddenly lost all power, going dead in space as something inside ruptured, its power grid failing spectacularly. The ship continued on at an angle from the rest of the ships, slamming uncontrollably into an asteroid. Another lost half its thrust, falling out of formation quickly.

Staring at the tactical screen for a moment Hackett frowned but shrugged his shoulders. You couldn't have everything exactly right after all. "Signal the bombs to detonate."

Out in the asteroid field several dozen nukes had been set up in various areas, and now they went off. Only three of them were close enough to catch the batarian fleet, but three hydrogen bombs, the strongest humanity could make, was enough. The resultant explosion and the debris from the asteroids caught in it and given impetus caught two frigates and two of the cruisers with enough force to knock them out of the fight destroying the frigates outright and sending one of the cruisers careening off course enough to force it to slam into several asteroids annihilating it in due course.

"Reverse course!" Hackett ordered, "Close with the enemy."

Far away, too far for the remaining frigates to get to, the fighters of the carrier Athena began to demolish the dreadnought like so many bees trying to take out a bear. Those fighters had launched the moment the carrier received Hackett's order. Much like the rest of this operation that had been a gamble: that moment of launching the fighters could have caused enough of an energy reading for the dreadnought to find Athena where she was hidden in the outer atmosphere of one of the gas giants before they could turn off all internals and simply coast along.

That must've been hell for the pilots, Hackett thought to himself shaking his head at the courage the fighter pilots had shown to allow themselves to simply fly through space propelled only by the kinetic force of their launches. But that had been the point. Those fighters hadn't been moving very fast, and it had taken them several hours to close the relatively short distance between that gas giant and the target relay but it was that very slowness that allowed them to be ignored by the dreadnought's sensors.

Then when they had closed knife range the fighters powered up directly underneath and behind the dreadnought, the sweet zone as it were.

"Let that be a lesson to you captain." Stephen murmured, even as the remaining batarian fleet turned at bay and began to battle his own. "One, always have an ace up your sleeve and two, never assume that what you see is all that is really there."

About an hour later the battle was over. None of the human ships had been knocked out entirely, but several of the frigates would need months of repair work, over a dozen of the fighters had died taking out the dreadnought, and the cruiser Hercules had been battered almost into scrap. That it had its engines running at all was a minor miracle, but it didn't have a single weapon or shield working. That would take months of repair work, if the being counters back in of systems alliance space didn't simply right the ship off. However, none of the batarian ships was able to escape, almost destroyed to a ship, leaving the dreadnought alone twirling through space unpowered and without a single gun or engine or shield working on its surface after the fighters had finished with it.

And just chock full of yummy information, Hackett thought smiling somewhat grimly as he looked at the list of the dead. *A costly victory, but one that could open the door to more.*

"Sir, said one of the tactical officers looking at him, "can I ask a question Sir?"

"Go ahead Lieutenant." Hackett said.

"How did you know Sir?" At Hackett's raised eyebrow the younger man hurried on. "I mean it's, the scuttlebutt said that you were the one that planned this ambush Sir, so I mean how did you know that this mission would turn out to be a trap?"

"Well there you have to understand a bit of the batarian mentality. At the heart of their species is their arrogance Lieutenant. Not one-on-one obviously though they can be arrogant if they believe they are in a position of power even there. But as a people the batarians are incredibly arrogant, uncaring of individual lives for the most part, and refuse to think that other races are as smart as they are. It would tickle their fancy to catch one of our fleets using their own men as bait, something they think humans would never see through. They think us too soft for that. And they wanted to show their own people their strength, a dreadnought would do that, and allow them to have enough firepower to wipe our fleet out. And of course, they didn't know about the Athena. High command has done an excellent job in keeping them from figuring out precisely the number of carriers assigned to the Verge, and the batarians don't seem to have realized how dangerous carriers can be in any event."

