

Can't draw, can't program, can't own.

This was the winner of the Ranma poll. Stallion will return in May guys, just giving you a head's up. And that poll will also show up on fanfic.

This chapter has been edited by myself with Grammarly and Hiryo.

Chapter 9: Catching a Bee in the Hand Often Stings

"Right, what do we know about how Ranma and Herb were captured? Who, how and why?" Sheppard demanded, looking around at his men. Human and alien, they all looked annoyed and angry. Two hours had passed since the two human super soldiers he and his team had befriended had been kidnapped and he wanted answers.

"The asari downloaded some kind of virus into the local system. It erased all images, all data tracking, everything that could tell us that she was here in the first place. Really highly advanced stuff," Corporal Ashter, his chief hack'n'crack stated, his voice torn between admiration and irritation. "That's the kind of thing a Salarian Special Task Group would use, maybe even better. Similarly, she used a programming backdoor to gain access to that hangar bay."

"We've actually been able to pinpoint the fact that she also had access to the video cameras too. Whoever our mystery asari is, she wasn't just hiding her presence from them," one of the other hackers added, shaking his head. "Frankly, we only knew anything was going on in that hangar bay because..."

"Because I am a paranoid bastard who made my own piggyback code that was separate but followed along Omega's OS that she couldn't access. If not, we wouldn't have known anything was happening at all. Whoever this is was, was that good," Ashter grunted, crossing his arms in annoyance. "If we had only been closer—"

"My great-great-great-grandfather passed down a saying that's stayed with us Shephards ever since, and it's as true now as it was back in his day. Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades," John interjected bluntly, earning a few barks of laughter from his listeners. "Let's not beat ourselves up about what ifs. We know we are dealing with an asari thanks to you, and that she's incredibly skilled at programming. Does anyone else have anything to add?"

"The gases whose traces we were able to pull from samples of that hangar bay and the release mechanisms, it's all expensive high-end technology. She could be some kind of Bounty Hunter. There are several of them operating in the Terminus Fringe. A special agent of the Shadow Broker would certainly have access to stuff like that, and the Shadow Broker would easily be able to provide her with both a backup into Omega's operating system and all the other programming toys we've seen," the senior Asari Commando, Trios said, before adding, "whoever it is, is extremely intelligent too. If the Justicar was still on Omega at this

point, she would probably be honor-bound to try to hunt the kidnapper down. It would not end well for the individual."

"The tech I will give you, that kind of thing, a person can keep on their person and use all the time. But those gases, those gases? I recognized some of them, and they were all on the controlled substance list. And in amounts fit to wipe out whole ship crews. Where did they come from?" Garrick asked. "And was she just basically piling them on one after another, thinking that the sheer amount would work or did she know somehow?"

Sergeant Truss shook her head. "I don't see how she would know. I think it was just a case of more Dakka being better than a little. As to where they got them, right here on Omega. I followed up on that angle, and large amounts of those chemicals have been moved through Omega occasionally over the years, and some stuff that was stored here was sold recently. Separate payments, all through a computer, all dropped off at different locations." The Sergeant shook his head as the others all stared at him. "Come on, people, this is Omega. Anything and everything can be bought here."

Lisa Truss gestured, and a holographic map of the massive space station popped up from her omni-tool, showing the locations the gasses were sent to. Examining the map, Shephard instantly realized that all of those places were out of the way parts of the station, either moving deeper into the rock portion of the station, where people had yet to spread, areas where varren and other scavenging beasts lived, or in sectors of the station that had fallen into disrepair due to various maintenance issues.

It was a stark reminder that while several sectors of Omega were almost as well maintained and kept up as a more law-abiding space station could boast, the majority wasn't. "And I would wager not a single person saw anyone pick up those shipments," John mused aloud before looking back at Garrus, crossing his own arms as his Corporal had a moment ago. "And you looked as if you had something else to say just now. Something you don't think any of us are going to like hearing."

Garrick's mandibles twitched. "Has anyone ever told you that you are incredibly good at reading the body language of a species not your own? Somewhat disturbingly so."

"This is the first time I've heard that, but given how well we've all worked together here, I wager that I'll probably be getting a lot more experience in it. Now talk," Sheppard ordered.

Garrick reached up and tapped his mandibles, a sign of both annoyance and concern in his people. "The Shadow Broker is one source for the kind of hacking programs and technology we've seen here. But there's another source: the Council. Frankly, this entire operation feels like something a Spectre would do, or maybe an STG team. But I remember Ranma mentioning how he and Herb ran into a Spectre once, Spectre Vasir."

"... Who happens to be an asari," Livia, the younger Asari Commando, whispered. "Athame's mercy, I **really** hope that isn't the case. Neither Ranma nor Herb struck me as the sort of people who would let bygones be bygones after something like this."

"If it is a Spectre, I think we need to call in higher authority, sir," Voljei, the salarian hacker pointed out. "Admiral Hackett and General Fedorian need to know about it. There's probably not a lot we can do about it if it's a Spectre. They're laws onto themselves for a reason. And it's not like either of those two are Systems Alliance citizens. But even so, I think they might need to be told."

"I like the fact that we're all assuming that those two are going to come out of being gassed to the gills and captured as if it's an everyday thing," Ashter muttered, shaking his head.

Garrick and John looked at him blankly. "Herb told us once that when he was young, his body developed an immunity to alcohol enough that he could drink a krogan under the table using the krogan's own drinks. I think it's not exactly a leap of logic to assume that whatever concoction of different gases were used to knock them out, it might not work for very long or again in the future," John deadpanned.

This information did not mollify Admiral Hackett, or his turian counterpart, when they were told what happened and the team's supposition on who was behind the kidnapping. "If it is a Spectre, this is an incredibly heavy-handed way of going about trying to bring them into the Council's fold, one that is almost doomed to backlash. That is if they haven't figured out a way to actually keep both of these 'humans' and I use the word lightly, under control somehow with the gases that this asari woman used on them, and aren't going to try to, I don't know, experiment on them or something."

Hackett looked at his companion in amusement. The two of them had become almost friends by this point, needing to work closely together to coordinate the space and ground forces throughout this war against the Batarian Hegemony had worked wonders on interspecies cooperation. There was already a complete research and development team being funded by their two governments because of it, and the initial concepts coming out of that group were intriguing, to say the least. Right now, though, Hackett was amused to note, "I see that turian fiction also can run to the macabre much like our own. Alien abductions were almost an entire subgenre of what we called science fiction before we gained the space ways ourselves. One that persists even now, if significantly changed."

"Truly? It does much the same in ours. And I'm not just talking about the *Ahem* adult-oriented sort that began when the asari first contacted our people," Fedorian joked, causing Hackett to snort laugh. But then the general became serious, shaking his head. "It's a pity. I would think that the Council would understand that you could get more with kribble juice than you could with the butt of a rifle, especially in cases like this."

"True. There are ways to direct anti-authoritarians like the two of them, and if one is subtle about it, they won't even get their backs up. That, and I honestly would've liked to sit down and talk with either of them. Herb sounded like an extremely educated sort, and if he and Ranma were telling the truth, when they told Commander Shepard that they were from an alternate dimension, it would be fascinating to learn how their history parallels our own Earth. But for now, I think we need to follow up on the idea that the asari who assaulted

them really was a Spectre. We probably won't be able to protest very much, but we should do what we can."

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Tela shivered a little, as she made sure that all of the asari prisoners she'd taken aboard the ship were tied up, along with some asari-specific knockout gas to keep them out of her hair in the hanger. Being so close to Ardat-Yakshi made her nervous in the extreme. They were something like lepers in asari society, and in Tela's opinion, no one sane like to be reminded of their existence, let alone interact with them.

Once the asari were dealt with, Tela took some delight in making certain that the two humans were still out of it, snorting a little at the fact that both of them were very clearly still alive despite the sheer amount of various chemicals that they'd inhaled, then prepped them to be moved. This meant hover-beds underneath the pair, plus a specially crafted holder for the many different gas tanks near their heads. She was taking no chance that either would wake up.

Moments later, Vasir was back on the bridge, watching as another cargo hauler came closer to her captured ship. It extended a boarding tube, linking the two ships for a moment, and she headed down to meet her guests. Those guests turned out to be two salarians accompanied by several droids. She quickly directed them to the one called Ranma. "Take that one. They're both prepped for moving, but he's the one who seemed to be trying to fight through the gasses harder than the other." *And the Shadow Broker is more likely to torture and experiment on him than the Council. That will teach you to make a fool of me, you fucker.*

One of the salarians looked at her coldly. "Our mutual employer would pay for both of them. Quite a lot, in point of fact."

"I know, but so would my regular employers. The Shadow Broker will take one and the Council the other. I think that's more than fair and so does the Shadow Broker. Turning in at least one of these two will remove any stain on my own position as a Spectre, allowing me to continue to be useful to him in the long-run. And the Shadow Broker always thinks of the long run."

Tela readied herself to reach for her sidearm, certain that she could drop both of these two before either could raise a weapon. It seemed to occur to the salarian that she could too because he dropped the subject, looking away quickly.

"Good. Now, don't be afraid to knock the bastard around a bit, so long as that gas mask stays on the human, the gases I've been forcing into his system will keep Ranma unconscious, at the very least. Frankly, part of me is still disturbed that both of them are still alive, but that's neither here nor there. "Be careful with the gas canisters. You do not want Ranma waking up before he gets to wherever the Shadow Broker wants him. And I would suggest making damn certain that however you lock him up, you've rated it for at least a thrasher maw."

The same salarian who had tried to argue a moment ago with her that she should turn over both prisoners to them sneered. "We have delivered many slaves and agents to the Shadow Broker. We do not need to be told our business. Comparing a human to a thresher maw? Are you still sore about how they humiliated you?"

A millisecond later, his head smashed into the wall beside where he had been standing, and Tela had her gun pressed into his cheek, growling. "They got the drop on me because I didn't know what I was dealing with! Now, I'm trying to make sure you do. I saw Ranma take on the entirety of the Blood Pack that was on Omega recently and not only survive but beat them down using nothing but his hands and feet! He tossed fully-grown Krogan Battle Masters around as if they were children! I made the mistake of underestimating them once. Are you going to make that same mistake now? Because if so, I'm not going to pay for your funeral, and if you somehow survive, I will not let the Shadow Broker get out of paying me for doing my part here! Who do you think will pay for the Shadow Broker not getting his prize?"

The salarian gulped but nodded, and Tela let him go, repeating her earlier instructions, as well as telling them about the chemical makeup of the gas that both of her supposedly human prisoners were currently breathing in. The salarians' eyes widened in shock, and they quickly moved over to look at the readouts of the gas containers said into the other side of the portable bed that Ranma was on, noting the numbers and the types of gases listed there. After that, any hesitancy in taking Tela's words seriously faded, and moments later, the two ships uncoupled from one another, going their merry way.

As they did, the Shadow Broker made good on his promise. A notification came from a secret account that Tela kept on Illium, indicating that her account there had just gotten a major jump in available funds. However, along with it was a message that caused Tela to scowl.

The Council knows of your success. The human and turian troops aboard Omega saw the capture of the prisoners. Be Prepared.

Damn it, I knew they had been warned that something was going on, but how... no, I doubt that they were able to see what was going on, but they might know Herb and Ranma were captured by an asari, which is damning enough If they contact the Council.

After a second, Tela shrugged, then powered up her omni-tool again. "Well, it won't be the first time I've had to manufacture some evidence. Hmm... now, first some fighters to bring the freighter to a stop, and then..."

