

I don't own Mass Effect, I'm bad at prologues, not endings, nor do I own Ranma 1/2, not nearly enough Kasumi.

Chapter 3 Moving In...

Ranma and Herb looked at the matriarch across from them studying her and her followers carefully. While the commandos behind her didn't seem to be much of a threat, there were over 50 of them. The two of them had sparred with the commandos on the ship to know that they had besides Usagi been the equivalent of second year students at best. Despite their exhaustion these all had the look of combat veterans and that was without taking into account the matriarch herself.

Herb studied her with interest. The way she stood denoted the fact that she wasn't even winded despite having to keep up with the two martial artists, and there were faint scars on her arms and legs denoting combat experience. Though she was older (possibly by far) than any of the asari they had so far met that didn't seem impact her beauty.

Next to the Chinese prince Ranma felt around his side wincing occasionally as his ki-heightened healing ability went to work, especially on his head, where he had received a grazing blow from a sniper rifle, and his ribs. Even that would have been enough to kill any of the locals (save krogan) but in his case it just gave him a major headache and maybe broke a rib. Still his pain did not stop him from looking over the matriarch and her followers closely. While none of the commandos looked to be much of a threat on their own there were quite a few of them, and the matriarch looked like she would be a handful. He had been impressed by the abilities and diversity of maneuvers able to be done by biotics, and if asari warriors kept on learning throughout their lives, then it followed that the older one was more dangerous.

The matriarch Benezia studied them in turn, and was astonished anew. For one thing she had seen most of the combat that had just occurred, and while that gave her an inkling of their abilities she was nowhere close to figuring out the how of them. For instance she knew that one with the pigtail had taken a shot from a sniper rifle to the side. Yet the round seemed to have simply impacted rather than penetrated. Oh, he was holding his side, but that was all, there wasn't even any blood.

They use some of the techniques attributed to master of Bera'van'tuwan, yet they are so young! Benezia had been around humans enough to know how to tell their ages, and these two were barely the equivalent of her daughter. *The one with the multicolored hair looks slightly older, but for them to become so skilled in so sort short of time should've been impossible if what little I was able to find about the Eternal fire was correct.*

Shiala too was looking them over, her face a mask to hide her scattered thoughts. While she and the other commandos hadn't been able to keep up with Benezia (and wasn't that going

to be something they would be **talking** about later), she had seen a bit of what these two could do in combat when they arrived and it awed and terrified her in turn. If these two attacked there was very little that she and the other commandos would be able to do to stop them.

The serious air was broken by Usagi bouncing forward happily, arms spread wide for a hug. "Bene!" she exclaimed, and before anyone else could do anything she had engulfed the older asari in a hug lifting her up and twirling her around happily. "I haven't seen you in decades!"

Benezia was shocked out of her analysis of the two martial artists by this sudden assault, and she looked down at the beaming face looking up at her. For a moment the younger asari's features and voice didn't register then she gasped wondering how she could have missed it before. "Usagi?!" she asked incredulously putting her own arms around the younger asari. "How are you? What are you doing with these two?"

"Matriarch?" asked Shiala whose first preference had been to use her biotic powers and throw the strange asari away from her benefactor.

Her matriarch waved Shiala off looking around at the others. "Usagi was a young acolyte at the same training school that I learned at when I was a maiden," she said calmly. "She had been there for over sixty years up to that point, and was almost ready to take her journeyman test." She raised one hand and ran it over the hard crests on Usagi's head affectionately, smiling faintly at the happy gurgle this elicited.

Benezia had spent over a hundred and forty years at that school, and Usagi was still there when she left. She well knew about the slightly younger Asari's peculiar mental stability. At first it had bothered her much like all the other neophytes, but after a little while Usagi grew on one like a fungus. Of course after Benezia left the school they lost contact, which wasn't at all unusual, though how Usagi happened to be here now was probably a tale and a half.

The two martial artists six changed a glance and shrugged. "You were saying something about an offer I think?" said Herb speaking for both of them. "I am Herb and this is Ranma by the way.

For his part Ranma was looking around them, trying to figure out if there were any other watchers and spotting one almost instantly. He was wondering what to do about it, but decided to wait for now, since the man was too far away to hear what they were talking about at this end of the street.

"Yes," Benezia looked up from where she had been caressing Usagi's head. She gathered herself again pushing Usagi away gently. "If you wish to get out of the limelight I can help with that. It won't be free of course," she said shaking your head. "But I think an information exchange would be much better than attempting to question you by force. Or taking you in to be studied which I can easily see happening. I will be frank you two exhibit some of the skills

and abilities that were attributed to masters of an art lost to my people well before we took to the stars. If there is even a chance of relearning that ability from talking to and watching you two, I will take it. Tell me all you can about how you do what you do, and in return I will get you safe passage off this planet, to a planet of our choice were no one will be able to find you, and after that I will aid you in any endeavor you wish."

The two martial artists looked at one another. "Could you give us some time to think about it for second?" Ranma asked motioning his head over and away from the asari. Benezia nodded graciously, rather amused by the idea that they wouldn't have to take time to think about it.

The two martial artists walked over to a building not at all coincidentally halfway to the watcher that Ranma spotted earlier. "What do you think?" asked Herb quietly, having also noticed the watcher and not willing to let him hear anything the two of them didn't want him to hear.

"She's on the level." said Rama shaking his head. "My school o' martial arts is built off reading and learning from yer opponents, it ties into how I can figure out how ta do some of the biotics tricks, and it makes me damn hard ta lie to if I concentrate on you. She wants ta know what we can do, and is honest about helping us."

Herb snorted and shook his head, having much the same ability from his lessons as heir to the throne. "It's a good deal, and her mention of our techniques being similar to an ancient asari one interests me. That could be a clue as to whether or not we come from the past here or an alternate dimension."

Ranma shook his head amusedly. "You're still hung up about that?"

Herb snorted. "Again, unlike you I prefer to know things rather than just live my life day-to-day."

Ranma shrugged unrepentantly then both of them turned to look at the unseen watcher. "What ta do about you is the question," said Ranma in a louder voice, scratching at his pigtail thoughtfully. "I think I'm going to just knock you out, that seems like the best course. A light concussion to the right part of yer skull that'll keep you out for a few days or so. Don't worry," he said raising his thumbs up in the air and grinning, make his teeth go 'ting' in the sunlight using a very silly technique he made up after watching an anime show with Kasumi. "I'm a martial artist, you're in safe hands."

The man so addressed stumbled out of the doorway he had been hiding in half a block down the street. "W-wait, I, I was only told to watch you, my, my employer..."

Herb shook his head. "Spit it out man. We won't give you a concussion until after you're done talking."

The nondescript man did not seem particularly encouraged by this, but brought out a large circular disk with face small piece of glass said into the top. He pressed the button on the side of it, and a voice began to emanate from it. "I am pleased to see that the videos did not do your skills justice."

Herb stiffened at the voice, recognizing it from a certain recording, but before he could interrupt (preferably by ripping the spy's throat out) the voice went on. "Yet it seems to me as if you are lost in this universe, no direction and little knowledge. I can give you the first and help you find the second. Your skills are too important to let go to waste. Work with me, and they can be used to help humanity take their rightful place."

Ranma frowned. "Yeah... I'm going to say no. Yer not offering us anything solid, and yer tone reminds me too much o' some used car salesman I once talked to."

Herb growled angrily. "I recognize your voice little man... little 'Illusive Man'. You speak of humanity's rightful place, then sacrifice human colonists to the Batarian slavers. You are no leader; you are a user, nothing but a terrorist following his own agenda. I will never work with you, and if I can I will hunt you down and rip your head off your shoulders to stick on a pike."

Ranma looked at him in surprise, wondering where the hatred had come from, but Herb merely waved him off.

The Illusive Man's voice responded after a moment. "That is... unfortunate. I'm sorry that you cannot see that sacrifices need to be made sometimes for the betterment of our race as a whole. Perhaps in time you will see how humanity is treated by the other races and come to see that Cerberus is the only force working to protect human interests and our future."

After that he clicked off, not wanting to make any threats at this point in time. Threats were only useful when you had resources at hand to carry them out. As he didn't at the moment have any resources on Sijou, he would refrain. But he knew now that not only would these two not work with him willingly, but that at least one actively work against him. That could not be allowed.

The man looked down at the communicator, gulped and began to back away but before he could everything went black. After knocking the man out with almost surgical precision Ranma and Herb moved back to join the asari. "We'll go with you, but I have to say that answering your questions isn't going to come cheap," said Ranma. "We want to be build or at least buy our own ship, and finding a place with a smithy, an old-time smithy would be excellent."

"Smithy?" asked Benezia, both her knowledge of English and her translator failing her. She opened up her Omni tool and perused the intra-web for the word frowning in thought. It was not a term used often apparently as it took her several minutes to find it during which

Ranma simply smirked and Herb shook his head. They could simply tell her, but Ranma evidently was in a playful sort of mood.

After a moment she found the word and her expression cleared. "I see, the asari word would be sh'ethen. creating metal and other works through the use of hand tools and flame is used as an art form among my people. A rather esoteric art, but that should be simple enough to find. In fact," she thought for a moment then nodded. "Yes I think I know precisely where to take you. And as for building a ship, that again is not a problem. I have a dozen shipwrights who owe me favors, and a dozen more who actually work for me."

Inside however, she was intensely interested to see what a smithy had to do with martial artists, and if they were connected to their abilities in some fashion.

The two martial artists exchanged another glance then nodded again. "In that case I think we should get a move on."

"Mistress" said Shiala looking at her mistress quizzically pointing at Usagi "what about this one?"

Benezia shook her head. "Usagi is harmless for the most part," she said smiling faintly when the often childish asari pouted. She frowned as she looked over her commander core, amused internally at how out of breath they still seemed. "Break yourselves up again into small formations and make your way back to the ship," she ordered. "I'm astonished that all 50 of you together like this has brought more attention on our heads yet, and I don't want to risk anymore now."

Her commandos all nodded, save for Shiala who moved to stand beside her. She looked down abashed at the approval in her matriarch's gaze for being the only one of the commandos who didn't seem completely out of breath at this point. "I believe the other commandos and you should be doing more endurance exercises yes?" asked Benezia softly and Shiala simply nodded still looking down.

Moments later the group left, leaving behind burning wreckage, bodies and one concussed human male who would be hard pressed to remember his own name let alone anything else for a few days.

The two martial artists followed the matriarch on a circuitous path through the city, taking to the rooftops occasionally but for the most part simply following her around. They were both hiding their features again, with heavy cloaks that covered their features, though this time neither bothered changing into their female forms.

Surprisingly they were easily able to get past customs. Ranma was the only one who realized how odd this was, since Herb had never bothered with customs back in his search for

the ladle or even before. "How exactly are ya doing this? I mean they should be stopping us here shouldn't they?"

