

I don't own ME or Ranma 1/2. I understand both romance and world building too much.

This has not been betaed. It is also a really short chapter for one of my fics. But hey, for working on it for only three and a half days, I figure you lot can take what I give you and like it, LOL.

Chapter 5 New Friends and New Enemies

Ranma held up an arms-wide plate of the reinforced armor he had been working on for over a week now practically nonstop, the edges heated to near white as he slowly merged it with another reinforced armor plate which was glowing only slightly less hot. During that time he had created several small portions of the reinforced armor just like this one and today they were putting them all together to create an actual armor plate. *Watching the locals try their damndest to disprove my claim that the armor is better than what they can come up with was really damn funny.* They'd tried everything, even using one of the Asari battle mechs, like those Ymir mechs the Blue Sun mercs had used, to attack a plate of it. Despite being very thin, the armor had performed very well, better than an equivalent weight of their normal armor would have.

Still, it's sad the locals won't be able to reproduce it anytime soon. It depends too much on controlling the flow of ki into the metal, not just the heat of it. Still, O'taku could possibly learn it eventually and the rest of the Ardat Yakshi too. Ranma thought maybe Benezia would be the closest but she wasn't here, while O'taku was actually nearby, using her biotics to gather parts for the next portion of the construction project.

Turning in that direction, Ranma moved over to her slowly letting his mag boots help him along the floor of the Zero-G construction yard. The yard was an ovoid shape set into the far larger shape of one of the stations, lined with elegant looking lights here and there. Though there was no gravity, there was air, and heat, a lot of heat from Ranma's personal work station. High above them the Asari workwomen were beginning to put together the superstructure of the ship. Each piece would be melded into the other, creating both a stronger ship and a more beautiful one, which was in keeping with Asari aesthetics. Ranma was sort of ambivalent about that, figuring it would make the job take longer, but his role in its construction was to strengthen the exterior armor plates, which would be added on in lots. First would be the armor over the equivalent of the keel, then from there the plates would follow the ribs as they were added to the keel.

Setting down the now cooling plate of metal, Ranma slid it behind a wire mesh to join two more finished plates. Once he was certain it was secure, he then moved over to join O'taku as best he could while other Asari used their biotics all around them. Jobs which would have been done by whole teams or robots in another race's yard were done here by single Asari and their biotics.

Nearby Rane'lle's chief construction engineer oversaw everything. She was the first Asari Ranma had met where the phrase 'butch' could be used to describe her, a short, practically squat woman with wide shoulders no chest and little hips to speak of. She was also very no-nonsense, and it had taken Ranma days to prove to her that he wouldn't be a liability in the construction process. She had also assigned two of her chief aids to watching as Ranma used his ki to work on the armor.

She nodded his way, and gestured toward the materials O'taku and two of the other Asari were bringing in. "Check the composition, and then we'll want you to start up on another batch of plates."

Sighing Ranma nodded. The fun had really gone out of this job after a few days of this. *But at least zero-G is fun. Damn Herb, he should be up here with me, but noooo, he gets to skive off while I'm doing all the work. 'Research' my ass. Well, at least he's keeping Usagi out of my hair.*

OOOOOOO

While Ranma was working up in the construction yard Herb was down on the planet, and thought Ranma really didn't think it important, Herb was indeed performing research for the ship. Specifically, he was researching the interior architecture of the ship with the 'aid' of Usagi. The interior of the ship would perforce be somewhat impacted by the essential systems, the engines, loading bays, control runs and so forth. But everything else was up in the air, and the Asari preferred that everything about the ship be beautiful and singular in nature.

Having now seen two cities, one a colony capital and the other a major industrial center, Herb could honestly say he was in love with Asari architecture. As a royal, Herb had been brought up in a palace that had it been known to the rest of China it would have been a national wonder. His people had never cultivated poetry, painting or music as forms of expression, considering them too effeminate.

But sculpture was an exception, as was architecture. Herb himself had been deemed a genius with animal based sculptures. This was why Herb was researching the interior layouts of Asari ships: Asari attempted to bring beautiful elegance to everything they did, and he wanted to see that in their ships.

Usagi was with him, helping him understand some of what he was seeing as they surfed the local web. As an Asari herself she could explain the significance of some of the things he saw in the designs whenever he asked. Even so, it- was obvious Usagi actually didn't care about any of it. She was just explaining in rote what she had been told sometime in the past.