Given the amount of work Tela had to put into guarding her posterior, she still hadn't figured out what to do with her asari prisoners by the time she came out of the warp gate. After some deliberation, she decided that the Ardat-Yakshi at least hadn't broken any laws and hadn't been among her targets. They could be let go, although Tela decided she would probably turn over what to do with the group of Ardat-Yakshi ostensibly let out without a minder any longer to Councilor Tevos. *Unless that other one, the one called Usagi, is supposed to be their minder? More like a bad influence, in my opinion.*

Looking out the view screen, she smiled at the sight of *Destiny Ascension* as she always did. *Truly, with such ships like that, can anyone doubt the might of the Asari Republics?* While she didn't really have much truck with the various republics themselves and certainly wasn't what anyone would call a nationalist, Tela Vasir was somewhat speciest and liked the fact, her people had developed and built the largest dreadnought in the known galaxy.

Her musings on that score took her until her ship docked with the Citadel, at which point she called ahead to the Council. Soon, she was on a conference call with all three of the Councilors.

"We will be calling you up to the Council Chamber soon, along with your prisoners. But there were a few questions we wanted to get out of the way now. Your initial mission briefing stated that he had also captured the crew of the vessel you are currently aboard? And that you would not have been able to get back to your own ship with your prisoners? Should we assume that your ship is on lockdown somewhere on Omega? You have access to a good deal of top-of-the-line STG technology and I would dislike to see it fall into the private sector. And what have you done with the prisoners? What is their makeup?"

The rapid-fire questions coming from Valern didn't surprise Tela all that much. He was always the first one to speak and always the one to speak most quickly. As a Spectre, Tela had long ago mastered the ability to keep up with the speed at which most salarians spoke when they were excited. "My ship is on lockdown, yes, and well-hidden to boot. As for my prisoners, I captured four asari. At first, I believed they were simply around as crew for the ship, but then I recalled that the two prisoners had spent time on a monastery world..."

Tevos winced at that but nodded, while both Spartacus and Valern twitched at that, and Valern fell silent, knowing how touchy Tevos was about the Ardat-Yakshi. "Very well, it will take some time to get a senior sister out here to pick them up, but we can monitor them with relative ease, keep them sequestered on the ship. Anything else?"

"One of them doesn't come from a monastery world," Tela said, continuing to use that term. "Her name is Usagi, and she is a formidable fighter, if mentally damaged in some fashion I'm not certain I understand. I was able to observe a video of her on Omega, and I couldn't quite get a handle on her personality. At times, she acted extremely childishly at other times, she evinced true-commando-trained Matron abilities. Mostly, she acted like a Maiden, one with far too much energy."

For a moment, Tevos frowned, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "That actually sounds familiar... Yes, I think I do know that one. I've never met her, but I know of Usagi. Scion of a very influential family, sent to the best, most famous schools from a young age, but with a strange mental disorder. And a love of causing trouble wherever she goes. A few hundred years ago, I think she was at the base of several scandals, although it was never clear to me if she was involved or simply allowed scandals to be discovered. No regardless, Usagi can stay with the others and transported back into Asari Space at the same time. Now, as I am certain that once you arrive at our Council Room, we will be more involved with questioning your prisoners than you, tell us more about Omega and anything else pertinent first."

At that, Tela knew that it was time to lie to her superiors again. However, this was something she had done numerous times before, and she had prepared video evidence of what she was about to say just in case they called her on it. Even the STG wouldn't be able to figure out the video evidence was fake, the same with the hidden bank account. "I regret to inform you, Councilors that I only have one of the two prisoners you sent me out to capture."

"How is this?" Spartacus growled. "We were told by the Alliance and Council Forces on Omega that you left the space station with both of them!"

"And I did, Councilor, but traveling from the Terminus Fringe to the Citadel here took me more than fifteen hours. And you well know that the Shadow Broker has it out for me after I busted some of his operations on Taetrus and Daleon," Tela shot back. "I don't know how he knew that I had captured the two human super soldiers, but they were obviously the target of the attack I was subjected to by some mercenary forces under his employ. As I came out of one of the warp gates, I found four fighters bracketing my ship, forcing me to heave to. I was able to disable the fighters with a virus eventually, but by then, the borders were already on the ship. I killed most of them boarders, but not before they were able to grab one of the prisoners. I don't think they were trying to free them, as otherwise, they would have attempted to do so while the attackers were in my ship, but they got away with the one called Ranma."

"We will need to do something about the Shadow Broker. If he is directly interfering with Spectre's business, then he is getting... I believe the human phrases to book big for his breaches?" Spartacus mused, allowing his mandibles to twitch a little bit in amusement as he looked down at his own omni-tool, very obviously watching the video recordings she had just sent over.

Valern also turned his attention that way, allowing Tevos to dominate the further discussion on what Tela had observed about Omega. Soon, however, something seemed to interrupt the three Councilors on their end, and Tevos cut off the conversation. "Give us around an hour or so, Spectre. Take all precautions you can so that your prisoner's features cannot be seen. Liaise with Citadel Security if you need to but no hint of his presence can be let out just yet."

The communication cut at that point. Staring at the hologram for a moment, Tela shook her head with a snort, but pushed herself out of her chair and got to work, wondering what had interrupted her three ostensible employers.

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The interruption turned out to be the human ambassador to the Citadel. Much like the other races that made up Citadel Space but were not part of the actual Council, humankind had a permanent ambassador on the Citadel, by the name of Donnel Udina.

Tela had dealt with the man before and found him an obstreperous, arrogant sort when he believed he had the upper hand. Udina also felt that his people's creation of medi-

gel and their expansionism was enough to make them a member of the Council itself. Tela didn't and understood why Tevos didn't either. Humans were too young, too ignorant and arrogant as a race to be given such a position. Even the drubbing they had taken in the First Contact War hadn't done much, truly to bring that arrogance to heel, as their full military might hadn't been engaged in that war.

Now, Udina looked quietly smug as he settled into a chair to one side of the three higher chairs reserved for the three Councilors. Those three raised pedestals dominated the room, but there was a row of comfortable seats on a dais around the circumference of the circular room that the large elevator connected directly to at the top of the Citadel's Presidium. At the back of the room were a few subtle personal entryways for the three Councilors.

Both Spartacus and Tevos looked angry, as did Valern, although not as much as his fellows. Evidently, something interesting had passed between the four beings, but Tela decided that it was well above her pay grade to care.

However, Tela had something else that she had to speak up about right now. "Councilors. Ambassador. I realize that you want to question this man--"

"We actually wanted to question both of them! Losing a knocked-out and unconscious prisoner due to ineptitude? Have the Spectres fallen so far?" Udina interrupted.

"Judging from the footage of the battle, Spectre Tela did well in actually surviving such a sudden assault. If the accompanying space fighters had better ECM equipment, they could well have blown up her ship entirely after the Shadow Broker had one of the specimens he so wanted," Valern pointed out mildly, turning to look at Udina with as much of a glare as his people were capable of.

"Yes, but you people always laud your Spectres as if they are some kind of superior species to the rest of us. It is just amusing to note that they can be taken by surprise," Udina snorted. "I also haven't been allowed to examine any of that footage. How is the System Alliance supposed to know whether or not you have simply scuttled off with the super soldier specimen and are going to try to indoctrinate him or something of that nature?"

That gave Tela an opening, and she hastily spoke up. "Councilor, we wouldn't be able to operate on him in any event. In fact, it's a wonder that the gases worked at all on either of them. I watched the one called Ranma take on the blood pack on Omega, and he was shot multiple times. It wasn't always his armor that turned away the bullets. This brings me up to the point I was going to say before I was interrupted. I realize that we need to take him off the gas in order for us to question Herb, which is his name. But I believe that we need some other means to try to control him. I do not know what his reaction will be to find himself waking up here in the Council Chamber."

"I can have a company of soldiers up here within twenty minutes. Given his fighting prowess, I do not believe that Citadel Security will be enough," Spartacus spoke quickly.

That was very true, but not what Tela had in mind. “Actually, Councilor, I was thinking more that we should take a page from the batarians and install an explosive device into his body,” she stated bluntly. “That way, the instant he tries to act out, the device blows, no more problem.”

“Out of the question!” Tevos shot back, looking affronted. “I will never condone using such a device on a sentient in our presence! The idea is unthinkable.”

“Yet you left nearly 2 million asari to be turned into slaves through the use of such devices,” Udina interjected silkily, sneering a little at the Councilor, who looked as if she wanted nothing more than to snap the man’s neck with her biotic power for a second. Yet when Udina turned back to Tela, he too shut down the idea, although the heart of his argument was far more pragmatic. “I cannot and will not condone the use of any such device or any human, a member of the System Alliance or not. And if we kill the man, is he really named Herb? If we kill him, we cannot then question him, can we?”

“We could install it in someplace that isn’t directly life-threatening. In Herb’s thigh, perhaps.” *With an explosive large enough to remove both leg and boy parts. He might not have been the one to strip me naked and paint me so many various colors back when we first tangled, but he is a friend of Ranma, and the idea of hurting him like that just makes me want to smile.*

“I agree,” Spartacus said, followed by Valern. After a moment, Tevos acquiesced, pragmatism overcoming her need to act as if she were the moral compass of the trio, as it usually did.

What followed was a series of very amusing attempts to cut into Herb’s thigh to install the explosive device. The first type of medical scalpel didn’t work. An omni-tool laser-based scalpel, it simply couldn’t seer through Herb’s skin fast enough, the heat of the scalpel dissipating before it could get deep enough.

Tevos, the other Councilors and the ambassador all watched in fascination as the wound began to heal, gone within seconds. Far faster than even medi-gel could have dealt with a wound that small on anything but a krogan.

“Amazing!” Spartacus murmured. “If we could train our soldiers to somehow do that-”

“You’re thinking too small. That kind of ability would have massive societal repercussions,” Valern cut in, his own eyes avid. “Especially if it could mean...” He cut himself off before going on to say what it would mean in terms of various diseases, and in particular, plagues. Virulent pathogens, which could spread quickly and between races was one of the recurring nightmares of any space going race. “And, of course, we must never allow any training needed to heal like this to fall into krogan hands. They can already heal far too quickly.”

The implications were not lost on his fellow Councilors, or even the ambassador and all of them nodded in mute agreement. The last thing they wanted was a group of krogan to be able somehow to heal away the genetic disease called the Genophage.

Really, that wasn't Valern's main concern or interest when it came to watching the enhanced healing of this human. No, he wondered something else entirely. If healing like this also affected how the ravages of time affected individuals who had access to this ability. If that was the case, his **entire race** would want it. Nothing would get in the way of the Dalatress to possess it. Absolutely nothing.

Of all the Citadel Races, the salarians had the shortest lifespan. Despite everything they had done with their high technology, despite everything they had gained access to when meeting the asari and the rest of the known races one after another, their lifespans still could only be extended to around forty years standard. It wasn't enough. It was nowhere near enough. Combating the aging factor of their own race genetics was the holy grail of genetic research among the salarians. While it would seem to many to be grossly unscientific, if some kind of martial training could lead to that, his entire race would jump at the chance.

Eventually, a series of laser scalpels were able to open and keep open a one-inch incision into Herb's thigh. Going any deeper than skin deep was almost impossible, the heat of the constant beam of energy causing the scalpels to stop functioning. This in turn forced them to be replaced, allowing the wound to start closing again before they had even inserted the chip. Several hours later, the salarian doctors, two of whom were members of the secret STG, exited, having accomplished what the Councilors had asked them to do, although nowhere near as deep as normal. They had to give up barely an inch into the thigh, not when they reached the bone as they had hoped.