The matriarch simply smiled. "This is an asari world young Ranma, and I am a matriarch. Matriarchs of my status very rarely have to deal with red tape, an excellent phrase you humans shared with the rest of us."

The ship they approached was larger then the frigate the two had taken to this planet, being a luxury liner the matriarch had converted into her personal spaceship. It had the same sleek lines as all asari vessels, curved and almost looking like a fish or perhaps a manta ray. Soon enough the two were on board, and she showed them their quarters. They would be bunking together, which was fine by them. The fact that Usagi insisted on staying with them was a bit weird, but neither of them really objected to her. As Benezia learned so long ago Usagi grew on you, and even Herb had warmed somewhat to her presence.

Herb nodded. "Does this ship have a good information databank about human history?"

The matriarch nodded. "Of course, I was most interested in your race when you first appeared on the galactic stage, and I spent years on learning all I could about you. You can access it anywhere aboard ship with your omni-tool."

The dragon prince nodded and without another word turned and reentered their room already opening up his Omni tool. He was determined to figure out if this was an alternate dimension or the future. If it was the future there should have been some mention of his people, and despite the fact that Ranma was insistent on the fact that they had left all their ties behind, some duties could not be so easily set aside. He had to know what happened.

Benezia shook her head amused. "Good grief just like my daughter, both in the lack of manners and the desire for learning." She turned back to Ranma. "Well in that case it leaves just you to be our first instructor."

"Right now?" asked Ranma, scratching at his pigtail. Around them the ship started to thrum and hum as the engines came online, though it would be two hours longer before they were cleared for liftoff.

"Indeed," said the matriarch nodding her head. "I would like us to start immediately. I have other duties I must see to, and thus only a short amount of time to spend on this regardless of my own desires. The sooner we start, the better."

Ranma shrugged and asked to be led to a training area. The ship of course did have one, since training never stopped for those dedicated to their craft. It was actually much bigger and more equipped than the one on the frigate. Several different guns of all size and shapes lined one side, as well as a door that led into a shooting range. The walls and floor were covered with

soft mats, and it almost gave off the feel of a dojo except for the fact it was done in color of silver, green and light blue rather than earthy tones.

Ranma squatted down in the center, looking at Benezia while her commandos sat around him in a half circle. Those that were free from shipboard duties at any rate, since one of the things she demanded of them was that they made themselves busy while aboard ship. The only exception was the engineering room where she had a few dedicated asari engineers. A dozen commandoes were making certain that the ship was ready for space others were making certain that the last shipment of food they took on was correct, two were sweeping the exterior of the ship for tracking devices or anything else, and still more were on the bridge handling the activities there. This only left ten with Shiala and Benezia.

Ranma closed his eyes thoughtfully scratching at his pigtail as he wondered where to start. Finally he opened his eyes, concentrated for a brief moment and suddenly in his hand appeared a glowing blue sphere interspersed with flashes of gold. "This is Ki, the power of yer body given shape. All life has ki to a certain extent." He held out the hand holding the sphere of ki towards Benezia.

At his nod she reached out and gingerly touched it with a few fingers almost gasping as the feelings spread through her nervous system, which was much more efficient at taking in impressions much like memories, than a human's. She got a feeling of almost overwhelming confidence, as well as a surge of overwhelming joy in simply living and having fun. There was also an eagerness to it, a desire for combat, to test himself against strong opponents. All of these things she easily recognized as coming from the young man in front of her.

She pulled her hand away nodding thoughtfully at having learned that much already about this young man. Almost certainly quite a bit more than he had expected her to learn. All at once she knew that any attempt to pin him down or force him to conform to rules would fail. He was a free spirit, and anything trying to control him would run into an adamantine stubbornness that would never willingly yield.

Still for now she concentrated on what she wanted to learn about Ranma's skills rather than his personality. "How much time did you have to spend to get as good as you are with, ki you called it?"

"Depends on what you're asking," answered Ranma closing his fist and letting the sphere of power disappear. "Like I said, everyone has ki inside 'em ta a certain extent, but it does take a lot of training to consciously use. I was using ki ta enhance my speed, strength and above all healing speed long before I learned how to consciously use it."

"Why especially your healing?" said Benezia looking at him sharply. Something about the way he said that told her there was a tale there. Whatever else he was Ranma wasn't very good at hiding his emotions or feelings.

"My old man was the one who trained me," Ranma said, shrugging. "And he wasn't the type to go easy on anyone regardless of their age."

That simple statement of fact caused a murmur to run through the commandos wondering what the heck that simple statement was concealing, but Benezia nearly frowned and decided to change the subject. "Is it normal to be able to use it as you do where you come from?"

Ranma laughed. "Nah, not normal at all. It's normal to have a lot in you at least more normal than it is here." He shook his head. "One of the weirdest things, at least to me, that we've seen since arriving here is how little ki there is in people."

That startled Benezia quite a bit as she had expected that they would at least share the same starting point since her ancestors had come up with Bera'van'tuwan. "What do you mean?"

"I'm still trying to figure out what it means if that's what you mean" he said jokingly, then sighed as she simply looked at him blankly. "Anyway what I mean is that there isn't as much ki in normal people here as there were in wherever Herb and I came from. Like I said, everyone has some inside of them, but you have to be trained to enlarge your reservoir. Physical strength, endurance and skill add to your energy, and the better shape you are in the more ki you have. Eventually ya reach a point where you have excess energy that you can use for other things." Ranma frowned a little, that sounded lame to him, but he had never really memorized the explanation behind ki, just how to use it the most effectively.

"How long does it normally take to get to that point?" asked Benezia, wondering if she could learn it before she would have to leave. Despite this interesting find, her concerns about Saren played on her mind. A Spectre going rogue could do a tremendous amount of damage, especially one with the abilities of Saren. The respect he had earned made him even more dangerous.

Ranma shrugged. "Building it up to a point ya have enough to use takes a hell of a long time, but it varies from person to person. Normally it'll take about two or three years to learn how to use it in attacks and other things." That was what Cologne had said anyway though it had only taken him a few months after realizing he had ki to do that. Though that was mostly because master Vulcan had been teaching him how to use it in conjunction with blacksmithing. That and having a target to shoot for in Herb at the time had helped his progress tremendously. "Of course it takes a lifetime to really master, and there's always more stuff to learn."

"Are there any side effects?" asked one of the asari commandos.

"An increased appetite is the only bad one I can think of" Ranma answered, shrugging. "That is if you're using regular life energy ki without any emotion intent. Emotion based ki...." he trailed off looking around at them all. "Is the easiest way to begin to learn it. Connect your

emotions, one specific emotion to an attack. But it's a bad shortcut. The more you use out that emotion to power your ki the more that emotion will drive out other emotions. My own initial starting point was confidence, but well you can guess where that led to."

"Arrogance, and eventually a dangerous overconfidence," said Benezia nodding slightly. "What about other emotions?"

Ranma frowned in memory. "Anger is the most dangerous one. I knew a girl back home who was wasn't a very good martial artist but she had used anger ki for so long that she could get some really powerful attacks out of it, so powerful she could take on better, faster stronger opponents on an even footin' if she could call it up. Yet it came ta dominate her personality. Being around someone like that was very tough, and I shudder to think what would've happened if she had attacked someone who didn't have my durability."

The others all notice the use of the word 'she' in that sentence, and wondered if there was another story there but didn't have a chance to inquire since Ranma continued speaking. "Like I said, ya can do a lot of stuff with ki once yer able to consciously use it."

"If you're not consciously using it, the training and physical abilities training ta use it gives ya enhanced endurance strength and skill well above the norm. By the time I was 12 I could kick the shit out of practically any regular martial arts master, and by the time I was 14 I had skills and endurance on par with the greatest Olympic athletes." At his audience's blank stares he shook his head sighing. "Majorly important paid athletes," he said carelessly and the all nodded.

Evidently the Olympics were no longer around either, or at least had never made is off Earth which was kind of sad. Ranma always liked watching the Olympics, admittedly because he could simply point and laugh at how bad all of the athletes were in comparison him but hey.

"On top of that," Ranma went on shaking that thought out of his head, "Is the enhanced longevity. I knew several people back home who're 300 or 400 years old, and still going strong. It didn't do much for their looks," he smirked "but they were still alive and very sprightly. Of course both of them had begun to learn ki later in life, if they had learned it at my age who knows what they would've looked like." In fact Ranma had a feeling that he and Herb could probably live well beyond 500 or six hundred years, possibly even as long as the asari themselves. Ranma knew he had more ki than

Cologne had when it started to retard her aging process, and Herb still had a bit more ki than him.

There was quite a lot of murmuring about that, especially from Benezia who liked the idea of possibly being around for another 1000 years or so, since she was already in her 8 century. "I wonder if this has a connection to the Krogan's longevity," she mused remembering her own early years and her rather egotistical opinion of herself. Benezia had an urge to test

herself and found her skill wanting against several krogan battlemasters. One in particular stuck in her mind, as her defeat at his hands had been rather humiliating at the time but a good learning experience overall.

"But where... I don't understand," said one of the asari commandos, rubbing the ridges on her head in consternation. "I mean where does this energy originally come from?"

Ranma shrugged. "I've never read any kind of scientific paper or nothing about it." The idea was kind of funny to him really since with the use of ki you could pretty much laugh at the laws of physics, which had bothered a lot of the science teachers he met in his life. "I heard it explained once back home as bio energy if that tells you something, it doesn't tell me anything."

"And where would home be exactly?" said Shiala wondering if these two were simply too of many such that would be appearing on the scene because the slavers had found some old abandoned slow boat colony where humans had developed these techniques.

"Don't know yet," said Ranma shrugging unconcern. "That's part of what Herb's interested in. One of my old rivals back home used some kind of magic scroll to send us away when the two of us were fighting. Herb thinks we were sent to some kind of alternate dimension but he's worried that we might be in the future. Me, I don't know or care really."

Shialla scoffed angrily. "Do you take us for idiots? Magic, there's no such thing!"

Instead of taking offense as Benezia thought he might Ranma laughed. He reached over to a glass of water he had grabbed from the cafeteria and dumped it over his head initiating the change. The new redhead shook her head fleeing water droplets everywhere and smirked at Shiala. "Magic exists, or what do you think could cause this?"

All the asari stumbled back except for Shiala who calmly got to her feet and left the room before swiftly coming back with a jug of water and several small glasses. "How exactly did you do that?" she asked intently.

"Magic, like I said," replied Ranma, shrugging. "I fell into a cursed spring where a drowned woman died centuries before in China. Her spirit powered the curse or somethin' like that, and both Herb and I can change forms when we're splashed with cold water. Hot water" she finished, taking one the cups from Shialla and heating it in his hand easily showing yet another thing that could be done with ki. "Changes me back." Mid-word Ranma changed, grinning around at their stunned faces.