Indeed looking at her from across the table at the small, very neat café they were eating at, Herb could tell she was close to dying of boredom. Usagi's next words confirmed this,

coming out in a whine as she slumped forward, her forehead meeting the table. 'I'm sooooo bored! Can't we do something else Herbie?'

"Grrr.... O'taku should never have let you see those 20th century movies series! I am not a sentient car damn it!" Herb growled before mellowing. "If you promise to never use that nickname again, I might agree to the idea of doing something more interesting. Perhaps a visit to a museum. Or perhaps a spar?"

Rolling her eyes, Usagi shook her head, standing up abruptly and reaching through the hologram Herb had been looking at. She grabbed Herb by the upper arm and began to drag him out of his chair. "That sounds about as much fun as watching paint dry after spending days on this. Come on, we haven't even gotten out to the beaches yet!"

Gulping Herb tried to shake her off, even going so far as to use main strength to wrench his arm away, but Usagi clung on like a limpet. "Unhand me Usagi! I am not Ranma, I am not at home in my female body and even for the chance to swim I refuse too..."

Usagi turned as they exited the café, her face sliding into one of her random serious modes. "Then you need to get that way."

Thrown off by the sudden change Herb looked at her blankly, realizing for the first time why Usagi's personality through her fellow Asari so badly.

But she didn't seem to notice. "Look Herb, I don't really understand your curses, but I know that there's no way of your getting home, and no cure for it here. So you need to learn to live with it, whatever you might think."

Opening his mouth Herb prepared to flay Usagi for her effrontery but she simply continued speaking, overriding whatever he was going to say. "Avoiding or ignoring half of yourself like that is stupid. Besides, as I understand it, the problem you have with it is this idea that women are weak, right? So are you suddenly weak when you change?"

Herb shook his head and she smiled, gesturing to herself and all around them at the other Asari on the street, all of whom were ignoring the two of them, going about their business. "How about me, and other Asari, are we weak?"

"No. No you're not, but you were born female, I was born a man, and I am in no way at home in that body Usagi," Herb replied, aware he was simply reiterating what Usagi had already said but unable to come up with a rational argument.

"That's just because you don't want to be Herb, I think you have to get over your handle about that form, there's no physical or logical reason for you to be against becoming more accustomed to it. It's all in your mind, and that's not healthy." Usagi replied, then suddenly her

serious face disappeared, replaced by her normal air-headed grin. "Now come on, I know you and Ranma don't have swimsuits, let's go see if we can find some to fit you!"

"That is a thought that fills me with dread," Herb replied, finding himself once more being pulled along by the odd Asari. "If you think for one moment that I will let you pick out bathing suits for myself or even Ranma, think again!" A sudden thought occurred to the dragon prince and he went on quickly. "Besides, shouldn't we wait for Ranma to join us, we'll need his female body's measurements will we not?"

"Oh don't worry, I know them by heart already," Usagi chirped, letting go of herb's arm and making grabby motions with her hands. Herb shuddered, but when he looked at Usagi's hands making that motion realized that perhaps going along with things would be a better idea.

Later that day Ranma and O'taku came down to join them in the afternoon. They were of course nowhere near done working on the ship, but Ranma had created enough plate for the keel of the vessel, which would allow that phase of the construction to go forward. The four of them met up in the hotel suite they were all sharing, which Ranma and Herb were paying for from the bank account Benezia had opened for them.

Herb looked up as the other two entered, gesturing wearily to a bag in front of him where he slumped on the sofa, a circular, air filled thing which shifted colors as he shifted his weight on it. "There's bathing suits for you and I in here. And if Usagi ever attempts to talk me into going shopping with her once more I am afraid I will have to kill her. That was pure torture, only alleviated by the fact that my threat to break her hands if she got me wet seemed to work."

Blinking Ranma nodded while O'taku seemed to gag on her tongue, flushing and looking away for some reason which flew over Ranma's head. "Yeah, I think that's actually sort of normal for shopping with women, I know the few times I went shopping even with Kasumi it was torture. Unless we were shopping for just food of course, that was fun at least. So what kind of bathing suits?"

"The simplest and most complete ones I could find," Herb replied dryly. "Usagi didn't like them at all, which was enough of a recommendation for me."

About an hour later, the four of them took a public transportation air car to the nearest beach, one which had been recommended by O'taku. As an Ardat Yakshi, even one trusted to be away from the monastery on her own, she had never been there before, but she had heard some good things about it. Once there they all changed, in various meanings of the term, with Herb once more attempting to get out of it. But Usagi was insistent, and Ranma and O'taku sided with her on this, much to the dragon prince's chagrin.