That was somewhat worrisome, but all of the Councilors felt that the explosive would still be strong enough to remove the super soldier's leg if need be.

Tela wasn't so certain and resolved to put herself well behind Herb when he woke up, and recommended again that they get some soldiers up here just in case. Spartacus agreed with her, and after some wrangling that a group of turian marines off of the Citadel's security fleet were called for. Getting them there took another forty minutes, during which all of them took a break to go get something to eat before returning, having left Tela and newly arrived soldiers in charge of the prisoner inside of the Council Room. They returned to find that Tela had also taken the opportunity to make certain that Herb was bound hand and foot. She had created a special set of full-body manacles, out of which only his hands and feet were visible, his hands sticking out and away from his body at a very uncomfortable angle.

Since even the ambassador had taken the time to observe some more of the footage that Tela had brought from the battle between Herb and the asari matriarch Aria on Omega, none of them objected. In particular, Tevos looked very wary as she stared at Herb, although whether or not that was because of his demolition of everything Aria and her enforcers had

put in front of them or the fact that he had killed Aria, a matriarch of renowned biotic power, Tela couldn't say.

"Wake him up," Spartacus ordered.

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By the time one of the infantrymen removed the mask from over Herb's head, his body had already mostly acclimatized to the different gases he had been dosed with. It was only the fact that Tela had used such a concoction of several various gases combined in the first place that had kept him under for so long. His body was also not used to dealing with attacks via the lungs and had to build up immunity from scratch to nearly half a dozen different gases at once.

Waking up, Herb realized almost instantly that he was restrained. His arms were tight against his body, no give in whatever was constraining him from the neck down to his toes at all. *Some, some kind of metal, then?* He thought woozily, concentrating and trying to push through his mental miasma.

"How long should it take for his facilities to return?" a voice intoned from nearby.

Another voice, one he had heard before but had trouble placing, replied from behind and to the right of Herb's position. "I don't know, Councilor. I've obviously never tried to use these series of gases on anyone, let alone a super soldier human before."

"Hmm... understandable."

For a few moments, Herb concentrated on what his sense of hearing and touch were telling him, then slowly opened his eyes, unsurprised to find himself standing, connected to some kind of metal bar that molded into his restraints behind his back in an open space. And now, looking around, Herb mentally sighed. *Ah. Delightful, brought before the so-called Councilors.* Herb had made a study of the Council and recognized all three, although the human sitting in a lower seat to one side, something that offended Herb as a human himself, he was not familiar with.

The guards stationed all around with their weapons trained on him were a sign of good sense. And lastly, twisting his head he was able to see the asari Spectre, Tela Vasir. "Ah. I see that I will need to educate Ranma on the old maxim of leaving an enemy alive being more dangerous than creating a new one in the future."

Sparatus snorted at that, the phrase making a good deal of sense to his military mind before Tevos spoke soothingly. "Please, we are not your enemy, Herb of Earth. We simply wish to know and understand where you and your companion came from. There is a great deal that you could offer the galaxy at large and which you could learn in turn."

"Or under the Systems Alliance," the human spoke up quickly. "While we are part of the Citadel, if you don't want to work directly with the Council itself, we can offer you citizenship and transport to Earth."

"Which would come with its own connotations and limitations," the Asari Councilor shot back. "But both of those points are on the table. All we request is that you cooperate and answer our questions."

"Like your lackey, you seem to have a very authoritative view on cooperation," Herb drawled. "Vasir tried to talk to us once politely to come in and to speak to you and then attacked us as soon as she could try to plot an ambush when we refused. Was our initial 'no' so unusual? Are you so used to being obeyed that, like children, you simply won't allow this new shiny toy to get away from you?"

"You're not toys, and you have already had a tremendous impact on the galaxy at large. It was your actions on Torfan that led directly to the war against the Batarian Hegemony," Sparatus said coldly. "It also has led directly to what amounts to a military dictatorship taking over Omega in lieu of the criminal organization that previously ran it, which might force us into a new war with the criminal elements of the Fringe if we try to retain control there and they object. The weight your actions have demanded our response. You can no longer be allowed to simply go your own way like a drunk krogan in a China shop."

While inwardly amused that the phrase Sparatus had used was still around in a somewhat changed format, Herb was not listening with all of his attention on the trio of Councilors. Instead, he was using an ability that Ranma had learned from Master Smith in Mongolia, and Herb had from his father: the ability to output heat via his own life energy. In this case, he was doing so throughout his entire body, heating up the metal surrounding him to the point where the interior of it began to glow almost.

This did not go unnoticed, and the salarian, who had the best hearing of any of the individuals in the room, cocked his head thoughtfully, looking around in puzzlement before looking back at the prisoner. "Something is hissing. If you are attempting some way of escape, please do not. We would dislike having to cripple you."

Herb looked at him but did not stop what he was doing, instead simply asking, "And what have you done to me that you believe you could do so? I do not see capital-ship-grade weapons anywhere in here, and beyond that, I truly doubt anything you could have on your person would do me over hot much harm."

That was a bluff, but one that had a kernel of truth in it. Unless someone was able to damage his brain, Herb felt his ki healing would be able to deal with any damage done to him. None of the soldiers here carried anything big enough to break bones. *On the other hand, I would rather like to know where my armor is. I suppose that I will never see it again, damn it.*

"As much as it pains me to say it, we were not unaware of the fact you might be angry when you woke up. We decided to implant an explosive device in your thigh, strong enough to remove your leg entirely and a good portion of your stomach and lower organs if you attempt to break free of your restraints," Valern answered coolly.

"Please, this does not need to escalate to more conflict. I am certain that we both have quite a bit to offer one another," Tevos spoke in turn, playing the soothing voice of reason with the ease of literal centuries of practice.

"Then you are wrong. I have no need for money, I have no need for influence or authority, Sihai Longwang forbid." *I had authority when I was younger, I have no need of it in this new universe I find myself in.* "And as for your threat, I am afraid that you greatly underestimate how stubborn the descendent of a Dragon can be."

With that, Herb finished heating up the metal surrounding him to the point where everyone could see it begin to move outward, the metal having deformed just enough to give him leverage to move first his wrists, then his arms. *And you should not have been so clever in which direction my hands face, Vasir,* Herb thought vindictively, letting a coin fall from his ki space into his hand.

The next instant that bit of coin flew towards Tela, so fast it created a sonic boom in the circular room. Before Tela even knew she was under attack the coin hit with such force that she flew backward, her ribs caved in despite her armor, which cracked as if someone had hit it with a massive hammer.

"AGGHGH!!" with a cry, the Spectre slammed into the outer wall of the Council Chamber.

Nearly blind from the pain of her wounds, Tela ignored Tevos and Valern's calls for calm or even Sparatus' orders for his troops to open fire. Instead, she pushed through the pain of her wounds to press the button of the device in her off-hand, triggering the explosive device.

The explosive in Herb's thigh went off with a, *crump*, partially contained within the restraints all around Herb's body. Those restraints had been heated and weakened now and burst outward away from his thigh as the explosion went off.

"GUHHH!!!" Herb gave a cry of pain, but it was one of mixed pain and anger. The explosion did indeed take a large chunk out of his leg, almost to the point of breaking his thighbone, but also took out much of the restraint on that leg. The rest was still heating up, but Herb could already feel his ki healing kick in, fixing the damage as it had earlier been trying to give him immunity to the gases. It took a lot out of him, but Herb was a descendent of dragons, and had ki to spare.

As bullets began to slam into his restraints and even clip his head, Herb used his freed leg to wrench himself sideways, causing many of the shots to miss even as he hissed in pain from the movement. Meanwhile, the Councilors shouted contradicting orders. Sparatus ordered his soldiers to continue to fire while Tevos tried to calm Herb down.

The human ambassador and salarian on the other hand, were following the far more sensible option of ducking down into cover. For the Councilor, this meant hiding behind his podium, although the human could only fall flat on his stomach, putting his hands above his head.

Rolling along the floor, Herb groaned with each hit at the still healing leg, but when his freed leg was underneath him he kicked off again towards several of the guards behind him, hearing the shots from their guns rattle against his current restraints again and again before he slammed into several of them carrying them bodily back into the walls behind. Only twice did his head ring from a bullet smacking into it, leaving him wincing and in pain but unhurt.

Once he was in amongst their fellows, the other groups of guards situated around the chamber hesitated, allowing Herb to finish pulling his arms out of the weakened restraints and for his leg to finish healing. The bits of metal plates fell away with a crash, at which point Herb used the remnants as a weapon for a second, hurling them every which way to smash several of the guards to the ground before jumping into the air.

Hovering there, Herb rapidly whirled one of his arms below him, the limb glowing so hot it seemed to leave an after image in the shape of a spiral "Hiryuu Shouten Ha, Perfected Form!" he intoned, bringing his other hand down into conjunction with the still-spiraling first. From that contact a tornado blossomed, bursting out to encompass the room within seconds.

The attack whirled around the entire area, picking up everyone within, bar Udina, Tevos and her fellow Councilors, whom she shielded with a Biotic Shield, anchoring them to the ground at the same time. Everyone else, including the barely conscious Vasir, was picked up and sent hurling into one another, the walls and anything else within the Council Room. All of the still-conscious guards found themselves in midair for a few seconds before several of them joined their fellows in the land of the comatose due to continued hits to the head or through various injuries.

As the attack faded, Herb descended toward the ground, angling himself into the midst of a group of three turians who hadn't been as badly battered as the others. Quick precise blows laid all of the guards out, but nearby, four more of the guards had time to recover, grabbing up weapons or pulling out secondary pistols, lining up shots at his back.

Interesting, turians are quite durable, especially when they are also wearing heavy armor, Herb reflected before hurling several of his previous victims towards them across the hallway, their bodies crashing into that of their fellows and taking them to earth.

Tevos' biotic shield faded, and Sparatus pulled out a gun of his own and shot Herb in the shoulder and side of the neck, sending him stumbling sideways. That hurt like blazes, but it didn't stop the Prince of the Musk, and he turned towards the Councilor, holding out a hand and lazily sending out a ki blast. Sparatus ducked behind his podium, but the top of it shattered under the impact of Herb's ki attack. Before he could try to fire again, Herb was in his face, grabbing the gun and crushing it in his grip, wrenching it out of the man's hand, and hurling it toward one of the few remaining guards who had been trying to get to his feet. That worthy ate a face full of warped metal and went down, both of his mandibles broken to go along with a possible concussion.

"Away from him, barbarian!" Tevos shouted, blasting Herb backward with a Biotic Push that hurled him back and across the Council Hall. She strode forward around her pedestal, blazing with biotic power, her arms raised to either side of her as she shouted, "We tried for peace between you and us and this is how you act!"

"Yes, because kidnapping someone via the use of gas is peaceful," Herb drawled, getting to his feet none the worse for wear. He heard a motion behind him and turned, looking at the elevator as it opened, with several more guards within.

However, Tevos had made a mistake in pushing him toward the incoming relief force. Before any of the four politicians could even shout a warning, Herb was among them, lashing out with hard punches, kicks and elbows. He disdained using any further ki attacks on this rabble, noting that none of them had as good armor as the first group of guards he'd just dealt with, and although heavily armed, they weren't as well-trained either.