He was not his favored male form for long however because Shiala stood above him and dumped another cold water cup over him. "This is the most amusing thing I've ever seen," she said laughing as she handed him another cup from the mug to heat up. Ranma groaned but sat there stoically letting her get it out of her system while the others watched amused.

Benezia's mind was on other things however. While she didn't have a strong grasp in the hard sciences certain levels were necessary to leave school, and she remembered the conservation of mass and energy rule. *The difference in height between his two forms is about a foot* she thought to herself, gazing at the young redhead's chest without any significant interest unlike a few of the commandos around her. *Those could only way about a quarter as much mass as that, and she is thinner in the waist. Wider in the hips slightly, but thinner in the shoulders and the rest of her seems almost the same density of muscle. That leaves a significant amount of mass to be accounted for. Where in the hell does it go? There's no science that I know of that could explain that, but magic?*

If the young male human in front of her could somehow harness the energy from that transformation he could possibly be as dangerous as a nuclear device going off.

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While the matriarch and her two guests made to leave Sijou on her ship, the Shadow broker, having learned from his contacts on Sijou what had occurred, put on a bulletin to his agents galaxy wide to be on the lookout for the two odd humans, then moved on to other things. The humans may be up to something, something quite a bit larger, or perhaps more widespread and long term, than their initial assault on Torfan, which had been planned for weeks, and had been designed to gut the Batarian slavers in the Verge.

] Yet the Shadow Broker knew that the assault was also supposed to show off human might, and now, with the news that the asteroid base was open for any friendly to come in, that wouldn't happen. Despite this the ship buildup had accelerated, and included five more frigate packs and three carrier groups, as well as several dozen more large troops carriers. This was more than would be needed to take the former slaves off Torfan given any reasonable estimate of their numbers. All this pointed to something big occurring in the Skylian Verge, and if it was what he thought, the slavers groups, the mercenary groups and of course their backers would pay good money to find what was really going on.

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The Shadow Broker was not the only one who had decided to move on from the two humans with the odd abilities. The Illusive Man however was not moving on because he wanted to, but because he had no resources in place to continue his pursuit. The man the two martial artists so conscientiously concussed was one of only two agents he had on the asari world, and even that was more luck than anything else.

He spent a few minutes spent silently fulminating at the idea of those two adding their strange abilities to that of Matriarch Benezia, a known expansionist in the odd ruling body of the asari. Then he sighed, another cigar, and after taking a few drags off it, moved on to other things.

Unlike the Shadow Broker, Jack Harper knew precisely what the Systems Alliance Navy was planning, and despite the fact they had backers he didn't like for the move, he approved of it. Beyond understanding the good it could do to show the rest of the galaxy the might of humanity, the whole action would cause chaos, and in chaos there was opportunity.

Still, he did send out a message to his most trusted spies and agents to be on the lookout for the two humans. Their abilities were above and beyond anything he had ever seen, and they needed to be harnessed to serve Cerberus. And humanity of course.

OOOOOOO

While Benezia's ship, the *Forward Thinker* (or that was what it translated to, the words had a bit more impact in their native asari) made its way out toward the mass relay and through it, Ranma continued in his position as primary trainer to the matriarch and the asari in their use of ki, with Herb only showing up for a few hours in the morning before disappearing to go back to his research. At this point of course they weren't using ki directly. Ranma was simply training their bodies and minds to prepare for that future use.

On top of that Benezia, Usagi, and a few select commandos sparred with Ranma daily for at least three hours. The commandoes were good, no mistake, in very good shape, incredibly agile and very skilled in the use of their biotics, but no real match against Ranma even with five on one. Usagi, as Ranma had found out, had a vast repertoire of biotic techniques and benefited from the fact she had been training with Ranma for a little over a week. She was also very sneaky, and a dirty fighter when she thought she could get an advantage from it.

It was fighting Benezia though which was a true joy to Ranma. She had a few more biotic moves than Usagi, but most of them she refused to use while aboard ship. It was in her endurance that she beat out the younger Asari as well as in her fighting style. Usagi had a lot of experience, but Benezia had fought opponents who were stronger and more durable than her more often than Usagi, who never decided to hunt down krogan battlemasters to see how she would measure up against them unlike Benezia. Where Usagi was wild and mobile, often tiring herself out too fast, Benezia was just as mobile, yet precise, controlled and very dangerous.

The ship was five days out and had made two quick jumps and was heading to a third when Ranma finally decided to ask a question of the matriarch he had been meaning to for a while. The two had just finished a one on one spar and were now leaning against one wall of the dojo, while several commandos lounged around them. Usagi lolled on the floor against another wall, sipping at one of the ship's zer-g rated water bottles. She just sort of lay there boneless, none of her normal body control evident as she drank in the previous liquid, but it was the looks some of the commandoes were giving her, odd, confused and even wary looks that prompted Ranma to remember his question.

He nudged Benezia, trying hard not to notice the formfitting nature of the exercise suit the matriarch wore. All the asari wore them of course, things that looked sort of like racing swimsuits back on Earth. Yet Benezia was, well, she was simply far more stacked up top than any of the commandos. The commandos were hard bodied and lithe, and Usagi was lithe and compact, though she had more curves than the commandoes. Despite Benezia's own physical abilities however, her body was that of a mature Woman with a capital W, and it was obvious to anyone who looked at her. To make matters worse, her suit was a special cut, which had a deeper neckline to it to better accommodate her figure. "Hey, can I ask ya a question?"

Benezia nodded, amused internally by the young man's obvious attempts to not look anywhere but her face. She had noticed a time or two during their spars that Ranma was... distracted by the flesh on display, and his general attitude towards sexuality amused her given the fact Usagi had passed on that she and several others had slept with him (though Usagi hadn't mentioned that it had been all at once). It was obvious Ranma found her attractive above and beyond her commandoes, and while flattering she had no desire to act on it. It might have been centuries, but she had not been with anyone since she had been with Liara's father, and did not mean to change that now. Moreover the human was simply too young to interest her in that manner. "Of course, though I cannot promise to answer."

"What's wrong with Usagi?" Ranma asked bluntly. "I see the way some of yer commandoes look at her, and I saw the same look a few times on the way ta Sijou. I also know she's well into yer second maturity phase, the matron-hood or whatever, yet she acts like a cross between a, highly experienced fighter, a little girl and a... a..."

"Oversexed slut?" Benezia responded dryly, chuckling a little at Ranma's faint blush. Benezia sighed then, becoming slightly more serious. "I realize it is odd, but it is not because of anything she can control, and I ask you to keep treating her as you have."

Ranma nodded easily, not having any plans to change that at all. He liked Usagi, having her around was like having an odd cross between a big sister and a little sister who was always trying to get into his pants. *Okay*, Ranma thought rolling mental eyes, *so that comparison ain't so good, but still, I know what I mean*. "No worries there, I just want ta know."

Benezia nodded. "Do you know how we asari reproduce, how we connect to another person nervous system, and if we so wish, take their DNA into ourselves?" She chuckled again at seeing Ranma's flushed face and hurried nod, but went on seriously. "Well, when two asari get together, sometimes their children will have genetic defects. Actually that isn't nearly as likely between two asari than it is between an asari and a Salarian, though in that case it is usually some physical impairment rather than neurological, which is why that pairing has fallen into disfavor, that and the humans coming onto the scene."

She shook her head, refocusing. "Anyway, sometimes that defect is mental rather than physical. In Usagi's case, her brain wasn't able to develop in certain areas as it was in others. Her memory for example is near eidetic. But in other areas, her mind is indeed that of a child,

and it cannot get any better than it is. She also can't seem to get angry at anything for very long, which was a good thing considering she would never have been allowed to train otherwise. Her talents for physical combat were recognized by someone however, and she spent centuries learning how to harness it."

"I still wonder how or rather why she was a slave on Torfan when you came there, but I doubt we could get any sort of realistic story out of her." Benezia pushed herself off the wall. "In any event, I hope that answers your question and I am now off for a shower."

Ranma nodded and forcefully turned his face away when she walked off, not wanting to see the older woman's toned rear as she moved off. Benezia however ignored this, intent on taking a shower, than seeing if she could drag the other human away from his studies long enough to answer some of her own questions.

OOOOOOO

The *Forward Thinker* had several rooms set aside for meditation, a part of the asari martial culture since time immemorial. Herb had found one that was dominated by window that made up an entire wall, showing a truly magnificent view of space. He sat there with his omnitool open in front of him while he sat in the lotus position, occasionally looking up and out into the infinite void. While transportation between the relays was instantaneous, travelling from one to another in-system was not, and this trip was taking them deep into asari territory, showing a never-ending panorama of stars to anyone who looked out into space from the ship.

The descendant of dragons looked up as the door opened soundlessly and the matriarch he and Ranma had allied themselves with flowed in. The exercise of the past few days had been good for her, adding to her already pronounced grace and poise, and it showed. The woman who Herb had found was a little over eight hundred years old nodded cordially at him. "How goes your search for knowledge Prince Herb?"

"Just Herb if you please," Herb responded, shrugging his shoulders. "After all, I have yet to find any evidence that a Musk Dynasty ever existed in this dimension."

"I see, but does that mean your search is over?"

Herb paused for a moment then touched a few buttons on his omnitool, the same one Ranma had purloined off their first victims back on Torfan. "How good is your connection to this intra-web?"

"Young man, my ship has a connection to the intra-web that you would have to go to the Salarians STG to better," Benezia replied dryly. "Whatever you are searching for, if it is anywhere on the galactic web you would be able to access it from here. Why, are you having trouble?"

Herb frowned but after a second's thought shrugged and replied bluntly. "I'm disturbed by what isn't there." The slightly spotted area around one eye ridge rose on the matriarch's face and Herb went in. "I mean there are no legends, no stories, no ancient records of ki manipulation, yet in my own world, while it was uncommon it certainly was known, and the benefits that came with it of course. Now I realize that such might have fallen to the wayside of the centuries since the equivalent of the time Ranma and I came from, but the utter lack of any information on ki bothers me, especially given the fact that your people had their own equivalent, you said you read historical records about it?"

"More legends and myths than actual history texts that are taken as accurately reporting our ancient times. Yet even for that you are correct, if the human race ever developed ki in this dimension there should have been something there. Maybe they did not. I also notice that you sound more definite about the alternate universe theory now." Benezia answered.

"Yes I am, but not only because of the lack of ki. There are... certain signs in the history texts I've perused that hint at a... a fundamental difference between the way humans in this dimension react and how I think the humans in my old dimension would act. This goes back to my studies as a politician and prince you understand, not anything to do with my martial arts?"