The tactical officer nodded thoughtfully, but the flag captain frowned looking at Admiral Hackett. "You think this was the first opening shots in a war with the Hegemony? I doubt they can say that a dreadnought was anything but one of their own military vessels."

"Above my pay grade I'm afraid," Hackett replied smiling a little grimly. "But if it is, and if that ship carries the information I hope it does we might be able to get the turians off the fence

and working with us here. If not," Hackett shrugged. "The Systems Alliance is already devoted far more ships to this than I had initially expected, we'll see if it's enough."

OOOOOOO

While time at the monastery and in the front against the Batarians passed thusly, the Council finally became aware of the two martial artists and their odd abilities and decided on what to do about it. For the past few weeks there had been rumors, video and commentary scattering across the Council systems about the raid on Torfan, and it had quickly been added to by the campaign of the Systems Alliance.

The humans were taking the Skylian Verge by storm. Using Torfan as a forward base they pushed out in all directions, hunting down and destroying any pirate activity.

The batarian ambassador tried to protest at first to this "unilateral act of war" on a territory his people claimed as their own. Yet by the time he did there were literally thousands of escaped slaves repatriated all of whom were more than willing to point the finger at his race. And when he tried to say that slavery was a cornerstone of batarian culture, he got far less sympathy than before.

This attitude was prevalent both on the street level and in the halls of power. Nearly every race in council space had begun to make noises now about not allowing the batarians to continue their depredations. This wasn't new among humans and turians, but the Asari position both on the street and perforce in the council had changed dramatically.

Before, Councilor Tevos was against bringing the batarians to task because she felt that it was not the council's place to dictate culture to another race, and that any war to force the batarians to stop raiding would be far more costly than allowing their small depredations to continue.

That was before the news that there had been literally thousands of asari slaves on Torfan, and all of them said that there were far more out there. In the great scheme of things of course that wasn't a large number, and counselor Tevos could have easily ignored that given the alternative was full war. She always worked toward a status quo.

But the slavers stories of woe and the tale of heroism that freed them was a **very** good story, and galactic news agencies everywhere ran them almost daily since *Sijou's Eyes* had touched down in its home port. Even with that she might have been willing to ignore it, but it was the sort of thing that the Council of Matriarchs would not, so she was being pressured to do something by the 29. To make matters worse, the computers on Torfan had been recovered almost entirely intact, and more than half the slaver bands that had made it their home had connections to the Batarian Hegemony. When this came to light, even Tevos could not ignore it, not with the 29 actually in agreement and breathing down her neck on the issue. So supplies and material for the human war effort began to flow out of asari space.

On the other side of the spectrum, the turian position had always been that slavers were scum, and that there should never be any such allowed. The turians representative Counselor Sparatus was **slightly** less confrontational about it than many other Primarchs. He could see how a campaign against the batarians would take away from the security of the Council systems as a whole, as well as turn their attention away from what he felt was a far greater threat: humanity. Saren was not the only one who saw humanity as a major threat to the peace and stability of the galaxy, and Sparatus was leery of any action that could take away ships patrolling the shared turian/human border systems.

However the humans had volunteered their services in this, provided that the turians back them in the form of supplies, so it was something that could gain them a lot for very little. Thus he was not able to convince his fellow Primarchs to do nothing. The slavers had been a thorn in the turians side for decades, a blemish on their record as peacekeepers for the Council. The chance to do something about them was simply too good a chance to pass up. Indeed, now that reports had begun to come in that the Hegemony was upping the stakes, it was all Sparatus could do to convince his fellow Primarchs not to send a few fleets in to aid the humans rather than supplies.

The salarians and their councilor were the only race that was truly neutral in this. They didn't make good slaves being weak and physically disgusting to the batarians and had rarely had any planets raided by pirates.

What the salarians and their STG were most concerned about, a concern their councilor shared with his fellows, was the fact that Torfan had been taken by two humans with very, very odd powers. When Ambassador Udina was called in, the Salarian tried to catch him out on what he thought was some kind of super soldier program, but Udina had evinced first amusement, then shock but no actual knowledge. He'd seen the recordings before but had dismissed them until the councilors had called him in and proved their veracity.