Tevos grabbed him again with a Biotic Grab, pulling him away from the guards and up into the air, while Sparatus and Valern shouted at the guards to shoot him. Evidently, any attempt at taking him alive to question him had gone out of their heads at this point, driven by fear for their own lives. Herb would have sneered if he wasn't busy taking shots from various different types of guns and feeling bruises accumulate under the hits.

In response, Herb twisted himself around in the air despite Tevos' Biotic Grab and thrust out one hand towards her, lashing out with a ki blast like the one he had toward Sparatus a moment before. Tevos blocked it with a second, far smaller Biotic Shield, but that broke her hold on him. Still in midair, Herb lashed out with the same air-based ki attack that he had used earlier.

Like the soldiers before them, these security forces were picked up and hurled around. Those within the elevator actually had the worst of it because rather than protecting them against the wind, the elevator allowed the wind to enter, pick them up, and slam them against each other and the walls all around them in far faster succession than out in the larger Council Chamber.

As the attack dissipated, Herb dropped down, evading another biotic push, this time seeing the blast of energy coming towards him in time. He grabbed up a body from the floor and hurled it towards the Asari Councilor, muttering under his breath, "Ranma does have a point that using the body of one opponent against another is somewhat amusing."

Tevos responded by grabbing the body out of the air and tossing it aside. Herb noted almost absently that she had done so hard enough that the man's neck broke on impact with the wall. *Well, if he wasn't dead before, which was unlikely, he certainly is now.*

But that momentary lapse of concentration allowed Herb to shoot out several more ki blasts. Tevos shielded herself, but when those shields dissipated, Herb was in her face. A palm strike to the chin lifted her up off of her feet and she found her arm grabbed.

Twisting around, Herb performed an over-the-shoulder throw, slamming Tevos into Valern, who hadn't moved from his position behind his lectern. Both Councilors went down with a groan.

Sparatus glared at Herb, standing up and actually bringing his fists up as if he were going to keep fighting. "I've sent the word out. There's going to be companies of my troops pouring into the station any minute now. You might be able to kill us, but—"

"I don't want to kill you. Despite my earlier comments about Tela over there, I do not consider you people my enemies. If only for the fact that if I did kill you, I would never have a moment's peace in this galaxy," Herb shook his head. "I do not like you. Any of you. Nor will I allow myself to be questioned or used by such as you. Believe me, that is set in stone. The more you try to pull us in, the more trouble we will make for you."

"Wait, just wait!" the human ambassador, whose name Herb had not been told just yet, tried to speak up, holding his hands up placatingly as he lifted up from the floor, twisting around to look at Herb. "You, you and your companion, you're both human! But you can do stuff like this. Don't you understand how important that could be!? Not for the Council, if you don't want to work with them, that's fine! Work with us, with the System Alliance! With what you can teach us, with what you can show us... hell, if you don't want to teach our soldiers to do what you can do, just let us help guide you! You could make a tremendous impact on the galaxy could help us catapult humanity to our rightful position as one of the Council Members.

"Udina!" Sparatus growled, giving the man the name that Herb had been lacking before.

"I am not a joining sort of person. I would only be willing to join if I was given the position equivalent to an Admiral or political leader," Herb replied honestly. The idea of following anyone else's orders, bar that of his own father, was not quite anathema to Herb but certainly wasn't something he would willingly do. "Nor do I like how you phrased that, your face, voice, or the fact that you apparently just decided on the fly to try to offer me this deal without talking to your so-called allies here. Whatever issues humanity has with the rest of the Council are its own. None of my business."

That actually won a dry chuckle from Sparatus as Udina sputtered. Herb looked around at the destruction he had caused, then back at the turian, while at his feet, Tevos and the other one, whose name again Herb hadn't heard, began to stir. This halted as Herb placed his foot on Tevos' back, pressing her down and into the back of the salarian. "Still, I do find myself in need of information at the moment, given how I was wrested from companions and ship. I will allow each of you one question so long as you tell me answers to mine."

"Done! Are you really from an alternate dimension? Can anyone in this dimension actually use your abilities?" the as-yet-unnamed Salarian Councilor quickly asked, pushing Tevos off of him, causing her to squawk a bit, at where his hand had landed as he did, staring avidly at Herb.

That gave Herb a downright Ranma-like idea of what to do with these three and the human before he escaped, but he kept it inside for a moment, simply snorting in response. "Those are two questions, something you undoubtedly already know. Yes, I do come from an alternate dimension. Yes, Ranma and I have been able to teach some of our techniques to a few asari. In particular, Usagi has learned quite a bit, as did Matriarch Benezia before she had to return to her regularly scheduled duties. Now, as to my question, where is my armor, and what happened to my companion, Ranma and our crew?"

"Your crew is still on board your ship, which Spectre Vasir took over to move you from Omega to the Citadel. I would assume your equipment is aboard. She was attacked en route by forces under the Shadow Broker, an information broker with ties to criminal organizations throughout Council Space. Your companion was taken by them," Sparatus answered, his mind awl with possibilities. *Subtle, we must be subtle, but if his healing skill can offset aging...*

"More fool to the Shadow Broker then," Herb snorted, shaking his head, completely unconcerned about Ranma being able to live through whatever the Shadow Broker had in mind for him and more than a little annoyed at the reminder of how Tevos had ambushed them. *I'm going to have to put myself through quite a bit of training to make certain that gas attacks of such nature do not work on me in the future. I recall Ranma was doing a much better job of fighting through it than I and that hurts my pride a bit.*

From her momentary embarrassment, Tevos showed a surprising amount of poise as she regally pushed herself to her knees, then up to her feet so that she could look Herb in the eye, composed despite the scene of destruction all around them. "Is there any way that we can come to an accord? That we can at least stop you from so blatantly ignoring our authority and causing trouble?"

"What trouble have we caused? As far as I can tell, we have simply solved issues that you either were unable or unwilling to solve yourselves," Herb said blankly, confused at first, then somewhat affronted. *Ah, yes, the status quo is all that matters. Disgusting.* "I would say that Ranma and I look more kindly upon the asari, given Matriarch Benezia's aid, but I am in no way willing to work directly with the Council or with you."

"What about us, then?! Please! Your abilities, they have to be more easily learned from other humans, right? Spreading that kind of training... name your price!" Udina insisted. "Our place on the Council would be assured with such skills!"

"In the name of all that is holy, why do you want to be further tied to the Council?" Herb asked, snorted again in amusement. "Humans should be proud enough to stand alone. Why do you want to be a part of something like the Council? Especially one like this, it is almost like the United Nations was made up of actual rulers rather than simple representatives of different nations, just as feckless and useless but far more full of itself. "No. While I would be willing to form alliances of convenience with any race that is all they will ever be. I will not constrain my actions to that of your laws or orders."

Herb shook his head and dismissed Udina as an idiot, turning to look at Sparatus, one eyebrow rising. That worthy was glaring at him, then towards the elevator. "If I were to try and study your people's history via the extranet, what sources are reputable? And your own question?"

"Letting us ask questions like this... you're planning something," Sparatus cut himself off, not willing to waste his one question like that. The dark smirk on Herb's face gave his words the truth regardless, and Sparatus reluctantly replied to Herb's question before giving his own. "If you're unwilling to work with us, are you at least willing to agree not to work against us? You will not turn into Bounty Hunters or work with the criminal elements?"

"You dare question my honor?" Herb growled, his smirk disappearing into a snarl that transformed what Tevos could reluctantly admit was a somewhat handsome face into something quite scary. "I will never work with creatures like Aria or such as the Shadow Broker or the Invisible Man! I may be willing to work with those who you think are legal but who have not done anything wrong when it comes to my own sense of honor, but that is all. Nor do you need to worry about Ranma or me suddenly deciding to target yourselves or other important functionaries of this misbegotten ramshackle thing you call a Council."

At that point, the doors into the chamber burst open, not just the large one leading into the elevator, which had closed earlier behind the unconscious bodies within, but also the ones behind the Council. From those private entrances, two Asari Commandos charged in. From the elevator, a company of turian troopers raced in, spreading out and opening fire on Herb the instant they appeared.

Herbal whirled, ducking under a Biotic Grab from Tevos. Reaching out quickly and grabbing Sparatus, Herb hurled him into his fellow Councilor, smashing both of them down onto Valern. The next instant, he was in the air, laughing wildly. "Hiryuu Shouten Ha!"

"Oh Athame's tits!" Tevos cursed, ducking back down and covering herself with a Biotic Shield. "Will you stop it with the tornado, you walking natural disaster!"

Despite it being the third time Herb used that technique, it worked like a charm again, picking up and turning the incoming soldiers into so many moving objects to slam into one another and the walls around the Council Chamber. The two Asari Commandos shielded themselves but were in no position to stop Herb from charging one of them as the attack dissipated, slamming through her shield and hurling her back into and through the doorway she'd come through. As he did that, he saw several other asari and salarians had rushed in and were trying to evacuate the Council. Stopping them was but a moment of flinging coins at them, slamming into the civilians with far less force than he had used on Tela.

Herb didn't want to kill these people after all. Yet this attack still smashed them towards the last remaining commando. Getting out of their way cost that commando time, which allowed Herb to turn and use that same technique on several of the turian troopers who had been slowly pushing themselves to their feet, their heavier body armor having allowed them to weather the storm a moment ago. It did not allow them to survive being

slammed into the chest, shoulder or thigh by fast-moving coins that dumped them onto the floor or simply hurled them backward into walls to join their fellows.

At this point, there was a veritable windrow of unconscious folk scattered in a perfect circle around the chamber, and Herb chuckled even as he closed with his last opponent, dodging several biotic pulses from her, before grabbing her arm, twisting it behind her and stopping at her neck laying her out easily. "Shiala and the other commandos I have dealt with in the past would be horrified at how poorly you did," he commented to the unconscious form at his feet, looking around and finding the new look of the Council Chamber to his liking. "I might have to take up interior decorating. This is quite amusing. Now, to cap it off, even if I have to take a page from Ranma to do it."

With that, he began to move around the area, sorting out the truly injured from the just unconscious or concussed. The truly injured were piled into groaning groups in front of the elevator, blocking any further access from that avenue. With two smaller piles of the groups of civilians who had tried to simply pull the Councilors and the human ambassador out of the chamber, at the back of the area, blocking the doors that the Councilors had used to enter.

With the injured and the noncombatants seen to, Herb took the rest and began his masterpiece. First, laying the asari in the center, piling most of the menfolk around them, shifting their arms and legs this way and that until he created what looked as if it was a still image of an orgy that had yet to get to the actual sex and was stuck on the clothed foreplay. And in the center, he put the four politicians together, as if they were the centerpiece of the orgy. "If threats of bodily harm will do no good, then perhaps embarrassment will."

Concentrating on the three Councilors in the human ambassador, Herb snapped a few pictures with his omni-tool.

Pleased with his work, Herb moved over to the window that allowed the Councilors to stare out over the Presidium below. It was indeed a magnificent view, made all the more spectacular when Herb remembered that the city he could see filling the view was on a space station. *A space station of a size to house a seemingly well-planned city. Amazing.*

With a sigh, he began to cut through the glass, which proved quite tough, but his ki-heating skill came back into use here. Once he had created a hole, Herb leaped out into the space beyond, finding himself almost weightless but not quite in the gravity this high up the Citadel.