Benezia nodded, indicating her willingness to listen despite that.

Herb frowned, wondering how to put this. "There are... pieces missing from human history that should be there but are not. For one thing the North American Coalition do you know of it?"

"Vaguely, it's one of the more powerful nations on Earth yes, a major power there but not a player in the large scheme of things."

"That is correct as far as it goes. In my time, the United States of America was a major world power, in point of fact it was the only **real** superpower, 'the world's policeman'. Even in the depths of the mountains of China my people knew this, and knew why that name was said with both scorn and respect. Such was its power that we needed to learn English to speak with them just as much as we had to learn the primary Chinese language. Yet in the histories I can access on the intra-web, the unification of the US, Canada and Mexico is simply glossed over. That makes no sense, not unless a lot more changed in a hundred years than I expected. Then there are bits and pieces going even farther back, several important historical battles, battles that I studied in my time training to be a king, are not even mentioned anywhere in the history texts here."

Benezia frowned. "I think you are making a, what is that human phrase, a mountain out of a molehill? Records fade, battles are forgotten, cultures change. Even we asari know that, and we have the advantage of living ten years longer than you humans do, and we change far slower."

"Perhaps," Herb grouched, but his tone and face told Benezia he did not believe that. "Perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. There are other things that bother me, the urge to join your precious Council for one. Then there is the way that all our ship, weapon and energy research is devoted around eezo, much like your own."

That last was said rather grimly, and with no little amount of disgust. Neither martial artist had forgotten their reactions to that first jump, and they had also both taken the time to study the *Sijou's Eyes* drive core. Neither had enjoyed the experience, there was just something about eezo that set off their senses. Even when they didn't have their ki sight on they reacted to it. Not like it was alive, but like it was... **WRONG** in some fundamental fashion. Ranma had actually flinched his reaction to it was so bad, and neither martial artist could stand being in the engine room while the core was active for any period of time. It was only a combination of adrenaline and the fact the cores had all been on standby that allowed the two of them to destroy the control consoles of the pirate ships back on Torfan.

"Now I know you're jumping at shadows," Benezia chuckled. "Mass Effect technology has been around for millennia, literally! The Protheans used it millennia before my race rose to the stars, it is perfectly safe and reliable."

"I never said it wasn't," Herb replied carefully. "I simply said it was very odd for my race to simply grab onto one avenues of scientific research to pursue to the exclusion of all similar ones. And as I understand it judging from what I have read, your Protheans were extinct for thousands of years before your race rose expanded into space."

Benezia looked at him, head cocked to one side as she thought of that, and wondered why that idea had never occurred to her before. After a moment she deliberately changed the subject, asking about the history of the Musk dynasty, and if Herb had realized how strange his and Ranma's transformations were on a mass exchange scale, and the two soon forgot about the strangely disturbing initial discussion. Eventually even Herb would realize he was seeing threats that were not there, and forget his concerns for a time. Benezia would come to the same conclusion much faster.

OOOOOOO

Later in the ships internal night however that conversation came back to Benezia, and she rose from her bed, restless and worried about vague yet ominous dreams and determined to put at least a few of them to rest. She went over to her com, and used the computers long range communicator to contact a number she hadn't contacted in over sixty years.

After a few beeps the line was picked up on the other end, showing a weary looking, almost haggard asari of barely 106 years, a mere child in asari terms, yet as Benezia well knew, her drive and intelligence could put to shame asari many times her senior. "Yes, what is... mother!?"

Benezia smiled sadly, knowing that note of incredulity was well-deserved. "Hello Little Wing, how are you?"

The relationship between Benezia and her daughter Liara was strained to say the least. Benezia was unconcerned about the past, only caring for the future. Liara had loved the idea of searching for ancient knowledge since she was very young. Benezia was a politician, a leader, and she had put in a lot of time on that to become one of the 29, but that had forced her to spend far too little time with her daughter growing up, and Liara had never liked the act that her position as Benezia's daughter thrust her into the limelight. She much preferred the solitude of archeological digs, being away from anyone important and able to fade into the background.

Benezia hadn't known how to deal with her wallflower of a daughter, so unlike herself and her father (who was, to put it mildly, outspoken) and had never really been able to connect to her on a personal level after she left her childhood behind. Which she did far too quickly in her mother's opinion, but no one had ever asked her alas. She had given the girl all the help she could, paving Liara's way to university, giving her a major stipend to set herself up in her chosen profession, but an emotional connection was much harder to achieve after so long.

So the hesitance she could sense even through the com screen was only natural. "I, I am well mother. Is, is there a reason you are calling?"

"Two reasons actually. One is I wanted to hear how you were doing, it has been, what two years almost since we last talked?" Liara nodded, but if anything that made her more tense, not less. Liara well knew Benezia didn't approve of her chosen profession. She had never come right out and said it, but it was easy to see. "And the second is that I have some questions about the Protheans, specifically mass effect technology, and your name was the first I thought of. I am hoping that you can allay some concerns I have, about how much their technological research mirrors our own. It has recently been pointed out to me that merely following in another race's footsteps is going to lock us into the same mistakes they made."

Liara thought for a moment then shrugged. "I can't really help you there I'm afraid mother. I don't have any idea about how much of the present mass effect technology is based on Prothean designs, I don't have enough of a knowledge of present day tech for that. I can say that it helped the turians, Salarians and humans of course, the caches of tech they all found helped them get to the stars far faster than they would otherwise. I don't even know anyone to recommend to you that could answer that however. My gut feeling is a lot."

That was not what Benezia had wanted to hear, but in any event this was all academic anyway. Herb was surely jumping at shadows and seeing the differences as a grand conspiracy when there was no evidence to suggest there was one, merely the differences and his own dislike for element zero. Both marital artists were very open about the fact even tiny bits of eezo made them feel uneasy and wary. "I see. Ahh, well it was just a thought. Now, tell me about what you have been up to since the last time we talked. Have you met anyone special? If

not, I have aboard a most interesting human, whose love of knowledge and research strongly reminds me of you." Benezia teased gently.

"Mother!" Liara gasped, her face darkening noticeably. "I, I'm not interested in, in that!"

From there on the conversation degenerated into the sort of teasing mothers the universe over do to their children, and Benezia's half-formed fears and worries left her, not to appear again for several months.

OOOOOOO

The *Forward Thinker* moved through space for over two weeks, travelling from one system to another via the mass relays, moving deep into asari territory until they came to the planet Crastus. The two marital artists joined Benezia and Shiala on the bridge to watch the approach to the planet, only the third planet the two had ever stepped on and precisely two more than they had ever thought they would ever step on as little as two months ago.

From the surface the planet looked pristine, a mix of green, brown, white and blue. There wasn't nearly as much water in view as there had been on Sijou during their approach to that planet, and there was far more rocky brown portions, but the dominant color was definitely green, with the white clouds in second place.

"This is Crastus. It is a cross between artistic commune, monastic retreat and hidden sanctuary. The tech here is kept deliberately low, there is no intra-web connection in this system you'll note to further separate it from life elsewhere," Benezia said looking over at Herb who nodded understanding. "There is only one spaceport, and under no circumstances are ships allowed to land elsewhere. The local wood called ashtari is highly prized for its beauty, and there is a small but thriving artistic group in every monastery here. The local animal life has several examples that view asari as easy meals. No other race even knows of its existence, not even the STG. You two will be the first ever humans allowed here, and I had to call in several favors to get permission for you to stay here."

At Ranma's concerned look Benezia waved that thought away. "It really is one of the best places to hide you though, and one of my acquaintances is the abbess of one of the monasteries here. I would ask you to be on your best behavior here however, and remember you are guests."

Ranma and Herb nodded understanding and soon the ship began its decent. Within another fifteen minutes they were standing on the soil of a third planet, though this one was far different from the industrialized Sijou. The spaceport was deliberately small, with a grassy area cleared for the landing area, about four dozen three stories buildings scattered around, and a large air tower. The defense however were much more formidable, consisting of several dozen of what were clearly ship grade cannons all around the landing area pointing up into the sky, and another ten anti-personnel turrets.

Benezia left the majority of her commandos in the spaceport to do ship maintenance, take on new supplies and get some downtime, while she and two others travelled with Ranma and Herb to what would become their new home while they got used to being in this dimension and helped train a few of the asari here in their techniques. They were led there by a local guide, who was clearly not very happy that two humans had arrived on her world.

As they walked the two martial artists took in their surroundings, wondering how a world like this could have so many similarities and yet be so different from the world they knew. Their first view of the world hadn't told them much, but being on the ground was vastly different. The trail was a simple rocky path, much like could be found anywhere in the Himalayas or any other mountain range on Earth, but the trees around them... They were green.

The bark was green, the leaves were green, even the fallen leaves around them was green. Different shades of green for all of them of course, but still it was all Ranma could do to not look around for a bunch of kids with paint brushes running around painting the trees. The bark too was different, rougher than even the roughest oak, with small (green of course) spikes visible on the bark in patches.

The ground and the rocks at least looked the same. The path began to ascend into a hilly section almost as soon as they left the small village, with dozens, hundreds of large rocky outcrops in view, and mountains dominating the horizon in every direction.

Herb looked around, feeling more at home then he had since leaving the Musk dynasty's land. His home was a mountainous realm, with little arable land but massive reserves of trees and other resources they traded with the lowlanders and the people of the steppes. This whole world seemed much the same, and he breathed in the air with a faint but warm smile on his face.

Ranma grinned, smacking his shoulder. "Feels a lot like home huh?"

Herb chuckled then pointed at what looked like a strange cross between a lizard and a sloth, with some aspects of a bird mixed in the form of a beak. "I was, until I saw that thing."

The local guide, who had yet to introduce herself, nodded. "An ouragus, one of the middling omnivores of this planet, the local equivalent of varren but without their adaptability. Not dangerous in any way, but they cannot be domesticated either. "There are several dangerous animals out there however, some of whom would look on an asari, or a human" she said that last bit with mild distaste as if she still wasn't comfortable with their presence here. "as a meal."

The two martial artists looked at one another, shrugging and the group continued on their way higher and higher into the mountains of this seemingly pristine world.

It took them three days travelling the slow pace of the guide to get to the monastery where Benezia's connection was head abbess and when they got there they ran into a bit of a surprise.

The monastery wasn't a single large building, but rather several dozen single and two story buildings made of local rock, possibly put together by hand (and biotics of course), spread out over about a mile in every direction, with a single story wall made of more rock surrounding it. It was thick enough that there were a few guards walking along the top of it keeping perimeter watch, with a single wooden gate. The wood, Ranma and Herb were interested to see, ranged from light pink to deep purple when cut and looked very pretty.

The guide noticed their look and smiled. "Our woods are our single export product, it is in high demand throughout the Asari Republics. It is both incredibly strong and aesthetically pleasing."