About three weeks since Ranma and Herb had freed Torfan, the Council finally decided that the two humans were unaffiliated with the Systems Alliance. As such, they assigned a Spectre to hunt them down and discover where they had come from. Their first choice of course was their ace trouble shooter, Saren. But he was busy on the Geth/Council border, hunting down an issue there, reports that might be Geth sightings. The Geth were such a concern that the councilors were loathe to pull him off that to chase two humans, no matter their odd powers. So the assignment went to another, the asari Spectre, Tela Vasir.

"you must be joking." said Tela flatly, staring at the images on her ship's com screen then back at the images of the three councilors. "I'd heard rumors of course, who hasn't about the two strange humans that apparently rescued all the slaves on Torfan. But strange attacks, flight like that, durability and speed of that nature without a hint of biotic power? It has to be some kind of trick, doesn't it?"

The Salarian councilor replied coldly. "This footage has passed every test the STG was able to use on it. It is authentic."

"Mass hallucination possibly?" Tela Vasir asked though her voice wavered now realizing that the three counselors were taking this seriously, and were worried about something. Not good especially since she could smell politics somewhere in this is well, above and beyond the desire to simply find out what these odd powers represented. *Of course, if the alliance are connected to these two humans or could become so, they would become an even greater threat to the status quo...*

"Negative, none of the former slaves tested positive for having any kind of hallucinogen in their blood for the past two months' time. Moreover this happened on the asteroid, and while it would be possible for someone to let out an air based hallucinogen, it would have affected everyone, not just the slaves but the slavers in the videos. Human and batarian physiology is close enough that what could affect one would affect all." Valern replied again though not as coldly as before.

"We haven't seen any evidence of these two being examples of some human super soldier program, but that possibility can't be discounted." said Tevos. "Any connection they have to any human group be it official or not is to be investigated. If they really are free agents, then bring them in, we'd like to ask them some questions about their powers."

"And if they won't come willingly?" Vasir asked.

"We'd like for you to be discreet, but if they refuse to answer the council's summons, they are human and thus fall under counsel law. As Spectre you can apprehend them and we can in our questions at leisure." Sparatus said flatly.

"You should be able to pick up their trail on Sijou," put in Tevos helpfully. "We look forward to your success."

With that the connection cut off, and Tela Vasir frowned, sitting for a moment before punching in a series of Hypercom addresses. After several bounces here and there to disguise the signal, she eventually got her **other** employer online. "Sir, I've been asked by the Council to..."

OOOOOOO

Mostromos was a major shipbuilding center for the Asari Republic. It had been so since long before the asari had joined the Council, or rather created the Council as the asari saw it. It was a large world, with almost Earth normal gravity and atmosphere, and the system it was in held several asteroid belts which were high in heavy metal content for the stations in orbit around its epicenter. There were so many stations there they almost formed what looked a like a natural ring around the planet.

Ranma knew he was staring like a child but he didn't care. This was after all only the third planet he had seen from space, and the view was simply breathtaking. Next to him Herb did the same, though he was much more controlled while he tried to give off the sense that he had seen it all before, and wasn't impressed. He almost succeeded too. Around them the five sisters in charge of procuring supplies for the abbey and trading the abbey's woodcraft continued their work on the guiding the ship in.

The two martial artists continued to stare as the ship closed, the captain giving their identifying codes to the station they were about to dock with. After a moment were too close, and the view was occluded by the station making Ranma sighed sadly. He shook himself and looked over at Usagi and Herb. "What's the name of our contact here again?"

"Rane'Ile L'terrah" said the Musk Prince promptly. "But we should access the local banks first, we need to know how much money we have to work with before getting to work on our ship."