This allowed him to leisurely fall towards the ground far below, controlling his descent until he was well away from the bottom of the elevator area, entering an area of shadow there. Clinging to the side of a huge skyscraper, he slowly climbed his way down from there, keeping out of sight as much as possible. In this fashion, he avoided a major security block that had been put up around the area. Only a few civilians saw him land, and stared after him, curious about where he had come from.

He ignored them though, pushing his way through the crowd until he was well away from the Presidium, heading deeper into the station. Swiftly, Herb was able to find an upper balcony to hide under, where he quickly began to pull out a change of clothing, which would have to do for a start. *It's only a matter of time before the Citadel Security realizes that I am no longer in the chamber and I will need to blend in unless I want to pile up the bodies. Which I do not want to do. While I am not nearly as lenient with soldiers and so forth, as Ranma would be in my place, they are truly just following orders from a reputable government. I wouldn't have an issue with it if were mercenaries or maybe even actual soldiers like those in the chamber I dealt with.*

Herb was under no illusion that he had pulled his punches with that first group of turians he had dealt with, and Herb had certainly tried his hardest to kill Vasir at the very least at the very start of the battle. Looking back, he found it rather annoying that she had lived until he was gathering up bodies, although if she died from her wounds before aid arrived, that would suit him down to the ground.

But Citadel Security is just... the equivalent of a police force, I suppose. Yet I do not doubt that they are intelligent enough to put out bulletins about my appearance... This leads me to only one conclusion.

Looking up at a potted plant above him on the railing of the second-story balcony he was hiding behind, he then looked around and, sure enough, found a small watering can nearby. With a sigh, Herb poured it over his head, transforming into his female form before quickly changing into the clothing she'd brought out. With that done, Herb leaped from there over to a nearby fire staircase, amused that something so prosaic was still around in this day and age. *Just like alleyways, there's no giving getting away from them.* Once on the ground, Herb made her way down from there and used her omni-tool to direct herself towards the nearest hair salon.

"Excuse me, do you take walk-ins?" Herb asked. "I find myself in need of a change."

Thinking up a story to tell the hairdressers was somewhat difficult, so Herb decided to take a page from a drama that she had seen recently with Ranma and O'taku, wherein a woman had decided to give herself a major makeover after being dumped by her boyfriend. This seemed to assuage both the humans and the few asari in the place. While they didn't have clear themselves, the asari had always been fascinated by human hair follicles and you would be hard-pressed to find a hair salon within Council Space that didn't have one of them around the place in some fashion.

Convincing them to dye all of her hair blue took a while, but that and cutting it short, so that it rode lightly on her head, completely changed her appearance. With that and her new change of clothing, Herb made her way out of the hair salon, intent on exploring.

Several levels down, Herb felt as if she had a feel of The Citadel, at least in terms of geography and what he would term the social structure of the place. And it was somewhat disturbing to her. Not mentally, there was just a feel to the place. It was as if he was being enclosed. Perhaps it was because there were so many civilians around? Or maybe it was

because of the stark dichotomy between the Presidium's open, airy thoroughfares and the rest of the Citadel Station? On Omega, everything was a warren, even the better kept-up areas. Here, you went from an area that truly showed the architecture and beauty that Herb would assume a galaxy-spanning civilization could display to enclosed areas that were frankly far too utilitarian and just plain dirty for his taste.

Herb knew it wasn't because this place was a space station, at least. She had been on space stations before, the asteroid space station where she and Ranma had first appeared for one. Then the construction stations in orbit over Mostromos and then Omega.

As she dived deeper into the Citadel, he also realized that each level down marked a difference in economic status... to put it mildly. The first three levels below the proscenium had been very affluent, with a good mix of stores and civilian housing, all of it well-kept and clean. There was a noted, subtle presence of security forces, both private and Citadel Security.

After that, though, each successive level got worse. Not only more crowded, but also dirtier, the houses more rundown. By the twentieth level down, Citadel Security became not just overt but pointed. Instead of a few wandering beat cops down here, Citadel Security went in groups of four, not traveling very far, except to deal with specific disturbances. And then, even that stopped. Now, she wandered through an area that could have been easily implanted into Omega without anyone the wiser and with no sight of Citadel Security at all.

There were many things that Herb found odd about the Citadel. The historical significance of it was amazing, fascinating, even. A whole space station left behind by the Protheans, the beings who apparently also created the Mass Effect Relay network.

However, there were very few records of any of the races currently inhabiting the Citadel looking into it beyond the surface level. The strange, insectile Keepers for example. What were they? Where was their hive or whatever located? No one seemed to know beyond the fact they seemed to keep the Citadel running, could not be communicated with, and tried to stay ahead of the dirty, dirty inhabitants and their refuse and so forth. They failed in this, but still, the fact no one seemed to know, or even care about learning anything more was disturbing. As was the the knowledge of how little of the actual control of the station was known.

There should have been whole teams of scientists trying to go over every inch of the Citadel, or groups of people following the Seekers around via drones. But there wasn't, even from the humans. If the asari and the salarians, the first two races to find the Citadel had not been able to make any headway, that would've been one thing. However, he couldn't even find any information on that.

Still, that was but a minor mystery and after contemplating on it for a time, Herb decided to put that down to wounded pride and pique. The two alien races hadn't been able to discover anything about how the Citadel ran itself or how the ancients had built the gates between them, and so had decided that none of the other races would ever be able to. Therefore, they had simply forbidden any interest in it. That made a lot of sense in her mind.

Probably, because she would have done something similar about a martial arts technique she couldn't master. Herb was self-conscious enough to admit that.

Yet, at the same time, Herb had traveled extensively through China and even, at one point, into India with her father. She was used to seeing the ancient remains of long-lost civilizations, places that gave off the feeling of ancient, faded grandeur that would never return.

The Citadel didn't feel like that, but it was something similar. So, despite knowing it had been the center of galactic civilization since the asari found it, it was still very odd to her that the Council Races had decided to make their capital here. *It would be like finding an ancient city in China at the center of a dead Empire deciding, 'Yes, this is my capital now, and no, I won't make any changes to the buildings already there, that would be wrong'. HAH! As if anyone from the China I left would ever thing that.*

It seems almost defeatist. Like you are already admitting that you're not going to ever match up to what has gone before, fully acknowledging that the ancients were your superiors, and all you can do is squat in the still-standing remains that they have left behind.

By this point in her meanderings, Herb was in the areas of the space station that were controlled by the criminal element and the destitute segments of society. She knew this, because a young human boy had tried to pickpocket her, and several other equally idiotic, albeit more mature, members of various races had rushed out, trying to hold Herb to gunpoint, shouting about how we should hand over her credits after that.

"And that is another thing," Herb said as she continued to drag the boy along behind her, the groaning, moaning mass of would-be criminals strewn about them. "This is the center of the Council Government. Why in the universe do they allow such squalor on their very doorstep? Given how fixated on their public image the Council seems to be, I would have assumed that they would wish this, the center of their government, the most important place in the galaxy, to be kept clean and pristine just like the Presidium. But no. Here we are, not an hour's walk from that magnificent thoroughfare, and I find myself accosted by those morons and you."

Here, Herb's monologue cut off, and she pulled the boy up to glare at him face-to-face. At the moment, the boy glared back defiantly despite looking all of nine years old and his feet hanging around Herb's stomach. "I don't know what you're talking about, lady, but if you don't let me go, Big Bruno will..."

"A tadpole thinks that a pike is large, but in comparison to a killer whale, it is barely a meal," Herb intoned, shaking him lightly and causing the boy to stop speaking. "And as for a meal, it looks as if you've missed a few anyway. Perhaps if the pike is not sharing, then the tadpole should look after itself?"

"... Are you calling me a baby?" the boy growled, looking somewhat confused. Evidently, he had not run into metaphor much.

"I'm calling you a very small boy in a very big area that is in itself small in comparison to the galaxy at large. I do apologize for any confusion. At times, I prefer to speak to the most intelligent person in the room, and habitually, that is myself. When I speak again to those of less intelligence, it sometimes takes me a moment to bring myself down to their level in my mode of speech," Herb intoned dryly, smiling at her own sense of humor for a second before deciding she was tired of carrying or dragging the boy, and flipped him through the air.

The boy squawked as he banged off the ceiling above them, then squawked even louder as Herb caught him easily, setting him on a shoulder in a fireman's carry. "Now, the question is what to do with you? I don't suppose you have parents. You have the look of a boy who's raised himself on the streets rather than someone who has someplace to go back to."

At this point, whatever response the boy might've made went unheeded because Herb was interrupted by a call from one side. "If you're looking for someplace to drop that boy off so that he doesn't get up to more mischief, I might have a suggestion."

Herb turned and found herself somewhat annoyed that the human man who had spoken looked as if he was at least several inches taller than Herb's male body, which was, in turn, taller than her current one. "I am not interested in giving him up into some more criminal enterprise. Although if you do know where this 'Big Bruno' is, I might be interested in making him feel very, very small." *That sounded like an amusing way to pass a few moments.*

The man smirked at that, shaking his head. "Big Bruno runs a group of orphans that he uses to pickpocket people on this level. He likes to lord it over them, but in reality, he's chump change."

The boy tried to interrupt, and Herb absentmindedly smacked him on the rear, causing him to squawk louder than he had a moment ago when Herb had tossed him into the air to bounce off of the exceedingly low ceiling here. Well, at least in Herb's opinion. Barely 16 feet? There was nothing to someone who had been raised on a planet. "So what do you suggest? I rather doubt there is any kind of orphanage around here."

"Hell no! Do you think the big wigs up in their tower would care enough to put money aside for that kind of thing? No, there's a clinic near here run by an Indian woman. She sometimes takes in boys and girls of that age, teaches them their letters, a bit of mechanics and so forth. It's not much, but it allows them to get some honest work."

The man looked a little embarrassed for a second. "I actually employ a few of the kids from there. I run a small engineering store nearby. They come cheap, they don't cost much to feed and my wife actually likes having a few of them around. After they've been, well, civilized anyway."

Snorting at that, Herb nodded, thinking to herself that it was a very good idea to outsource said training. *Much like getting a puppy who has already been house-trained.*

When she said this aloud, the youth attempted to smack Herb on the back with his tiny fists, only for Herb to completely ignore him except to say, "If you are trying to give me a massage, could you go a little to the left and up? For some reason, that area right between my shoulders is bothering me the more I stay in this form."

Dropping off the youth was no issue. The Indian doctor, a woman whose name Herb promptly forgot, was happy enough to bring him in, and within a few seconds of seemingly being cowed or perhaps overawed, Herb wasn't certain the youth had given up giving her any backtalk. *Is this the dreaded mother voice? I only remembered vaguely from my own toddler years, but it certainly matches what I have heard menfolk among my people speak of in hushed whispers.*

Having felt that she had done her good deed for the day, Herb left the boy there, along with several thousand credits to help the small clinic along for a bit. From there, she wandered for a bit, wondering internally about her next move. She had no idea where her original traveling companion was but had no doubt that Ranma would somehow survive. From the moment they met on the outskirts of his people's land in the mountains of China, Ranma had impressed Herb with his learning speed and adaptability. That, and the simple fact that he had no idea whatsoever how to even begin to look for him, meant that Herb wasn't going to even try.

No, such would be a waste of time. Thus, is it best to get myself back to Mostromos or perhaps another monastery world? I don't know how many of those there are, but I know the names of two, and I would wager I could disappear on one easily enough for a time until the deadline for our ship is due to be finished anyway. By that point, Ranma will have returned, or he won't have. And I will be free to travel the galaxy on my own.