Both martial artists took more notice of the strong bit than the 'aesthetically pleasing' part, and Ranma in particular wondered what he could do with it. He of course was more at home with metals, but he could work in woods as well. Herb however was an avid hunter, and was wondering if there were any rules or religious issues that would get in the way of his taking up hunting once more.

Just as the guide was about to call out to the guards she could see on the parapet around the monastery the door of the monastery flung wide and a small catlike creature bounded out, heading towards the forest. It had the body of a panther with streaks of, yes, green, and black, with a long forked tail, large pointed ears currently laid back along its head, and six eyes set equidistant around its head, giving it a nearly 360 degree view. Its eyes were purple, and its face almost looked to be pouting as it ran.

Despite all the strange differences, it was very much a cat, and at the sight Ranma stopped, eyes going wide and his entire body going rigid with fright.

Even worse for the pigtailed marital artist, this creature's route took it right through Ranma, who was standing just a little too close for him to dodge fast enough. Before anyone else could do anything the little creature had latched onto his face.

From out of the gate came three young asari, barely into their maidenhoods, and one of them sighed with relief as they saw their pet. "Oh thank goodness he didn't get away. Come here you silly thing."

She reached forward while one of her fellows shook her head. "Still can't believe that boroden outran Mistress Till'ya's biotic grab. Trouble-making little..."

It was at this point that Ranma's instincts took over and he began screaming. His voice was muffled by the body of the small creature that had latched onto his face, yet the gut-

wrenching terror in the sound came through, stopping the hearts of all present. Before anyone could even ask what was wrong Ranma turned and bolted, with the thing still on its his face smashing into trees and even through rocks at one point in his desperation to get away.

While everyone else looked on aghast, Benezia turned to Herb, her eyes wide in astonishment "What by the goddess was that about?"

Herb however was growling under his throat as he looked toward Ranma who was already over 3 miles into the forest around them and moving so fast even he might have trouble keeping up. "I have an idea, but I never expected to meet someone who had been put through the cat-fist technique and survived." At her questioning look He elaborated. "Many martial arts techniques put their learners through training that would be termed brutal or just on the edge of idiotically dangerous, but some go beyond even that to the realm of the truly insane. You know of cats correct?"

Benezia nodded sharply, while in the distance the sound of yowling began, rapidly becoming louder. Despite this the little boroden, a local carnivore that could be somewhat domesticated as personal pets, streaked back to its now rather freaked out owner, who scooped it off the ground quickly, trying to sooth its nerves. "Yes of course, they are quite popular on several asari worlds near human space as pets. Get to the point!"

Herb sighed, now looking out into the forest as crashing noises began, and he could just make out the shape of a tree falling. "The neko-ken is based off the idea of breaking its users mind, tying it to a single exterior stimuli. It's a technique to create berserkers with abilities ranging on the unstoppable. The user takes on the aspect of a cat, with cat claws made of ki that can cut through practically anything, the reflexes and speed of a cat, as well as something of the thought processes. Its users are said to be utterly unstoppable in battle, though there haven't been any users in millennia, and it comes with some severe drawbacks."

His interlocutor latched onto the first sentence, her eyes narrowing dangerously while Usagi looked out into the woods, a confused, almost frightened look on her face. "And precisely how does one go about 'breaking' the users mind?"

Behind them the gate to the monastery opened, and the abbess herself with several senior sisters ran out to see what the commotion was about. The abbess was even older than Benezia, and carried herself with a certain gravity and grace that, while lacking the athletic and martial dangerousness of Benezia, was intimidating in its own way. She, like the others sisters of the monastery, wore a dark purple and red robe or simple make with a hood flown back, though the abbess' had a line of yellow weave running over the shoulders to denote her rank. She moved swiftly toward her younger acquaintance, lips already forming a question.

Herb grit his teeth, waiting until the newcomers were close enough to listen in. "The process is as simple as it is inhuman. You take the learner, wrap him in various cat food products, toss him into a pit of starving cats. Repeat as necessary until the learner learns the

technique, or dies. I would say that 8 out of ten people, even when the technique was more widely known and used, died. That is certainly why it was banned in my own people's land." Even among the tiger and other wildcat clans that had been true for hundreds of years. "And most of the time those who survive are driven utterly insane. Ranma is the first I have ever heard of who wasn't utterly around the bend 24/7."

The abbess, who was named Joldrea'as, shook her head in astonishment while the senior sisters around her had more vocal responses to that news. Herb went on, pulling at one of his long blue bangs. "I would imagine it was one of the things he glossed over when talking about his father. I've never personally met the fat fool, but certainly wouldn't put it past him from what little I've heard."

For the first time in over a century Benezia found herself in danger of losing control of her biotic powers, her biotic aura rising up around her, causing sparks and ripples in the air, the very idea that a father could do that to his own child angering her beyond belief. "If Ranma's father ever shows himself in this dimension I will ensure that his death is the stuff of nightmares!"

"If I had even a hint that he put his son through the neko-ken I would've hunted the man down myself." Herb shook his head. "It's a wonder Ranma is as sane as he is." He turned and bowed his head very slightly in acknowledgement of the abbess then looked back out into the forest. "I think it's best if we just wait until he snaps out of it himself."

Herb paused, then made himself say the next bit, his teeth gritted even as he did so. "I would not like my own chances against a neko-ken warrior, let alone one of Ranma's strength. It would be best for all involved to just let him alone, unless of course the animals here are all poisonous?"

A senior sister by Joldrea'as' elbow shook her head. "Not at all, they don't taste good to asari palettes, but they aren't poisonous either. But there are several dangerous animals out there, two of the apex predators in particular are dangerous to us. Don't you think we should try and lure him back somehow?"

"Not unless you want to fight him, I doubt you have anything that his cat mind would be interested over exploring this new territory. At least I hope not." Herb shook his head, hoping that Ranma's cat side wasn't a full on tomcat, that could be.... **Bad**. "And with him locked into the cat fist, it is the animals who mess with him you should be afraid for. If he's not back by nightfall I'll head out and bring him in then."

This turned out to be a prophetic statement, as Ranma did come back later that evening, looking haggard and exhausted. He was immediately ushered into the abbess's presence, where he found Herb and Benezia waiting for him.

The dragon prince having spent a few hours explain to a incredulous audience where he and Ranma had come from. Their disbelief faded after Herb reluctantly showed them his curse form, but it was still there, none of them ready to believe his tale. The evidence supported him, yet their own knowledge of science and biology fought against this.

The abbess looked across her desk at Ranma with a sorrowful expression. It would seem that beyond their odd curses both humans had other mental instabilities. Herb seemed almost frightened of his female body and certainly loathed it with a passion which Joldrea'as could tell was not only unhealthy mentally, but could cause him to become dangerously unstable in the future.

With that and Ranma's own mental issues they would fit right in here with her charges unfortunately. "Still," she said thoughtfully, "I wonder if I could somehow help you via mental bonding. Perhaps excising some of the memories would help you to if not take control of this neko-ken, it could at least.

"I wouldn't recommend it," said Ranma opening his eyes and looking across at her. "The last time one of you asari tried one of that, well, um after, she said it acted up badly."

"How so?" said the abbess, looking at him with her head cocked to one side. As the abbess of a monastery that was almost entirely comprised of ardat Yakshi she was always interested in anything that could make her race's neural connection to their partners act in strange ways.

Ranma blushed a bright crimson color almost matching his female form's hair. "Well, she... She, used it, um, when she and I were..."

Both Benezia and Joldrea'as laughed at his expression and the abbess nodded. "Don't worry, that's a somewhat normal use of the technique. But what was so unusual about that?"

Ranma coughed uncomfortably looking away and trying to explain, but it was several more minutes before the two finally understood what he was trying to say. "You mean," said Benezia slowly, "this matron T'velma lost control of the melding, your bioelectric system overrode hers?"

"I guess," Ranma replied, shrugging. "I mean I felt something connects to my ki, but I didn't know what it was of the time and then a second later she's on top of me just sort of you know," he blushed again "thrashing around wildly and her mouth's open but nothin's coming out. Her eyes rolled back and everythin'."

The two matriarchs shared a glance wondering what the hell had happened there but they didn't know the half of it.

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Back on Sijou a matron was being told some very odd news, which shocked her to the core. "How by the goddess am I pregnant!?" It turned out that there were other consequences from T'velma embracing eternity with Ranma and losing control of the link than she had thought. Normally a asari would have to control the link to take in her partner's DNA rather than simply connect their nervous systems. Evidently however, this rule had never met a ki adept, and certainly not Ranma.

Alas, this little tidbit would not come to Ranma's attention for several years.

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The abbess frowned, but eventually shrugged. "Well if that is the case, then I doubt we would be able to get through to your memories to help you with this affliction of yours. In any event, I welcome you and Herb to our monastery. I will have one of the sisters show you to your rooms. A word of warning however, despite that strange ability of yours, I will tell you now to not let any of the girls attempt to embrace eternity with you. In fact it would be better to never mention this ability again so long as you are here."

Herb and Ranma exchanged shrugs. "Neither of us are interested in anything of that nature, so that doesn't bother us at all, but you sound like there is something to be truly feared.

Benezia cut in here. "Did you think this planet was as isolated as it is because my race wanted to devote a planet to the monastic lifestyle because we could? Most of the sisters here are latent Ardat Yakshi. They all share a genetic defect which makes their nervous system override and overwhelm their partners, killing them almost instantly. I don't know what would happen if they mated with you, but I don't want to find out either." At Herb's raised eyebrow she shrugged. "It was the best place for you to get both a smithy and continue to train myself and my commandoes in the use of ki. No other race is allowed to land here, and even a council ship on official business would have to have a very good reason for being here at all."

Herb and Ranma exchanged another look then nodded. "Again, neither of us is interested in that at the moment, and we will be on guard."

The abbess nodded. "Good, now, let me summon one of the senior sisters to show you to your quarters." The two humans nodded agreement, and she rang a small bell on her desk.

As Ranma and Herb's first day in their new, albeit temporary, home began to end, events elsewhere were just beginning.

OOOOOOO

Newly minted First Lieutenant John Sheppard moved among his men in the troop transport, making sure that all of his Marines were ready to go. Despite the rumors being practically confirmed that this would be a cakewalk the Systems Alliance was not going to take

any chances. All their forces were going to go in hot into the asteroid fortress Torfan, especially since no one on the inside had replied to the fleets numerous attempts to communicate since the task force had come through the mass relay.

This operation had been planned for weeks, though the makeup of the fleet sent had changed swiftly given the news that Torfan had already been captured, growing in some ways and shrinking in others. For one thing, there were far more cruisers than there had been, more cargo ships as well, though fewer dreadnaughts and troop transports. There are also two new carrier led groups, and two dreadnoughts and their forces as well. All for those ships extra ships had come from Earth's own defense force.