"It will be interestin' to talk to this Rane'Ile lady given what we want to do with our ship." Ranma said smirking a little. The two of them had time on the cruise here to look at space warfare as it was practiced in this the universe, and had decided what kind of ship they wanted to build. And they had decided on the weapons as well, which was quite a bit different than anything out there at this point.

A custom job like that would be expensive, they'd gotten some of the prices for various weapons systems off the intranet the moment they entered the system. That had been something they couldn't do with their bank accounts. Since this would be the first time they would access them that would require Ranma and Herb to go there in person. But it had given them an idea of the total cost of their ship, and it had made both of them wince even though they didn't really have a good handle on the local currency.

"Indeed, it will be fascinating to talk to a ship designer in person, I am very interested in the asari mode of ship design, so beautiful and yet so functional at the same time. You do know though, that once work begins it will be months before the ship actually finishes?"

"May take longer than that." Rama replied with a shrug. "I'll want to help create the outer armor layer after all. Depending on the actual size of the ships that might add weeks or even months. Thankfully I won't have to experiment with the different metals, creating our suits gave me enough of an idea there."

Herb nodded then pointed vaguely downwards. "We'll have to head down there as well, I certainly don't want to miss the chance to walk on another alien world."

Behind them Usagi laughed, putting her arms around both their shoulders. "Mostromos has some great beaches, we could go swimming! You two haven't spent nearly enough time in

your female forms you know, I've been keeping track. Oh, and this will give me a chance to buy bathing suits for you both!"

The two martial artists grimaced. They had in fact spent one day out of every six in their female bodies, which continually astonished the asari at the abbey even though Benenzia had warned them about it. Ranma had become somewhat more comfortable in his, but that process had begun long before they had arrived in this dimension. It was only the reactions of other people to it that really bothered him. Herb on the other hand still loathed his female form but given his people's attitudes towards women that was understandable.

"Actually that might be fun." Ranma said after moment. Herb looked at him betrayal writ on his face and Ranma shrugged. "I like swimming, if I gotta put up with being female for it, I'll do it. But ye're not buying me any kind of bathing suit Usagi," he said looking at the asari sternly. "I know what you like to wear already, and I don't want attention in that form, not even from asari. I wouldn't even be thinking about this it was a human world."

Ranma shuddered a little, remembering all too well how many men hit on him when he went to the beach with the Tendos and the amazons a few times. He quickly moved on. "Still, we'll want ta go down there ta see what we can do about recruiting a crew too y'know. Speaking of..."

He turned to look at O'taku, who was in the pilot's seat, whistling a tune that sounded strangely familiar to Ranma. "Ooohhweeeooo, oooooooooooooOOOOoo, weeeoooo..." Ranma moved over to tap her on the shoulder, startling the asari maiden. "Um, what, yes Ranma, er did I miss something?"

"Nah just wanted ta ask if you were still wanting to come with us. I mean, you aren't a fighter, and trust me, when Herb and I start travelling we will find shit to get involved in, it's sort of one of the drivin' reasons behind us wantin' to explore the universe and all."

"I might not be a fighter, but I'm a darn good pilot, and you need one." O'taku replied firmly. "Besides, I've always wanted to explore the universe too, but my, my status as an Ardat Yakshi was always a block on that. But since Abbess Joldrea'as has given me permission, I;m not going to miss out on this."

Actually what the abbess had said was that Herb and Ranma would be held accountable for anything O'taku did, and that if she succumbed to her urges as an Ardat Yakshi even once she'd send a Justicar out after her. But O'taku wanted to stay with her new friend and explore the universe so much, she was more than willing to deal with that hovering in the background. Especially since she had never really cared about the whole 'sex' thing, sure she liked to look at Ranma and Herb, but actually going more than that didn't really interest her.

"Well if yer sure, then that's one spot down." Ranma laughed. "That leaves gunner, supply officer I guess, engineer, doctor, oh and chef. No way am I gonna keep cookin' for us all if I can help it."

Herb, Usagi and O'taku all laughed while the supply ship finished docking.