What she would do at that point, Herb didn't know, although she had an intense interest in the past, particularly that of the asari and human races. The turians also, but given their militant nature, she felt that researching their history on the ground would be more trouble than it was worth.

Herb's musings on this score took her through several portions of the shantytown that dominated this and several other levels of the station, but she paused, hearing something that interested her for a second. A voice somewhere nearby commenting, "--need all the help we can get to take on the Green Armored Warrior! And you're a great warrior, Wrex! Stand with us and redeem Clan--"

That first voice was interrupted by a second voice. Its volume was lower than the first but deeper, more growling and authoritative even if Herb couldn't make out the actual words, and he pressed on through the warn towards it, interested in seeing who this Wrex was and why the Blood Pack wanted to bring him in on their hunt for Ranma. *Regardless, I doubt it will end well for them.*

Evidently, Wrex agreed with that point because as Herb rounded a corner so that she could finally see who was talking, a seemingly young-looking krogan, you could tell by how unscarred and how green his scales were and flew past him, the recipient of a massive blow.

Herb paused, looking on as an older krogan stomped past her towards the younger one, who was slowly getting to his feet. Wrex grabbed the younger one's frill, twisting it and pulling him upright, causing the younger one to freeze, his eyes wide, no longer trying to push to his feet, his entire body language suddenly radiating submission. "I don't care how you scruggs bit off more than you could chew! I don't care about anyone from the Blood Pack. You're all just a bunch of useless young cretins! Save Patriarch, none of the rest of you is worth my time to even talk to! Even your so-called Battle Masters are but youngsters to me, not worthy of the name!"

"Now, that is an interesting statement," Herb drawled, watching as the younger krogan nodded frantically, or as much as he could with his frill in the older man's hands. Both krogan looked towards her, and she continued. "That must mean you are better than them, which means older. And that, in turn, means you know about history, don't you?"

"Bah, history! History is found in books. I've no truck with them! And aren't you a little young to care about that kind of thing?" Wrex asked, somewhat thrown by the sight of a young seeming human woman willing to talk to a krogan, who was clearly going about krogan business down in the slums. Most humans steered clear of them, especially in lawless areas like this.

"Young I might be, but I also think of myself as intelligent, and that means I wish to learn of the past. Speaking to someone who has experienced that past is far better than trying to find the truth in books. Besides, you've shown yourself somewhat rational and not taking part in trying to hunt Ranma down. That kind of thing would only end in humiliation for the lot of you. He quite likes that kind of thing, both fighting and humiliating people."

The younger krogan spoke up, staring at Herb. "How the hell!? There's no way that the green-armored warrior's name should be known to some random human chit here in the slums of the Citadel! The Council's been trying to suppress any information about him and his companion at all, and--"

"I am that companion. Let us just say that our adventures have separated us for the moment, and I found myself here," Herb drawled. Seeing the look of disbelief on the krogan's face, as well as the judgmental stare of the older, Herb scowled, looking around, before deciding to pick up a piece of the wall that the younger krogan had been hurled into. What it was she didn't know but it felt somewhat like concrete. So, when she held it up and crushed it easily in her grip, she expected to have at least proven some of her strength.

But both krogan scoffed. "Anyone can do that, girl! You're going to have to try harder. It might be impressive for a human, especially a shorty like you, but..."

Herb blurred forward so fast that he seemed to disappear to the younger krogan's eyes. Wrex could track her first jolt forward but lost her a second later, so he was intensely surprised to find Herb's tiny hand pressed into the front of his neck right above where his armor began. "Well, if a show of simple strength is not enough, then how about speed?"

Wrex reacted instantly, a bionic pulse blasting out from him, hurling both the younger krogan and Herb away, although she flipped through the air to land lightly nearby, crossing her arms around her annoyingly prevalent chest as she stared, cocking her head to one side watching the older krogan. "Well? Are we going to keep going, or do I have your attention yet?"

"... You've got some skills certainly, and that was no biotic power. Raw speed like that is impressive," Wrex muttered, staring at her. "But I thought both the green armored warrior and the other one had, you know, armor. And were male instead of female."

"Actually, there is some mention of one or both of them being able to turn into females somehow," the younger krogan muttered, regaining some control of his tongue, if not his mind, as he pushed himself to his feet. "It must be interesting come mating time for their species. They sure as hell aren't human, despite what they look like. So, is it a cyclical thing? Do they take turns, or..."

Wrex winced as the young girl's fist slammed into the krogan's face, breaking jaw and several teeth as she laid him out unconscious with a single blow. "Now that he had coming."

"I'm glad we agree. I'm also glad that that is the first time I've heard anyone comment on whether or not Ranma and I are... together like that. I rather don't like the idea of committing mass murder, but that concept makes it look almost appealing," Herb grumbled before turning her attention back to Wrex. "You're not going to try to attack me?"

"A part of me wants to. But I'd rather not get my quad kicked in by an opponent I don't know enough about to know whether or not I have a chance. When one goes hunting for a thresher maw, you go prepared, knowing what you will face and armed to boot. You surely don't go into any fight blind you can avoid," Wrex answered slowly, staring at Herb, both hands ready to reach for weapons just in case she attacked him.

"Wisdom. But quads? I'm afraid I haven't come across that euphemism before," Herb replied quizzically.

Wrex snorted at that, then gestured down to where his legs met. "Quads! You humans, your males anyway, only have two of them, poor stunted things. We krogan have four."

Herb blinked at that, then laughed, nodding her head, as she understood what Wrex had said earlier. "Well, if you're not going to try to attack me, then perhaps we can have a discussion? I would like to know more about your people, and your conflicts with the Council in the past. I realize that might be bringing up bad memories for you, I understand that krogan can live for longer than even asari, but like I said, first-hand information is always better than what you can find in books. I would also be willing to pay for the privilege."

"Keep your money. If you want to talk about old times like that, then you're going to have to do it over a good meal and a drink," Wrex said firmly. "And you better reciprocate, too. I heard that you and your companion busted up the slaving pirates on Torfan and then

downed T'Loak on Omega. That's at least two stories you've got to share with me in turn. Not to mention your companion fighting the Blood Pack."

Somewhat irritated that it seemed as if that action from Ranma was actually more famous than Herb's own fight with Aria, Herb still nodded. "Lead the way then. I'm more than willing to buy enough liquor for you to go on a krogan-sized bender, so long as you also are willing to answer a few odd questions I have about Citadel Space, the Citadel Races and everything else. Starting with why any race would decide to build their own capital on the ruins of the last one."

Wrex snorted at that and turned, leading the way to a bar he knew.

OOOOOOO

By the time Herb was done with his-then-her makeover, the fact that he had escaped the Council Chamber had gotten out, and Sparatus, easily the most durable of the Council Members, was awake once more and giving out orders. A force was sent to the ship Vanir had arrived in to find the asari crew, remove them and take over the vessel. Sparatus assumed that it would be a target for Herb, not realizing that that ship mattered very little to the prince of the Musk. It had been merely a means to get to Omega for Samara's hunt.

Sparatus had made another mistake, though. He had assumed, given the way that Tevos and Vasir had been talking about them, that the crew of the ship were relatively innocent, members of this strange asari offshoot that had befriended Herb and Ranma and had simply been willing to transport them to Omega and back someplace. The fact that one of them was Usagi, one of the two, along with Matriarch Benezia, had been trained by the pair of them to a certain degree, had slipped through his admittedly concussed mind.

When she woke up, first, Usagi thought that perhaps she had tied one on a little too much at some point. *Oh, I hope I didn't try ryncol again. That stuff makes me go crazy.*

Then, all of her recent memories came back. The fact that Usagi had been knocked out by something in the air of the ship, O'taku and Inu collapsing alongside her. While Usagi was all for learning about and feeling new sensations, that one she wasn't very happy about, and while the soldiers who were currently waking her up had nothing to do with it, Usagi certainly wasn't going to go along with the suggestion that they take the group into protective custody, whatever that meant at this point.

A burst of biotic energy flung the salarian who had pulled her mask off away, smashing him into one of his fellows. Then, she was up and moving. Punches and kicks flashed out, downing four more, before she grabbed a weapon from out of one man's hand, using it as a club to knock him unconscious as well as the last remaining person in the room.

"Ugh, what happened? And this better not have been from something you made me drink, Usagi," O'taku muttered, pushing herself to her feet.

"Whatever it is, it shouldn't be allowed on ships, and this is my engine room!" the engineer, Inu, grunted in turn, pushing faster to her feet than O'taku, looking around them

and finding that all of them were still within the ship's engine room. The groaning, moaning bodies on the floor were new, though. "What the hell happened? And who are these people?"

"We're on the Citadel for some reason, and we're wanted in questioning about Herb," Usagi said, rubbing one hand along her head frills for a moment in confusion. "I think I took all of these guys out before they could get a message off, though, so we're good for now."

"Good for now? Usagi, these aren't mercenaries or criminal thugs! There are members of the Citadel Security Force! And you just knocked them all out! Goddess, that makes us criminals! And there's only one type of criminal we can be! Rogues! Do you know what happens to rogues? They get Samara on their ass!" O'taku gabbled, staring at the bodies, then Usagi, then back, her words coming out in a tumble. "Oh my God, we're criminals, we're criminals! And they're just going to assume that we..."

"Oh, hush!" The more levelheaded Inu shook her head, reached over, and lightly smacked O'taku on the shoulder. "So long as we weren't directly involved in fighting these people, only Usagi is going to get in trouble for that and I don't think she cares overmuch."

"Nope. It wouldn't be the first time in my centuries I've been a criminal, and at least at this time, it's not about someone else trying to plant something on me but rather something I actually did. Besides, all of these folk are just in pain or unconscious right now." Usagi lifted a foot and brought it crashing down the back of one of the turians, sending him back to the ground unconscious. "Well, now they're all unconscious. Come on, if we're on the Citadel, we can go exploring a bit. And as long as I'm with you, I don't think the monastery is going to care overmuch. Once you're back there, you can disappear."

That was true enough, O'taku mused, getting a hold of herself with some difficulty. This was already far, far more excitement than she had ever wanted, and involving actual legal authority figures was well beyond what she ever wanted to do. The beauty of planets like Crastus was that they were sanctuaries for asari like her. "I don't think exploring is a good idea. Although getting off the ship might be."

"I think we need to contact our representative back on Mostromos and have them send a message to the Abbess. Detail everything that happened, and especially that this was **all** Usagi's fault, and have them send a senior sister out here to help us get back," the engineer said.

Usagi shrugged. "That sounds like a plan for you girls. Me, I'm going to look for some fun. About Herb and Ranma, I really, really don't think that the Council will be able to hold either of them. Although the funny thing is, we were only wanted in connection to Herb. I wonder what happened to Ranma? He's way better at snuggling than Herb."

Rolling their eyes, the four younger asari followed O'taku out while Inu quickly fired off a text message via her omni-tool over the extranet. The message was simple, if somewhat in code.

Wild Horse and Cooking Requirement caught and brought to Citadel. We were collateral damage. Wild Child with us, please help. Wish to return to the monastery. Please send senior sister. No legal issues at present. May change due to Wild Child acting as Wild Horse does.

This was the truth, although calling Usagi a Wild Child was a bit of an inside joke at the abbey. Usagi shifted personality so much from Matron to Maiden to child and back that calling her that was a label that just made itself.