Operation Bearding Barbarossa had been originally designed to take Torfan from the slavers, who everyone knew but as yet couldn't prove were backed by the Batarian Hegemony, the ruling body of the four-eyed bastards. This would send a message to the Hegemony that their predations would no longer be tolerated.

Now however that was going to change. Initially they thought that perhaps taking this place out would send a strong enough message, but since they were going to be basically walking in and simply taking it without a fight the Systems Alliance needed to show their strength in other ways. Now, instead of simply ransacking the place and retreating, the humans intended to invest Torfan, and make it their forward base into the Skylian Verge, a fortress against the even wilder territories beyond it where the Batarian Hegemony resided along with the Omega-led mercs in the Terminus systems and the rest of the Attican Traverse. With it they would be able to expand their operations against all the pirate groups in the Verge, claiming the entire resource rich cluster for humanity.

This move would never have been possible if they had been forced to expend resources to take the asteroid base in the first place since it would have opened them up to have their lines of supply cut. Now however, with the asteroid mostly intact, things had changed. Not only would the asteroid be much easier to take, but the videos and reports of asari slaves as well as humans had gotten out.

While the Council could not be seen to be backing the humans push, that didn't mean much to the turian military, who for years had been utterly enraged at their inability to slip their leash enough to take out the pirates themselves, were going to miss this chance. While the Asari and the Salaris (in point of fact even the STG hadn't figure it out yet, though they would, at just about the same time that Sparatus would find out what his people were up to) didn't know it, the turians were backing this move to the hilt not only as a way to hopefully bridge the gulf between them and humans from their first contact war, but also to hopefully end the slaver and pirate threat to their own systems.

John Sheppard was fine with that. He was fine with anything that let him fight the four-eyed freaks that had shattered his home world. He was a survivor of their raid on Mindoir, he had watched as his sister die and had known it was a mercy that she had. He had watched his

father's final moments, and then killed the old man's killers with an old hunting rifle. John might not be able to get his revenge today, but he knew eventually he would get it stuck in with those fuckers, and make them pay for his home.

As he finished his last minute inspection the captain's voice came over the ships com "All right troops, we're entering the first airlock, if they've got any communication up we should know right away if there really are friendlies in there and this isn't just some elaborate trap. Just in case your load outs are combat-rated, but I swear to God if any of you fire before making damn certain that the target is an enemy I will personally see you shot before we leave this asteroid. Putting aside whatever the hell really happened here, this is an opportunity for humanity to get us a hell of a lot of good press as well as a major forward base, so none of you are allowed to fuck it up."

The Marines of 1st company 15th battalion answered with a loud roar. There was about ten minutes of banter exchanged between the marines then the captain was back on. "All right troops it looks like there are indeed friendlies in here. You know the drill, two out of every three fire-teams unload your gear you're going to be on civilian detail."

There were some groans and mutters at that but for the most part that message was met with relief while John went around delegating the chosen fire teams. While many of the marines in the company were green, they knew enough to fear an assault against an asteroid base the size of Torfan. Boarding actions were nasty, city combat was nastier, putting them together was far worse.

That relief skyrocketed after the transport ship landed in the hangar of the asteroid and the marines could see the defenses laid out. All those defenses faced outwards towards the entrance to the spaceport, but even from here they could tell that would've been a bitch to get through.

Around the hanger were more defenses and the entrance leading further into the asteroid had even heavier defenses, with what looked like a reinforced company of defenders. This defense was comprised of turians, humans and asari, but it looked as if one of the turians was the one in charge. As the hatch opened and the humans piled out, there were mutters of loud relief and joy.

The one in charge, a turian with a severe countenance, moved forward to greet them.

"Sheppard on me," ordered the captain moving over towards the turian.

He chose Sheppard because he was one of the few Marines that were willing to play nice with the turians. The Batarians were another story entirely, but old grudges died hard and a lot of the marines had family that died in the first contact war.

With that he turned and marched over to where the turians had put up a defense position around the entrance to the main section of the city. He whistled quietly looking at the dense field of makeshift barriers, as well as one or two heavy guns set well back on mobile pods.

The two saluted one another and then the human said "Capt. Sean McGuire, 2nd company 15th Battalion Alliance Marine Corps. This is my executive officer First Lieutenant John Sheppard."

The turian introduced himself and said "We're glad that you arrived when you did. Were nearly out of food, and we've got a lot of children and dependents here."

"We've got empty troop transports coming in to transport them out said Sean. My men here will set up a delivery system for food at the same time the next company in will set up a outgoing system. We want to get the civilians out of here as soon as possible."

Behind him a large cargo ship thump to the ground, disgorging several heavy mechs, followed by three companies of combat engineers, and several trucks worth of gear.

The turian looked at that and slowly began to smile his mouth opening slightly to show his fangs. "I don't think this is just hit-and-run raid or a pickup operation?"

"Not anymore," said Sean grimly.

"Excellent," said the turian smiling evilly.

OOOOOOO

Ranma and Herb got up early as usual the next day, their first day living at the monastery.

While he wasn't normally the earliest of risers, Ranma did like to see the day begin, and he'd gotten into the habit so that his father and the little she bitch from hell couldn't attack him in an effort to 'wake him up'. Herb on the other hand was a morning person, but heaven help you if you woke him up before he was ready to get up.

The two exited their room, then went outside to one of the training grounds and began a light spar. Neither of them was very serious about it, since it was simply a warm-up exercise but the watchers, and they eventually gathered quite a few of those, were hard-pressed to tell that.

The two exchanged blows, punches kicks of vicious force, the loud cracks of their blows landing reverberating in the morning air loud as any gun. They both also used one or two ki

attacks low-key of course, but enough to warm them up. This went on for a few hours then both martial artists backed away from one another, bowing.

As they did cheers began all around them, and the two of them turned noticing for the first time that they had gathered a crowd of onlookers. The abbess, the commandos that had come with them, the senior sisters and several dozen sisters of the monastery were all gathered around, clapping and cheering.

The senior sisters, most of whom were well into the make their matron years, merely saw it as an extremely exceptional show of martial force, much like the commandos did who had been able to follow more of the high speed action because they had been training against Ranma for nearly a week. All of them were wondering if they could ever get that good, and somehow incorporate modern weapons and other styles.

The asari sisters of the convent however, most especially the ones suffering from the genetic defect that crippled their nervous systems, the ones called Ardat Yakshi, saw something much different. They saw two prime human males, and the looks on their faces made both martial artists blush and pale in turn.

During breakfast with the convent sisters this feeling did not go away, and it was with quite a lot of glee that Ranma slapped Herb on the shoulder and said "You're up my friend. I've got other things to see to." And with that he made his escape, grabbing one of the senior sisters to show him to the smithy.

Herb groaned aloud, but he couldn't argue the point. That was the deal they had made after all, and up to this point it had been Ranma who had been leading the training they had promised. Oh, Herb and the matriarch had several long discussions on the way here, but none of them had really touched on martial arts or ki.

Even as he thought that one of the senior sisters came up to them. "Do you think you can start training us now? After that little display you two put on earlier all of us are eager to learn, even those that were skeptical at first when news came that you would be arriving."

Herb groaned again pulling at one of his long sideburns then nodded. "Before you do, could you find someone to drop of a razor or a knife of some kind for me in our room please?" Herb had decided to change his hairstyle a bit. *But not the ponytail*, he thought to himself pulling at its end possessively. *Never the ponytail. The sideburns however have to go at a minimum.*

While Herb took up the job of training the interested asari in their martial arts, Ranma began to work in the smithy. For the next few days he didn't do much work on actually creating any armor for himself or Herb, but merely got to grips with the differences in the metals in this dimension, of which there were only a few, since base minerals had not changed, and using some notes he had taken off the intra-web on the local metallurgy.

Those first few days were relatively quiet as Ranma and Herb ease themselves into the life of the monastery, yet after that incidents of varying degrees began to crop up from time to time, many of them having a certain... theme. The first happened around two weeks after the two humans moved in.

OOOOOOO

Herb looked up from a book the abbess had given him when someone knocked on the door to his quarters. It was an actual book made out of paper, which made it an anachronism in this dimension but made him feel much more at home than the omnitool, and he put it down very carefully as he stood up to answer the door.

Outside stood one of the younger sisters, a maiden of about 200 or so, a little older than the asari equivalent of his own age if he remembered correctly. "Yes?" He did not ask her what she was doing here or if there was anything she wanted since it was so late, and he didn't want to encourage her in any way to stick around. Herb was blunt like that.

The asari seemed to stammer a little bit then said "I was wondering if we could ... talk?" The inflection she gave the word 'talk' made the word mean much more than usual. In fact her tone, along with a certain tilt to her head and a cant to her hips told Herb that talking would be one of the last things they would be doing if she had her way.

Herb groaned a little. He had hoped that if this happened it would happen to Ranma, who seemed to have something of a way with the girls. Herb wasn't jealous, but he had noticed that slightly more of the girls here seemed to be interested in Ranma than himself. Herb wasn't thrown by it of course, since for one thing he didn't care about getting into a relationship at this point. Moreover he knew that his arrogant and standoffish attitude worked against him, and he hadn't made as much of an effort to integrate himself into the community here as Ranma did.

Herb was content with simply teaching those interested in martial arts enough to possibly build up their own ki reservoirs, talking with the senior sisters and the matron about this world, asari politics, and all and sundry. He generally ignored the youngsters as being rather uninteresting and insular. Oh there were several fine figures among them, but he wasn't really interested in anything more.

Ranma on the other hand was not a scholar by any means, though he did tend to pick up anything related to combat on the fly faster than Herb could, much faster. He had already created some ki-powered equivalents to several of the biotic powers, though only Usagi and Benezia had made any headway in the opposite direction. That was a fact that bothered several of the senior sisters, as did Usagi in general, but with the abbess and Benezia both vouching for her they left her alone.

More to the point, Ranma had also taken several of the artists who worked in the smithy under his wing, and a few of them had already produced pieces that were of much finer

quality than they had been able to do before in return for teaching him how to work with the local woods. Ranma had also volunteered to work in the fields a time or two, more as a break from his work in the smithy than anything else, as well as out in the woods cutting the ashtari wood, which was the name for the ultra-durable and aesthetic woods that the guide had mentioned that first day.

Ranma had, in other words become a part of the community, no matter how temporary their stay might be, and Herb was still a guest.

That made this nighttime visit rather surprising, but not welcome for that, and Herb decided to deal with it in as blunt a manner as he could, hoping that this would help deter others from attempting the same thing. "I believe not. While you are attractive, I am in no way interested in a physical relationship at this time."