OOOOOOO

Tela Vasir stared blankly at the matriarch in front of her. "You're telling me that when you melded with this human his bioelectric system overrode yours, and now you're pregnant?"

"If you have a better explanation for it, then I'm all ears Spectre." T'velma growled. She didn't like the other matron aged asari at all, there was just something off about her. Her expression became tender however when she stared down at her stomach, which was beginning to show signs of her pregnancy. "I may have been shocked by this when I found out about it at first, but now I'm actually looking forward to having a child."

Not having a single nurturing bone in her body Tela barely stopped herself from rolling her eyes. "Back on topic, is there anything else you can tell me about where the two of them could've gone?"

"No, not a one. I know about their changing forms, which you seem to think is an impossibility, though I won't try to convince you, you won't believe it until you see it. Other than that, I have no idea how they got off planet at all. Sorry."

It was pretty obvious by her tone that T'velma wasn't actually sorry about that, but Vasir didn't call her on it, having better things to do than talk with a matron that was so foolish as to have lost control of the merging so badly as to become pregnant. Whatever T'velma's opinion was, that had to be the real reason, no way a human's bioelectric field could dominate a asari's like that.

Without even a farewell Tela waved T'velma out of the room she was using as her headquarters on Sijou. She had a police report to read through, and some Blue Suns mercs to interview.

Several hours later Tela Vasir was calling councilor Tevos on a secure channel. "Councilor, we might have a problem..."

OOOOOOO

"....how much?!"

OOOOOOO

Rane'Ile L'terrah was on the cusp between matron and matriarch, still energetic and eager to enlarge her personal fortune. She was also forward thinking and rather innovative with contacts among the asari military and a few human contacts.

She was also married to a human and had three lovely children with him, who were the lights of her life. They had met at a conference about ship designs that the humans had hosted a bare six weeks after peace had been declared. Coming as it did in a bar after the official meetings were over, their courtship had begun on a rather tumultuous footing. Rane'Ile had called his people barbarians because of the way they designed their ships with no taste in anesthetics at all and he calling the asari over-civilized fops who had forgotten that warships were supposed to be threatening and actually destroy the enemy rather than look pretty doing it.

That discussion had turned into an all-nighter then breakfast the next morning and finally lunch in bed. Neither of them had looked back since, and with his help and Rane'Ile had to admit Eezo and human desire to get things done quickly Rane'Ile and her company had grown in leaps and bounds.

Because she understood humans she didn't immediately scoff and throw the two humans that matriarch Benenzia had recommended she speak to whenever they showed up. When a matriarch spoke, especially one of the 29 an intelligent businesswoman listened, even if they sounded crazy.

"What you're describing goes against practically every known rule of warfare. While your, let's call it a pocket cruiser might be good against other light vessels, a dreadnought would eat such a ship for lunch, it wouldn't even spit out the bones. Moreover, this will be well beyond the limits of what is allowed in civilian hands."

"That's if they tag us with the main gun. Like I said, this ship won't be as fast in a straight line, but it will be extremely maneuverable." Ranma said notes gesturing to some of his notes on the screen all three of them were looking at, which took up half of Rane'Ile's office.

"I understand that, and if the outer armor is capable of aiding the inertial dampeners in damping out of the G-forces of such maneuvers as you say, that could be possible. And indeed I would be willing to buy any such metallurgical formula. If it works, I'd even be willing to shelve the cost of the ship entirely." She was understating it really, if Ranma came through on his boasts the formula would make her incredibly rich very quickly, and revolutionize warship armor the galaxy over. "But again our pocket cruiser is well beyond what's aloud in civilian hands both in tonnage and weaponry. I can still build it for you, but you might have to push out to the Verge quickly, and stay there. Unless you want to join up with a notarized mercenary band."

She went on more grimly, steeping her fingers in a manner she had learned from her husband. "And if you do that, I refuse to build the ship for you. I loathe mercenaries with a fiery passion, regardless of their affiliation."