Beyond that, the guards that had been sent aboard the ship would need to actually be conscious to get a message off about how Usagi had attacked them suddenly. And currently, they weren't. *And even then, I wager we can definitely say she's been a bad influence on us and we can get off with but a few slaps on the wrist. No need for any detailed work on our backgrounds or anything else... Which would certainly lead a Justicar out here.*

"Ooh, wait, isn't that Ranma and Herb's armor? Yoink," Usagi giggled, hurrying over to a pile of armor in the corner. She then seemed to concentrate before suddenly, the piece of armor she had been holding disappeared.

"Wh... was that that ki space thing Ranma and Herb use!?" O'taku asked, staring.

"Since when can you do that!?" Inu gasped.

"For a few weeks now, and yep," Usagi answered. "And before you say anything about me keeping it a secret, you didn't ask." All her listeners groaned at that, and Usagi giggled.

Not even two hours later, Usagi walked into one of her favorite bars on the Citadel and was amused to see someone who looked remarkably like Herb in his female form but with a different hairstyle. She waved cheerfully at a few of the bartenders, who blinked in shock at her before raising his hand in reply.

Inu noticed this and had to comment. "I take it you've been here before?"

"Everyone comes through Chora's Den eventually. They've got some good drinks; just don't order anything with the red dye in it unless you want to try to take up pole dancing for a bit," Usagi said with a grin as she moved over towards Herb, where she was sitting reading something from his omni-tool across from a giant ancient looking krogan. "Herbie, guess who!"

The krogan lifted an eyebrow, snickering a little, while Herb sighed, although he did smile somewhat fondly. "Usagi, you're about the only one in this galaxy who would do something like that to me. I don't know why you keep on asking as if I'm going to forget that little fact. I don't suppose you were able to take anything from the ship, were you?"

"Yep, I brought along your armor and everything," Usagi chirped, plopping herself into a chair between the two men, "in my ki space."

“Hah! You were able to figure that technique out. Well done,” Herb approved.

“Why’re you talking to this oldster? He looks older than even Bene,” Usagi gestured to the krogan. “And you’re not the kind to just make friends and have meals with people normally.

“I’m not used to blunt asari, but I gotta admit, I like your attitude,” the krogan said, smirking a little then looking over at Herb. As for who I am, I’m Urdnot Wrex. This one was about to buy me dinner.”

Usagi grinned, leaning forward. “There’s gotta be a story behind stuffy Herb paying you a meal. Anything you want to tell me, Herbie? Getting in touch with your female side a bit?”

As Wrex laughed, Herb sighed. In her head, a pendulum swung, trying to decide if Ranma’s anger, Herb’s gratefulness at having his armor returned to him, and basic politeness (blood was one of those difficult stains) outweighed his desire to just kill Usagi and be done with it. Eventually, politeness won out, and he waved the other Ardat-Yakshi into chairs around them.

OOOOOOO

The name of the Shadow Broker had been around for so long that most assumed the mysterious information broker was an asari. Or, some wags thought, a krogan, although most disparaged the idea. And at one point, it had been true. Before the current Shadow Broker had killed the first one, The Shadow Broker had been an asari. Now, though? It was a yahg, a fact that would have astonished any sentient among the Council Races. For all the twenty seconds, they had to live after discovering this fact.

For a while known as having some kind of social structure, the yahg are not a space-going race. A powerful predator species, they had evolved on the planet Parnack with four pairs of eyes, almost like Batarians, with each pair designed to track and predict the movements of prey. This gave them such a sensitivity to movement and light that the yahg could easily read the body language of any species. And they were so violent and so violently against any kind of equality among their own packs that when the initial diplomatic team tried to make contact with them and treated them like equals, the yahg took this as an insult and torn apart, and then eaten, the diplomatic team and their guards.

At which point, the Council had decided to interdict the planet and leave the yahg to their own devices. The yahg, larger, stronger, faster than a krogan with a healing factor to match and violent, cannibalistic tendencies, was too much trouble for little gain. The Shadow Broker, however, had other ideas. He had wanted to examine the yahg, and had sent out a team to capture one. Under experimentation, the subject proved to be exceptionally intelligent and adaptable below its barbaric exterior.

Eventually, the Shadow Broker felt the yahg had learned enough to be of use, and with the then-broker’s blessing, the yahg killed the operative that was monitoring him and assumed the operative’s identity. Not a year later, after about a month of a clandestine war

with 'Operative Kechlu', the Shadow Broker first sent out an execution order on him, then rescinded it. No one in his operation realized that last was because the Shadow Broker, the original, had been killed and replaced by the yahg.

The new Shadow Broker greatly enjoyed ferreting out secrets in the trade of information, seeing it as a mix of a great game and hunting for prey. Prey of the mind was often the hardest to catch, after all. However, the yahg could not entirely ignore his body's instincts for blood and hunting. So, over the years since he had taken over, powerful biotics, soldiers of some repute, and even his own agents had occasionally been kidnapped and brought to the vessel the original Shadow Broker had used as the base of his operations. Currently, that base was situated on the planet Hagalaz and had been for several years. Not one of those kidnapped had ever been seen again.

A second-tier garden world, Hagalaz had once hosted the salarian mining expedition that had initially discovered the planet, but organized crime had taken over, exploiting the planet for a time before abandoning it when other planets were found with more easily accessible minerals. Though Hagalaz had a somewhat normal atmosphere, it was also wracked by insane storms, making living on its surface for any length of time nearly impossible. The criminals had pulled up a stake so much that when the yahg took over, he only had to hunt down a few hundred squatters or hermits around the entire planet scattered through the various mine complexes.

But of late, the ultimate hunter had despaired. There had been nothing to truly sink his claws into. No worthy prey had grabbed his attention for more than a year, and his instincts were demanding he hunt. He had been tempted to actually leave Hagalaz and his Shadow Broker persona to head out among the stars and maybe hunt down one of the vaunted Spectres. However, he knew that his race would be against him there.

And then into his web came information about two human super soldiers. Human super soldiers with exceedingly odd abilities, no affiliation with the System Alliance, and insane amounts of skill and ability. Far more than even krogan, who had turned out to be something of a mixed bag. True, they became stronger and better fighters the older they became, but even so, they were far weaker than the yahg.

These two super soldiers on the other hand, they could perhaps be a challenge. The first challenge that he had faced in person for years. So, the order had gone out to capture one of them.

Now, as Herb began to ply Wrex with food and questions in equal measure, Kechlu, the yahg had seen no reason to change his assumed name, watched from his control center as a fully automated shuttle came in from well outside of the planet's atmosphere. The shuttle touched down on top of the ship he used as his lair, and a small tube connected the two vessels. Robots quickly moved. Now under his control, he directed the robots to take the pallet that contained the prisoner into a small room set near the center of the ship. A large freighter, the yahg knew every inch of his hunting ground and was eagerly looking forward to this hunt.

Kechlu ordered the robots to smash one of the gas containers before retreating back up towards the shuttle, whereupon he ordered them to take off. They would remain in orbit while the ship connected to it had already turned, entering the gate again, returning to its normal duties elsewhere in the Terminus Fringe.

Eagerly, Kechlu watched his screen, waiting until his prey woke, trying hard to combat his rising desire for blood. *Soon, soon the hunt will begin! And what a glorious hunt it will be!*

OOOOOOO

Ranma woke up just as angry as Herb had been when he was awoken by the Council, although thanks to Genma's training, it didn't take him nearly as long. Tearing the mask off his face, he hurled it to one side before rolling the other way, then kicking out hard, sending the pallet crashing in a third direction, whirling in place, trying to find any target or danger. However, all he saw was darkness, a darkness lit only by a light greenish glare of a tiny green light from near the doorway. Ranma instantly moved towards it, his senses on high alert.

When he reached the door, a voice came over the span speaker set into the ceiling above.

It sounded like a cross between an alligator's hiss, a krogan growl, and a bear's growling. "Flee, fort up, or fight. Those are your choices, human. Please, make this hunt fun for me."

Ranma glared up at the speaker, his hand pressing into the door panel. It surprisingly opened, and he stepped through only to stop halfway, grabbing the edge of the door before he could fully close. "I'm kinda in a bad mood, mystery voice. I don't think you want to mess with me right now. You had the good sense to wake me up and not have someone standing over me menacingly or worse, medically. Now, let me go, and I only take my anger out on whoever actually kidnapped me rather than you."

Ranma normally wouldn't offer that kind of deal, being of the firm opinion that the mind behind something like that was just as culpable as the hand that did the deed. But he felt embarrassed and humiliated at how he had been taken out by whatever kind of gas that had been used on him, and any hint in the direction of the person who thought that idea up, he would cheerfully take.

Not that it probably would've worked for much longer, Ranma thought to himself, mentally taking stock of his body for a second. His ki reserves were really low, evidence of how much his body had been fighting the toxins in his system. But Ranma could also sense that he had been slowly winning that fight. *My stomach eventually got used to being force-fed Akane's cooking, and that month Kodachi was after me and everything that entailed. I can deal with this.*

His only answer was a growling sort of laugh, and Ranma scowled. "Fine, have it your way. You probably have a very punchable face anyway."

With that, Ranma concentrated, his hand glowing almost white-hot for a second with heat as he melted a portion of the door, but it took a while and a lot of effort to even melt a bit of the hatch. Inside and out, this ship had been rated for reentry, and despite his work at numerous forges over the years since training under Master Vulcan, Ranma had never run into something that hot before.

He stopped after almost a minute, pulling his hand back, then experimentally raised a fist as the door finished closing, banging on it several hard times both with Amaguriken and a few times when he concentrated more on putting more strength into each blow. He was able to dent it, but not quickly, and Ranma estimated that breaking through the walls wasn't going to work very well. *Not unless I want to go really slow. Damn. There goes my 'fastest way is a straight line' concept.*

Of course, that would've also run into the problem that he didn't really know where his destination was or what was outside the ship. For all Ranma knew, they could be in deep space, and while Ranma was confident he could probably survive in a lot of environments, he still needed to breathe. *Well, I can hold my breath for a long time but not all that much.*

Experiments done, Ranma looked from one direction to another along the corridor he found outside of the room he had woken up in. The only light that he could see were tiny green lights set into the ceiling, and hopping up to one, Ranma realized that it had replaced a much larger light there. *So, whoever is in here with me obviously can see far better than I can with this. Still, I've always had decent night sights anyway.*

That wasn't actually the case. Although Ranma didn't really want to admit it, a small side effect of the Neko-Ken training that he had been put through had given Ranma enhanced night vision. Not quite to the point of a house cat but certainly better than that of a normal human.

With no idea which direction to go, Ranma randomly picked a direction and headed down the corridor, all of his senses on alert. *With my ki reserves as low as they are and with my armor gone, I don't want to take any hits I don't have to. Dammit, I wish I had Herb's massive reserves!*

That was a bit of a bone of contention between the two of them. Herb had natural ki reserves that literally dwarfed Ranma's despite the fact that he had barely done anything to enlarge them throughout his life. Ranma, on the other hand, had done quite a bit to enlarge his from the moment he learned about ki in general, and that gap still existed between them. *Bet Herb would just be tossing around ki blasts to light his way or just blast through the walls like I wanted to.*

He paused suddenly, hearing something mechanical shifting, then ducked and rolled to one side, kicking up hard off of the corner of the wall just in time to avoid a stream of bullets that tried to follow him from his previous position. "FUCK!"

Clinging to the ceiling for a moment, Ranma tossed out a grenade that he kept in his ki space, which exploded on the small pop-up auto cannon that had suddenly pushed out of a wall.