The girl flushed angrily. Her status as a latent Ardat Yakshi had been discovered almost immediately after she reached maturity, and she had been sent here directly after so had never felt the sweet release of having sex with someone, since she was also not willing to go to her other sisters for such a thing. Couple that with the rumor of the humans' ability to possibly survive embracing eternity, and it became almost impossible for her to ignore them. Approaching Herb had taken a lot of courage, and she was damned if she would let this human just walk away. "Oh come on," she said grabbing one of his arms "I'm sure..."

That was all she wrote because a moment later she fell unconscious from a slight prick at the back of her neck from Herb's free hand.

Unfortunately this would not be the end of it. Herb's blunt and out spoken way of dealing with this assault would become a source of amusement to the less mature sisters, who would egg one another on to try and see if they could interest him for the remainder of his time at the monastery.

Ranma unfortunately was not able to deal with the problem in a similar manner.

OOOOOOO

Ranma stretched explosively, cracking his back as he lifted himself up from the bench he had been using as a workspace. *Still*, he thought to himself *I seem to have hit on the correct mix for metals, I'll test it when it cools off but baring a major setback that is it. Then I can finally start on actually creating our armor, which means research.*

He pouted slightly at the thought but sighed. He had taken more than enough notes downloading everything he could find on the Intra-web about modern armor, and had asked Benezia to send for several different examples of it from her ship. The only size that her ship didn't stock was one she sardonically called the 'lizard special', an ultra-heavy armor that could

not be worn by any race save the krogan, a race Ranma and Herb hadn't yet seen an example of in person.

But his research turned up some odd things, specifically some things that he and Herb had not noticed so far but which might be important in the long term.

He moved over to several of the asari artists who were working with wood, sitting down beside them and nudging the one next to him in the shoulder companionably. "How are you doing O'taku?"

The asari has addressed turned and smiled at him, blushing slightly, which turned her already blue skin into a slightly darker hue. She was an older asari, and wasn't here just because she was a latent Ardat Yakshi, though that was part of the reason. She had come here to learn from the wood crafters, having been fascinated by the art from a very young age.

It was not the only thing that fascinated her however, and the other thing that did had made Ranma tell her what her name meant in Japanese, and they both agreed it did indeed fit her. O'taku was a major fan of human TV shows, especially old soap operas.

She was in fact a licensed pilot, and one of the few trusted sisters that could leave the plane. O'taku did so once a month to head to another planet just to download the latest episodes of various currently airing shows. She also used her portion of the money the sisterhood made by selling their art pieces mainly for purchasing more old shows and downloading them into her omnitool. Her omnitool even had its memory expanded several times over her life to hold more shows. O'taku's infatuation with wood craft and the TV shows was so strong and well known in fact that she was one of only four sisters allowed to leave the planet without an accompanying senior sister.

That didn't mean that O'taku was immune to the humans good looks though, and having spent so long around him in the past few days had not done anything to combat that.

"I'm fine, I think I figured out a way to add a splash of orange color to the wood without ruining the inherent dark purple of it. If I can do that, it'll open up several new designs and color schemes we can use in our art pieces. Your work is over there," she finished, nodding to another bench where a bow and arrow set lay. Herb had requested them, and Ranma had seen no need to quibble about making them since it had let him work with the local woods some more, something he was very interested in.

He had at first thought that maybe with ki reinforcement the local woods, which were many times stronger than any back on Earth, could be made into a better armor than steel, which didn't hold a charge of ki nearly as well as wood. In point of fact a person could work with wood in such a way that they could strengthen it many times over. Cologne's stick for example could shatter all but the finest blades, and even they could not actually do it any damage.

Next to the table where he sat down another sister was working a project, this one a simple slab of wood that would be part of a larger set as part of a decorative door. She was the youngest asari in the work room, and, despite not being an Ardat Yakshi was the one with the least amount of control over herself. She leaned forward, running one hand up Ranma's thigh suggestively, blushing all the while. "After this is over, do you want to go someplace?"

Ranma blushed and moved away slightly, shaking his head. "Sorry, I'm not really interested in all that stuff right now." Despite the fact he was not a virgin any longer, actually initiating that sort of thing was beyond him, and he hadn't yet met anyone that he wanted to be like that with here.

The young asari pouted. "Are you sure?" she said as she leaned forward.

Ranma held up a finger glowing faintly with ki, poking her in the forehead and she gave a gasp backing away slightly, while around them the other asari frowned at her. "Learn when no means no," he said jokingly reaching forward to pat her on the head, and her lips twisted into a pout while around her the rest of the woodcrafters began to chuckle at her expense.

Ranma's soft sell had its own downsides, and the somewhat gentle way he let that sister down went around, garnering him even more admirers, all of whom would make passes at him, sometimes as many as three a day.

Of course Usagi had an altogether different way of handling things.

OOO warning Limish content ahead OOO

Usagi clamped her lips around her current lovers cerulean nipple, sucking and nibbling forcefully, while she added a fourth finger to the ones already moving in and out of the other asari's dark blue pussy.

The sister, a junior sister named Jerosa who had been such for nearly five hundred years without making the leap to senior sister, writhed under her, trying to reciprocate and failing. When she had come to the strange asari that had arrived with the martial artists and the matriarch she hadn't honestly thought that her offer of having some fun would be accepted. Jerosa was after all an Ardat Yakshi after all, and one that wasn't trusted off-planet due to not having any self-control. If she embraced eternity with her partner, she would kill the other woman. It wasn't something she could control, if it happened then they would die. She had thought that maybe the two martial artists would be safe from it, but the odd childlike asari they had arrived with?

Despite this however she was having a lot of fun, Usagi was a very fun and experienced lover and Jerosa vowed to try and control herself.

Four orgasms later, when she was on top of Usagi, their pussies rubbing together frantically, her lips on the other asari's throat, that vow was forgotten. When one asari was with another, embracing eternity was an automatic and certain part of the lovemaking process. Added to that Ardat Yakshi, even ones that hadn't 'fed' before had a compulsion to do so, to use their species power and connect their neural systems to another person's. There were many papers and theories about why this was, but there was denying that no Ardat Yakshi could control herself when in the throes of passion, no matter how much they wanted to.

Jerosa reached forward and grabbed Usagi's face turning it towards her own, her eyes going black.

But before she could create the connection Usagi had flipped her around, until she was facing down and Usagi was behind her. "Naughty, Naughty Jerosa, you know you're not supposed to do that!" Usagi practically caroled, smiling cheerfully while one arm kept the other asari pinned, mashing her face against the bed while her rear rose into the air behind her.

"I'm afraid some punishment is in order." Usagi's free hand rose and fell, slapping Jerosa's ass with a resounding crack. Jerosa yelped, then moaned as that same hand moved down to her pussy, stroking it lightly before rising again and slapping her ass for a second time. Soon embracing eternity was the last thing on Jerosa's mind as Usagi utterly dominated her.

Two hours later Usagi bounded out of the room whistling cheerily, leaving behind the utterly exhausted and almost comatose form of her former partner.

When the abbess heard of this incident she merely chuckled, shaking her head. At the time she was sharing a small glass of tea with Benezia and after a moment she handed a small wooden figurine made to look like the goddess Athame over to Benezia.

"The humans have a saying, 'never bet against the house'," Benezia said dryly. "While I doubt any of your charges will interest Ranma and Herb in physical intercourse, Usagi will cheerfully wear any of them out so much they won't even be able to think of embracing eternity." She looked over and waited until the senior sister left before leaning forward conspiratorially. "Trust me, this is the voice of experience speaking."

The abbess chuckled and the two turned back to their original topic.

OOO End Limish content OOO

About two weeks into their stay some of the commandos had begun to exhibit accelerated healing, the first sign of having real ki to manipulate, though they could not keep it up for long, and indeed the first one who tried to speak technique collapsed from exhaustion. She had broken her arm during a spar, and her body, with no direction from her mind, used her ki to heal it to as good as new within two hours of the original injury. She had a few minutes of

total mobility in it before she collapsed. Still it was progress, and all the asari were ecstatic about it.

Today however they were interrupted at their practice when Ranma came out dragging a medium heavy armor with him. "Hey Herb, can you come over here for sec?"

Herb walked over with one eyebrow raised. The two of them had of course spent some time together of the past few weeks, but his duties as a teacher, his interest in reading and hunting had kept him away from Ranma for most of their time here. "What do you need?"

"Did you notice anything odd when you were punching or kicking those batarian assholes or the mercs on Sijou?"

Herb cocked his head to one side, sending his pony tail flopping to that side. But not his sideburns, he had cut those, and he had shortened the white hair around his head. Herb had several ideas for ki techniques that would utilize his ponytail, having discussed the body strengthening technique that Ranma used. It was slightly different than his own and more versatile, and Herb thought there might be something he could do there, combining that technique with the steel cloth technique.

After a moment he shook his head. "No, I can't say that I did."

Ranma nodded. "I didn't either which was why this came is sort of a surprise." He motioned Herb to back up and put the armor on a dummy along one side of the training area. In his other hand he suddenly held a local pistol, and he pointed it at the armor. "Watch this."

He fired the gun at the armor, and Herb was surprised to see a sudden burst of electrical energy surround the armor, blocking the bullets. "What is that?"

"A kinetic barrier, it activates when something approaches the armor going over a certain speed. It's got a decent shelf life, and some armor can recharge itself. But the problem is," Ranma answered walking up to the armor. Suddenly his hand flashed out, there was a crack and the armor and the dummy it had been stuck on flew backwards.

Herb had watched carefully and he nodded. "You struck it, what, 17 times?"

"Twenty actually." Ranma shook his head. "The barrier stopped working after the first few. But our techniques are so fast we feel the impact like they're single punches too, just something to be aware of. For instance, if we run into the local equivalent of tanks and they're equipped with heavier barriers we might not be able punch through, and we could injure ourselves trying. But it won't activate..." he said while he picked the armor up and placed it on another dummy. "If you punch it slowly."

Normally Ranma didn't care to add pure strength to a punch when he could use speed of multiple impacts, since the force of the blow was greater that way. This time however he punched with just pure power, and again the dummy flew backward. This time however the barrier hadn't activated. The dent was a little bit smaller than the previous one, but either blow would have shattered the chest of the armor's wearer.

Herb nodded. "Does this is affect your plans for our armor?"

"Yes and no. I don't intend to have something like that on all the time, I'm already comin' up with armor that should be more than enough to stop any of the heavy rounds, and it'll be even tougher if we charge it up with some of our ki fer a few seconds, but would that stand up to, a capital class weapon? The kind a ship would use? I don't know, and I'm not willing to test it out. We'll have to see, the barrier shield was just something I wanted you to be aware of. However it gave me some other ideas that I might be able to use, the idea of puttin' in some electronics and other gear is an idea."