"We have no interest in joining any mercenary band, however I think you might wish to check on that. I have the impression that you will be given... a sort of unofficial, official okay to build it for us." Herb replied dryly. He'd had several long talks with Ranma and Benenzia about this before, and the two martial artists had agreed to act as agents of the 29 so long as they were only asked to solve issues that met their own code of honor, which Benenzia had no issue with. "Besides which, most of the weapons will be hidden behind panels most of the time, so long as it isn't obvious I don't see the problem."

"I hate to say it, but I don't think you could learn my method of smithing before we are done building this ship. It's not a personal thing, I'll show it to you, but whether or not you'll be able to pick it up that I can't say." Ranma shrugged. "If you can, then that's fine but if you can't we'll pay for our ship regardless"

"Would you agree to allow me to check on that assumption before we continue discussions?" asked Rane'Ile. "And I don't know if you really understand how expensive this ship could be. We're talking about not only a purpose built design but one well beyond the norm in many ways and the weapons themselves will be incredibly expensive, I might be a military contractor, but even so..."

Her voice trailed off for a moment as she used her omni-tool to punch in some numbers. "This could run you..." after a moment Rane'Ile frowned and continued. "It would run you about approximately this much."

With a wave of finger the figure changed from being on her omni-tool onto the screen allowing the two humans to look at it. Then she went on as the two of them looked at the number. "That is without time and labor added in, along with all the little problems we will into designing the ship in the first place. That will cost you more than it normally does, asari ships may each be individualized in some ways, but that is routinely only on the surface, many of their internal parts are standardized especially military vessels. This ship won't be like any other ship, and almost all of it will have to be designed on the spot."

The two martial artists looked at one another then Herb checked something on his own omni-tool before nodding. "We can afford that, indeed, as long as you don't triple that amount we would still be able to pay it. Matriarch Benenzia was incredibly generous."

Rane'Ile's eyes widened, but she slowly nodded. That gave more credence to the idea that she would get an unofficial okay to build this ship. This thought was expanded on the next day when she was called down to matriarch Donal's place. Another of the 29, Donal controlled this planet and several others and was a big name in the industrial sector. Indeed she controlled

at least 8% of the total asari GDP, making her quite easily one of the richest individuals ins all of space.

She was also far older than matriarch Benenzia, indeed she was on the cusp of what was the normal asari age range, though she had her daughter in the wings ready and willing to take over. Both daughter and matriarch were there when Rane'Ile was called in to her office and the matriarch was far more blunt than was normal for asari. "Build their ship. Watch them, learn what you can from this Ranma youth and his ability to work with metals. Speak to this Herb as you can, learn what they have to teach us, teach them what they wish to know."

Rane'Ile's eyes had widened as the matriarch talked, and she replied hesitantly. "This is unofficial yes?"

"If you mean it is not to become common knowledge, and that the STG are going to be purposefully kept from finding out, then yes it is unofficial. However, the 29 are aware, and 12 of us have decided that these humans represent something new and interesting. We are particularly interested in guiding the ripples their presence will cause in the future."

That consensus was coming from several different points of discussion. Many of the 29 had been worried about the corruption in the council since even before Tevos was elected to her position. Since then it had become worse. This was coupled with a certain concern about the reach of the STG, the attitude of the turians (though that had taken a hit since the war with the humans).

Others simply thought the two young humans represented a breakthrough in trying to decipher Bera'van'tuwan, which was part of their ancient history. They were ecstatic what had already been learned, and several observers had reported back from the Abbey feeding that interest. They had also reported simple psych profiles on Ranma and Herb, which showed that neither one was the type to work with the establishment or the government in any form. They were antiauthoritarian in the extreme unless they respected that authority. That had caused some ruffled feathers, but the majority had been willing to listen to Benenzia about this manner, and all of the matriarchs were old pros at directing such attitudes.