“Now, was that motion triggered, or did someone elsewhere activate it?” Looking around, Ranma couldn’t see enough to notice anything getting off the reflected gleam he would expect to see from a video camera, not even when he pulled out an emergency flashlight and shown it around, concentrating on the ceiling for a moment, figuring that was where most video cameras were, and then along the walls and finally the floor. What he did find was a small aperture near where he had initially been, and passing his hand through the area between the two, he noticed a small red band of light. “Okay, motion-triggered. Not weight, though.”

With a shrug, Ranma jumped up, clinging to the wall for a second, then up onto the ceiling, where he began to crawl along, slower now but hopefully well above any other motion-activated traps.

In this manner, Ranma came out of the hallway and into what looked like a two-story thoroughfare of some kind. Numerous hallways led off from both this floor and the next floor up, with stairs leading upwards to one side of where he stood. “So, am I in a space station or a ship?” Ranma didn’t really have any sense of size yet, so he couldn’t tell. This area at least looked as if it was built into something large. Either a huge freighter, one of the ones that made the ship they had taken to Omega seem small, or a space station.

Climbing his way along the ceiling, Ranma came to the lip of the second-floor area and flipped himself upwards, only for that motion to apparently trigger something. Numerous guns appeared throughout the room, popping up out of the walls or down from the ceiling. One of them even popped up from the floor, all of them twisting around, trying to train on him. Worse, all of them looked as if they were anti-krogan weapons. This caliber of weapon was dangerous even to Ranma. “Well, crap!”

Flipping into a cartwheel to the side, Ranma was able to dodge the initial flood of bullets, lashing out by pulling out his own gun from his ki space and returning fire as he moved. Even so, he was clipped several times, grimacing at the pain of the strikes. In particular, one of them caught Ranma on the side of the head. That twisted his body around, but Ranma moved with it, firing repeatedly, destroying each gun position as he could train on them with controlled bursts of fire even as his head rang from the pain.

Even as the guns fell silent, Ranma was caught again, this time on the foot. One of the guns had aimed where he was about to be just a little bit faster than he had expected. The momentum of the strike upended him just as he was about to land, causing Ranma to crash headfirst into the metal of the first floor near the center of the room.

Even so, his return fire had smashed that gun to flinders, and now he rolled under the fire of the two remaining guns, popping up to fire at the furthest one with his rifle as he closed with the other. Dodging to one side just in time to avoid another fusillade, his fist crashed down on top of the gun emplacement, smashing gears, electronics and metal alike.

As he was about to pull out his hand, something moved in the darkness of one of the passages. Before Ranma could turn around, he was smashed by something in the back by a powerful enough blow to cause him to grunt in pain, and he found himself flying through the air once more.

"Crap! Whoever just hit me is almost as strong as Lime or Taro in his Minotaur form!" Ranma grunted as he flew. Landing, he rolled, twisting around to face in the direction the blow had come.

He found himself facing a twelve-foot monstrosity. The creature wore armor but had scales like a krogan underneath, ranging from red to brown from what Ranma could see in the poor light, a triangular mouth jutting downward from a hinged jaw with rows of sharp teeth, two large horns and facial markings like tattoos or something similar. Its hands had three fingers, reminding Ranma of an old anime he'd seen once. In fact, to Ranma, he looked like a rancor, only smaller.

Yet, as intimidating as the monster was, Ranma stood unafraid, cracking his neck explosively as he stared at the creature. "And what are you supposed to be? You almost look like this sci-fi thing I saw once, although it was much larger than you."

"You face a yahg, fool! You face death! I am the mightiest hunter in the galaxy! And you are my prey."

Snorting, Ranma shook his head. "You know what they say. The bigger they are, the harder they fall." With that, he charged forward, as did the creature. The creature smashed into one of the other turrets, sending pieces of metal flying towards Ranma, who was forced to slow, dodging through them, then twitching around a blow that would have taken him in the side of the head with the creature's claws. The creature was fast, easily the fastest fighter Ranma had yet faced in this dimension. *Still, he's no Herb or Mint.*

A leg came up in a kick that almost caught Ranma, but he used two hands to push up and off of it, flipping up into the air, where he lashed out with a kick of his own toward the creature. That kick was blocked, but Ranma used the momentum of it to push himself higher into the air of the entryway, only to flinch as the creature reached down to its belt and pulled up several grenades, tossing them into the air around him as all of its many eyes closed. They all went off, flash bangs and explosives alike, battering Ranma in several directions and blinding and causing his hearing to go.

"GAHH!" he yelled in pain, reaching up to his face, covering his hands with one eye with a hand, then his ears, his instincts fighting as to which pain was the worst as he fell back to the floor. His ki healing went to work immediately, repairing his hearing, but there was little it could do to bring back his sight for a few seconds, as there was nothing physically wrong with his eyes. They had simply been overloaded, unlike his ears, which had burst thanks to one of the flashbangs actually hitting his head before it went off.

The next second, Ranma felt a punch landing in his side, which broke a rib where his back was clawed. That didn't do much damage though, the yahg's claws skittering across his

skin, leaving welts but not drawing any blood. Seemingly furious at that, the yahg kicked Ranma away, breaking another rib and slamming him into the wall. The yahg trooped after him, grabbing Ranma up and lowering his mouth to try to bite through his shoulder and neck.

“OWFFUCK you!” Ranma yelled in pain, but his skin was durable enough to withstand the pressure of the bite, and knowing where the monster had to be because of that blow, he kicked out hard, catching the creature in the stomach and sending it backward in turn.

Landing on his feet, Ranma blinked the lights out of his eyes and swiftly shifted to one side around a blow, then lashed out in a kick hard enough to shatter steel or stone. The kick landed, breaking the creature’s leg and sending it to its knees with a cry of fury, not pain. The creature didn’t seem to care about the wound, simply lost in his own bloodlust and confident of its healing ability. Which seemed to be right, as Ranma, his vision returning now, could see in the low light something moving under the skin as if the broken bone was trying to mend itself.

The next second, Ranma’s hands blurred, battering the yahg’s hands back, then landing several hard blows to the face and chest as the familiar machine gun sound filled the room, telling Ranma his hearing was coming back.

The yahg was immensely durable, far more durable than any of the krogan Ranma had fought before this and tried to grab Ranma as his attack slowed. “You will die, and your flesh will--”

“Oh, shut up!” Ranma flipped up and into the air again, lashing down with a kick that caught the creature on the head at Amaguriken speed. The hundreds of blows rained down on his head seemed to disorient the yahg, and its multiple eyes almost began to roll back into their sockets before it shook its head and try to power through it, only for Ranma to whip around behind it. There, Ranma lashed out with another series of blows, the armor the creature was wearing beginning to dent and warp, even cracking under the continued punishment. It couldn’t turn fast enough, and Ranma continued to pummel it for several seconds until it rolled forward, thrusting up behind it with another series of flashbangs.

“Nope, not again!” Ranma flipped up and away, landing side on the safety railing above, waiting for the explosion to pass before launching himself forward again. The creature, now broken out of its bloodlust from the injuries it’d taken, was trying to retreat, but Ranma didn’t allow it, grabbing onto its horns and wrenching his head backward into another series of Amaguriken punches that shattered teeth and jaw.

It tried to claw at him again, and Ranma grimaced at the pain of the blow, the momentum of the strike blasting him sideways, but he moved with it. When the yahg charged forward, he kicked up off the ground once more over the creature, coming down again with an overhead kick. This was a feint and as the creature raised its arms to try to either block or grab his leg, Ranma flipped in midair, moving around and down below the creature’s upraised arm. More punches slammed into his face before he could get its arms

back into position, and nearly half the creature's eyes exploded while the other one broke more teeth as the sound of a machine gun once more roared through the room.

The creature screamed in agony, lashing out wildly with both arms, catching Ranma with a glancing blow. Ranma used the momentum of that to perform a barrel roll to one side, landing on the side of the yahg where it could no longer see. There, he lashed out with a kick that broke its other knee. Then, as the creature tried to flail in all directions, Ranma leaped up again, coming down on its back feet first, sending it crashing to the ground.

The yahg tried to rise, try to push up, but Ranma slammed fist after fist into the back of his neck where its armor ended. The scales there proved just as tough as its armor, but not tough enough. A few hundred Amaguriken blows later, Ranma's hand was hurting, but he had heard the telltale crack of bone, and the creature, which had been trying to rear up, trying to buck Ranma off, fell limp, spasming as it lost all ability to control his body.

Having seen the creature's healing ability several times by this point, Ranma decided to make sure the fucker stayed down. Hopping off the creature's back, wound up and kicked out as hard as he possibly could, his entire leg glowing with blue energy. The creature's head exploded, blood and viscera bursting everywhere under Ranma's foot.

Grimacing at the state of his pants, Ranma shook his head. "That was probably overkill, but best to be certain." Ranma then looked around, then back to the creature, and began to curse, "Dammit! How the hell am I supposed to figure out where I am now?"

Feeling as if he had suddenly turned into Ryoga at that cry, Ranma smacked his cheeks for a second, then knelt down beside the creature, seeing if any of its other pockets had anything but grenades in them. He found a wicked-looking dagger, a skinning dagger if he was any judge, which did not make Ranma any more inclined to feel sorry about slaying the creature than he'd already been, a pair of keys, which he pocketed, and the yahg's omni-tool, which was gene-locked.

"Great, just great. Well, at least I got the impression that this guy was here all alone. Which means I can at least use my emergency flashlight from now on without giving my position away." With that somewhat doleful thought, Ranma turned, pulled out his flashlight from his ki space, and shone it in various directions, trying to orient himself, figuring out where the creature had come from first.

By the clock his omni-tool had installed in it, it took him nearly half a day to figure out where he was going. The creature had removed any kind of internal map, and his omni-tool couldn't make a map of where he was going, so Ranma accidentally doubled back on himself twice, before he found the entrance into what looked like the engineering room. That was well and good, and Ranma could tell that the engine room was in one piece. But the engineering room didn't have any of the computers necessary to tell Ranma where he was, what was outside the ship, or communicate with the outside world.

Those he only acquired when he entered the bridge of the ship. Figuring out that the engine room would be at the back of the vessel and the bridge at the front, Ranma had

moved entirely one direction from the engine room, only doubling back once more when he had to go up to the second floor when the first-floor corridor ended at a series of crew quarters.

The bridge had very obviously been designed for one person long in the past, one person with the ability to concentrate on a lot of things at once, and a lot of computer screens at once in this case. It looked almost like the bedroom of the hacker or NEET, in Ranma's opinion. Yet it did have computers his omni-tool could navigate with, and soon, Ranma realized that this ship was stranded on a planet that had no technological civilization, that the outside atmosphere or pressure at this height would almost certainly be eventually deadly even to Ranma and that there was nothing in orbit either. "Well, fuck. Now, what do I do?"

Sighing, Ranma hooked up his omni-tool to the computers, trying to figure out if he should try to call someone for help or if he could somehow pilot the ship on his own. "This is going to take a while, isn't it?" he asked himself. "And without anything to munch on either."

End Chapter

So from here on, we will have one or two chapters of separate adventures. Wrex and Herb will bond (much to the horror of Valern and others) and Ranma will need to use his brain to figure things out, contract help somehow, and get himself involved in something he very much doesn't before they are back together again on the Asari world where their ship is being built. There will be shenanigans galore for both, some serious, most not as the two martial artists continue to move across the galaxy with all the subtlety of a elephant herd, making friends and influencing people.