Herb nodded then shared his own thoughts on the matter. "I think mobility would be much more useful in our case then stopping power, try to keep the armor as light as possible."

"I already thought of that. It won't be easy but it's doable."

"And how long do you think we'll need to stay here for that?" Herb was having fun here of course, but he also wanted to get out and explore the galaxy. To that end he was using his evenings to write down in easy to learn chunks (easy for him anyway) to tell the sisters here.

That was a desire that Ranma shared. "About four months or so I think. Possibly more, maybe less. Making armor isn't exactly easy you know. The easy stuff, the vambraces and greaves, I'll do first, then the central chest area, add what tech to it I want ta, then a power source. Not eezo though." The two marital artists exchanged a scowl at the mention of that crap, the idea of having a small eezo based battery pack that close to them disturbed the hell out of both of them. "I have an idea there, we'll see. Then the interior, the movin' bits, and finally the helmet. So yeah, a four months or so. Then we can get started on building our ship, and exploring!"

Herb chuckled at Ranma's eagerness, but it was one he shared so he merely nodded. With that Ranma took the now badly dented armor and walked off, while Herb went back to his class.

OOOOOOO

Later that day Benezia took a break from her own martial arts lesson to watch Ranma at work at the forge, and was astonished anew at what he could make his 'life energy' do. "What exactly are you doing?" she asked, looking at Ranma's glowing hands as they slowly funneled

his ki into the metal he was working with. The technique was so advanced that she couldn't even comprehend it, but she knew enough about biotics to get the gist of the energy involved.

"I'm finally actually startin' work on armor for me an' Herb. It's taken me this long ta get used ta yer tools and the steels here, but I think I've got it now."

He finished, and flipped the small shaped bit of metal into a bucket of water next to the forge where it hissed and steamed before he pulled it out, again with his bare hands. The piece of steel was gunmetal gray, as long as his forearm with a small bit over the edge, signifying it would go on the back of his hand. It didn't look very different from the metals that Benezia was used to, but then again she wasn't a metallurgist.

Ranma let it clunk to the top of a table set nearby, then turned away to work on another slab of similar metal, his hands heating it slowly, pouring his ki into it. After a moment it was pliable enough and he began to use a hammer to mold it into shape, stopping after every blow to pour still more heat into the metal, keeping it pliable and strengthening it at the same time.

Benezia watched this for a time then turned to look at the finished piece of armor. "Is there a name for this?" she said gingerly poking it up until she realized it wasn't even warm. Then she picked it up staring at it thoughtfully. It was **lighter** than it looked.

"Not really, I sort of mixed styles to make it. Some of it was taken direct form the Vulkan school of smithing in how to create armor, and some of the armor that's used fer yer spaceships here." He held up the next bit, sighting along one side while plucking the finished piece out of her hands before holding the two together, not letting the two touch but seeing how they would go together. He smiled faintly, well pleased, then dropped the bit he was working on into the bucket of water, letting it cool before pulling it off and laying it on the bench to cool further.

Still holding the first piece he turned, grinning at the matriarch. "Let me show ya how tough this stuff is." With that he walked off toward the door of the forge.

Benezia followed him eagerly. Along the way he picked up a rocket launcher, and after placing the piece of the vambrace against a target set about forty feet away fired at it.

The matriarch blinked in shock at the apparent destruction, while part of her mind wondered if he had asked the abbess's permission to destroy a portion of one of the sisterhood's training grounds.

She was astonished moments later that the vambrace was still in one piece. It wasn't even marked. Ranma shrugged. "O'course a missile ain't exactly a precision weapon, all of its power goes everywhere ya know. But it'll stop bullets even from a heavy gun or a rifle, and even vehicle class weapons'd have a tough time getting through it. Enough hits'll still get

through eventually of course but at the same time, me and Herb'll be doin' something about whoever's shooting at us." He shrugged eloquently.

Benezia smiled faintly. *A treasure trove of information indeed, she thought to herself smiling inside. Armor made out of starship rated steel, being light enough for an asari or human to wear like light armor? That right there is a game changer. And I know young Ranma has thought of weapons as well. And when they start to work on their ship... That doesn't even include what else they can do with ki, such as the accelerated healing and lengthened lives. Even when you add in the price of building a custom starship, this may turn out to be the best deal I ever made. I doubt the council will think the same of course. I'm actually looking forward to the fireworks when their abilities truly get out.*

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After that Ranma spent over two months working on the armor for him and for Herb, while Herb taught the asari commandos as much about ki and martial artists he could. While they took to the martial arts like ducks to water, even to the endurance and speed exercises that Herb put them through, not a one of them could so much as make a spark of ki. He could tell that their life energy was growing, but it was nowhere near where it had to be for them to use real ki attacks.

Benezia and Usagi of course were the closest, with the matriarch's commandos close on her heels. Shiala was head and shoulders ahead of the others, but it was Usagi in particular that was getting close to a real breakthrough, Herb could see it. She seemed to be developing a speed technique much like Ranma's, and after a strength exercise Herb could've sworn that she had been able to use ki to reinforce her strength as well, but she wasn't quite at the level to use it consciously just yet.

During this time both martial artists fended off overtures of affection from various asari both the commandos who had traveled with them and the ones from the monastery. It was a daily occurrence, and it got to the point that both martial artists sometimes felt as if the girls were after them nowadays more because their reactions were fun than because they wanted to meld with them any longer. Ranma in particular got that impression after he found the girls had actually come up with a blush rating system and gave points for how much of a blush they could get out of him.

The abbess, much to her surprise as she hadn't been enthused by the idea of hosting the two human males here, was very happy with the way things were going. The two martial artists were like a breath of fresh wind to the monastery, though in very different ways. Herb was stern and studious and a tough task master, but his abilities skill and strength gave all of them a target to shoot for. The topics he discussed with all and sundry ranged wildly from history to philosophy, even technology and back again, and all of the older members of the monastery were extremely impressed with him.

Ranma on the other hand was carefree and fun loving, and seemed to simply enjoy life for its own sake more than Herb. There was a deadly edge to him that he hid easily, that they could all sense but for the most part he was simply an amusing and interesting young man to have around, becoming a hit with nearly everyone in the monastery.

However after three months Benezia had to leave. While it had been a fascinating time all around she had duties she had to see to, and being cut off here on Crastus without any connection to the intra web she could not perform any of them. She had not realized how dependent she was on the intra-web for news and information and simply the ability to connect to the universe as a whole before, but being here had opened her eyes to that. Even leaving a day out of every month to head to another system wasn't enough.

To top it off her instincts were telling her to get back out searching for Saren. Something told her that the Spectre was going to be at the center of important events in the new near future, but what those events could be she was not certain, but she did fear them. If it came to it her new abilities would allow her to overcome even a Spectre of Saren's proven ability, and if it came to it, that was what she was going to do.

She offered her commandos the chance to stay on the planet and continue their learning, but to a woman they all decided to follow her. It was a sign of loyalty that touched Benezia's heart, though she was sad that none of them had decided to take up her offer to keep learning from Ranma and Herb. Those same instincts that told Benezia to get moving told her that these two would also be at the center of events that would change the face of this universe.

The idea of them traveling the galaxy solving right its wrongs appealed to her sense of humor, and she had decided to throw her weight behind that idea above and beyond allowing them access to funds enough to build their ship in the near future. After all if they could become what the Spectres should have been in truth, without the connection to the Council and its moribund bureaucracy and entrenched corruption, the universe would be a better place.

To that end she added to the funds she had set aside in an account that the duo could access, doubling it. On top of that she left them contact information for her web of informants (not spies of course, just people willing to tell her things) and the name of several shipwrights that would be willing to build their ship for them. On top of that she left them a letter of introduction that would open nearly any door in asari space for them. Still there was only so much she could do for them without having the two humans labeled as her agents. Eventually they would have to make their own way in the galaxy. Yet that was well in the future, right now, she had to get back out into the universe.

Ranma stood with the abbess and Herb to bid her and her retinue farewell. Usagi was sniffing, not happy about seeing her old friend going away again, and Benezia was smiling faintly as she patted the younger asari's head. "Now now Usagi, this doesn't mean we won't see

each other for another 300 years, if you stay with these two I'm certain we'll see each other again."

"You promise?" Usagi looked up at her with wide soulful eyes and Benezia blinked in shock at the first 'puppy dog eye attack' she had seen in over two hundred years

I Thought I had left this behind when my daughter grew up she groused to herself before she caved. "I promise."

That seemed to cheer Usagi up, and with one last bone cracking hug she retreated to stand beside Ranma.

Ranma came forward and clasped arms with the older matriarch. "Thanks for your help really, if there's anything we can do for you in return, I think you've completely tipped the scales here. Whatever ya learned from us so far ain't worth the cash you gave us or the resources here."

"I beg to differ," said Benezia smiling at the younger man. Ranma would never be a diplomat or a merchant of any kind, he was simply too open faced, too eager to help other people at times and the rest of the time he was far too eager to fight. But he was a likable young man and hopefully sometime in the future he would meet a nice asari girl who could ground him. She was tempted once more to introduce these two to her daughter, but she felt that Ranma would actually not be the one that Liara would be most compatible with, and if either Liara or Herb realized they had been set up, they would fight it tooth and nail.

Ranma retreated and Herb stepped forward, and the two of them clasped arms. "May the stars guide you on your journey my lady." The dragon prince said regally, bowing his head slightly.

Benezia smiled faintly, nodded and without another word turned to leave, her commandos following swiftly after exchanging their own farewells.

The three friends stayed there for a time looking after them, then turned and went back into the monastery.

End chapter

Here is the last of what I would call the starting off arc. After this the action (oh glorious violence!) will pick up while the two martial artists build their ship, get to know a few more people, gather a (small) crew and meet their first council rep while also establishing their skills and abilities. I would say about six months before the canon plot starts up, but that is subject to

change. Then the question becomes how much of canon should I change here? Frankly the difference is between **a lot** and **all of it**. Your thoughts would be appreciated on the matter.

What I am trying to do with Herb, just so you know, is to make him into a warrior scholar. He's asking questions because of his training as a king and his instincts as a ruler which tell him something is missing here. To my mind the Leviathans are the type to muck about with other races, and I am setting them up to having done that several times in the history of nearly every race. I know there is no evidence of this in canon outside of erasing evidence of their existence, but meh. And you have to admit, the idea of humanity unifying under the Systems Alliance is very odd considering the world as it is today. Benezia's conversation with Liara shows that even she (or my version anyway) is a little too complacent about the way things are to really see things she has always known in a different light. Mores the pity. Don't worry, Ranma won't be playing second fiddle to Herb, as time goes on and he moves on from his personal quest, he'll be the one calling the shots simply because he is far more adaptable and a far better tactician than the dragon prince.