Then there was the group that thought the humans not only represented knowledge, but some that could break the status quo: those who had seen the research into Eezo slowing, their own people's growth slowing, the rot beginning to slowly spread from the Council to everything else. The humans themselves were unimportant to this group, their knowledge, and the way they would shake things up were much more important.

Donal was part of that third group. She was intensely interested in what new branches of learning and knowledge the presence of the two humans could open up, especially what they thought about Eezo. If they found or tried to research alternative means of powering their ship, that could be a massive breakthrough. If their ship design was anything to go by they were certainly not scared of going their own way, something that fueled that idea.

"I see." Rane'Ile said thoughtfully. "Is that the case if they end up not being able to pay for it?" She was still ambivalent about trusting the human's word on how much money they had available.

The matriarch laughed, which segued into a cough, causing her daughter to move forward quickly patting her back. "Trust us," the younger woman said dryly. "That's not an issue. Build their ship Rane'Ile, let's see what we can learn from these two outside of the martial arts. I might come up eventually to look at them myself."

"That brings me to my other question." Rane'Ile said anxiously. "The ships we're building, it will raise several flags in the local..."

"I will take care of that," said the daughter, whose name Rane'Ile hadn't heard before. "Trust us, it will be taken care of. And," she went on more seriously looking into Rane'ille's eyes. "If official notice falls on the two humans from higher up, shall we say, you are to do what you can to keep the ship itself from being discovered. So long as the Council is not aware of the ship and its various... nuances, we can keep things at a low level. We want to learn from these humans, but we can't challenge the Council directly by trying to officially hide such a ship or be part of such an attempt."

Rane'Ile growled but nodded. Politics irritated the hell out of her, but she understood the message there. "I'll see to it."

OOOOOOO

It took two weeks for Rane'Ile, several of her chief design team, Ranma and Herb to decide on a ship design. This process was filled with various frustrations, but made much easier thanks to the level of technology the asari had on hand. Being able to work with a three-dimensional representation of a design shaved off weeks of effort.

Ranma and Herb perforce learned more about ship design in those few weeks than either of them had actually wished to, but with their requirements being so specific and so different from the norm they had realized early in the process they had to go along with it. Herb delved into all aspects of the process, learning far more about the technology of this world and indeed how and why it worked than Ranma. Ranma in turn concentrated on the weapons and tactics, delving into the historical fleet actions and space battles that had been the reasoning behind the development of the different modes of warfare of the different races that made up the council, the rest of the races, and the Alliance in particular.

Some of it he just couldn't understand, in particular the way each race had become so focused on their various specialties rather than trying to be jacks-of-all-trades. Or the way the salarians and asari were happy to let the turians take over defending the council after they helped deal with the krogan, let alone the way the krogan had been dealt with, which Ranma thought was a dick move on a galactic scale.

But some of it he did understand, such as the development of the mass effect railguns, which were the primary dreadnought weapons, and common tactical fleet doctrine for the alliance and asari in particular. The GARDIAN anti-fighter weapons were much better than he had thought they were also, and missiles were far worse than he had thought, being far shorter ranged than he had expected.

In return Rane'Ile had tested out one of Ranma's gauntlets, which represented the armor that Ranma wanted to put on the ship. She had come away astonished and eager to learn how to make it. Pound for pound it was lighter and tougher than even Silaris armor, the best armor the asari could make!

But they had finally found a design that they were all happy with. The final ship was actually small for a freighter though large for a private yacht and much more solid in design. It was made to look like a manta ray, a design that was popular among asari military cruisers. The ship was also extremely heavily armed as the two humans had wished though only the Guardian lasers, of which there were enough to almost pass as an asari frigate. The mass effect guns were hidden behind compartments, which could be opened quickly and only by the bridge.

It's hangar bay was very small, which would not be true for a freighter, or even a asari yacht. Asari cruisers routinely had small flights of fighters on them or interceptors depending on their assignment in battle, a holdover from before the humans had introduced the carrier design. And the mouth of the manta ray was not the hangar bay as it would be normally. The hangar Bay was actually down low on the bottom of the ship opening towards the back. The mouth instead contained one of the four heavy banks of mass effect railguns.

This last was a sign of the two human's ideas about space warfare. Rather than devote space to a large and above all long rail gun they had decided to go for more than a dozen shorter weapons. But instead of the normal slugs, these were explosive, with a penetrating component. That of course meant that both the guns and rounds were one-off designs, but that would still be well within the budget. Rane'Ile was interested in seeing how they worked, but it was the kind of thing that even a V.I. devoted to weapons research couldn't quite analyze without real-time tests. Even putting aside the ship's mobility, which was extremely high, the armor and shields of the ship though could take as much punishment as a dreadnaught, possibly even more so the ship would certainly be able to survive to get into it's own weapons range.

That was only the exterior however, the interior was just as interesting. Some of the interior space that had been taken from the hangar bay had been devoted to a dojo, a training center complete with weapons. The rest of the ship had been designed to run with a minimum crew of twelve, with everything that could be mechanized automated. That led to the one aspect of the design that Rane'Ile was still not happy with, computational power. It would take several devoted V.I.s to run everything, and even then it wouldn't work as well as it would with bigger crew, but that was what the client wanted in this case.

Rane'Ile and her people excitedly walked around the final design shaking their heads in wonder and asking one another if it would really work, but the humans simply smiled. "Looks good." Ranma grinned clapping her on the shoulder lightly. "How long do you think it will take to build?"

"5 to 6 months at minimum." Rane'Ile said shrugging her shoulders in one of those human body movements that had spread to practically every other race.

"Good." Ranma said nodding his head. "That'll give me time to work on the outer armor. How soon can you get enough of that here for me to start working with?"

"I have enough of it on hand now. Remember, I said I was a military contractor."

"And if you can figure out a way to replicate my technique we get the ship for free, yes?"

"Most assuredly!" Rane'Ile stated quickly. "If I can figure that out I might just win myself a seat on the 29 eventually even if we split the dues. Keeping the patent for it will be tougher" She shrugged. Asari patterns were for life, which would help immensely, but the STG had proven in the past not to care about such niceties, and the turians in particular were rabid animals for anything that could make their ships tougher. Still, she could keep them from this for a time if matriarch Donal was able to help her hide their discoveries.

Ranma and Herb shrugged, not caring about that aspect really. Neither of them was looking to set themselves up as businessmen after all, simply explorers and 'Robin Hood types' as Ranma put it. the money from the new metal however would provide a long term income beyond what Matriarch Benenzia had already given them. Herb nodded his head. "In that case, I think I'd like to start exploring this planet, and I'll keep Usagi out of your hair Ranma." he smirked at the other martial artist who blushed lightly.

Usagi had proven that she had a marked preference for Ranma's personality, and had not stopped chasing after him, rather halfheartedly it must be admitted, but she had made no bones about the fact that she would love to jump in the sack with him again. Ranma however wasn't willing to let that happen. He liked, possibly even loved Usagi, but it was a sisterly kind of love. The multiple and conflicting portions of her personality were simply too much for him to handle in a relationship kind of setting.

"In that case, let's get to work." Ranma said, smacking his hands together.

End chapter

.... Please tell me my attempt to make an onomatopoeia for the Doctor Who theme song worked in the scene with O'taku?

As you can see, this could be called the last chapter before the real story starts to move, there will be a month time skip there before Vasir shows up, while the ripples of Ranma and Herb's presence continue to grow.

The Hegemony in particular are in for a bad time, now that the humans have a stable, easily defended forward base, and the council are coming on board to letting the human control the Verge (so long as they can defend it). I had meant to put in Vasir's finding them in this chapter, but I just couldn't get the scene just right. That and bulking up Ranma and Herbs differing characters and the way they spent the next few months, but again, couldn't quite get the scenes right, and couldn't concentrate on them at all!