"Face facts Herb, we can't get rid of these extra bods of ours," Ranma said philosophically, having come to accept if not really like his female body before Ryoga had

transported the two of them here via his magic scroll. *Where the hells did he come up with that thing anyway?* "Usagi's right, it's better to be happy in our own skin, as much as we can be."

"I truly dislike you right now Saotome," Herb grumbled, but made no further argument as Ranma dumped cold water over first his own head, then Herb's. The two of them swiftly finished changing, looking anywhere but at one another as they did so. Being comfortable with their own bodies was one thing, comfortable with looking at one another like that was entirely another thing for the two men turned women.

The bathing suits they both wore were conservative in the extreme, covering them from their privates on up to their neck. Even Kasumi Tendo would have thought they were too bland, simple red and white for Ranma, and blue and purple for Herb. But given the bodies underneath, they were still somewhat sexy looking. Both aquatranssexuals had long legs and large busts, straining against the swimsuits while also being perky enough for even Asari to look at with jealousy.

Usagi's suit was at the far end of the spectrum, being a string Bikini that was barely this side of allowable in public on an Asari world. Given her own larger than normal breasts this was heightened further to the point where several Asari nearby looked at her, some with desire, others in affront.

Since the humans stood out as humans on a world that didn't have very many and Usagi being Usagi, O'taku was the only one of the four who was able to avoid attention as they walked along the beach, looking for a place to set up. She was wearing a conservative bikini, which was good enough for her and able to blend in with the locals. Or she would have, if not for the mark of the Order on her shoulder. This was a small tattoo done in electrical coding which marked her as an Ardat Yakshi to anyone who knew what to look for. Thankfully the vast majority of Asari didn't recognize it.

The exception to this rule was an older looking Asari who seemed to stare at her mark before turning away. She was obviously in her matron years, but the only other thing that made her stand out at present was the grim cast to her face. She also wore a conservative bikini and she didn't look comfortable in it nor at the beach at all.

Happy to have gotten away from the docks and get into atmosphere at all O'taku didn't notice the older Asari examining her from nearby. Instead she lay out in the sun, urging Herb to do the same. "If you've never gone sunbathing it is an amazing feeling believe me."

Since he still had some reading to do, Herb agreed to that readily laying down beside O'taku on a lounge chair. Yet even the lounge chair looked futuristic, matching both the changing areas, and the multiple small skimmers that moved out on the water from which divers routinely hopped off. The chairs looked as if its creator had wanted to make it look as if it was part of the beach rising up into a chair shape.

The multi-haired woman laid out there, at first spreading her leg out to either side but O'taku smacked her lightly on the shoulder. "Don't do that, no woman lies out like that."

"I'm not a woman," Herb protested, but seeing a few looks sent her way Herb obeyed, bringing her legs together and leaning back, feeling the heat of the sun on her skin and smiling.

In contrast Usagi and Ranma headed straight into the water, diving in and swimming out before diving down into the ocean, goggles and rebreathers over their faces as they did.

The Asari watching O'taku stayed still for a moment, somehow blending into the background of the beach without doing anything but stand there. Eventually she moved away, but not before she had taken a picture of Usagi, a thoughtful frown on her face as she walked off.

OOOOOOO

The three Councilors who led the Council of the Citadel liked to think they were the strongest, most powerful people in space, and as representatives of their races to the Council, they were for the most part. But that did not make them omnipotent, nor did speaking for their races automatically mean they led them entirely. It irked all three of them, Tevos, Sparatus and Valern, when this fact was rubbed into their faces. And unfortunately, this was occurring for all three of them, if in very different matters.

It would surprise no one who knew any Turian that it was the Primarchs which were doing this in their most frank manner. Although it was Valern who brought this to the attention of the Triumvirate as a whole. "Sparatus, why are there reports coming Turian fleets on the move into the Skylian Verge?"

Sparatus closed his eyes, his mouth mandibles gnashing together in a sign of a Turian holding back irritation if not anger. But when he spoke he was remarkably calm, if noticeably sarcastic. "Well it's always nice to know that the STG spies on everyone equally."

"The STG are the eyes and ears of both the Salarians and the Council as a whole," Valern replied calmly. "If not for the STG, many problems would come at us suddenly and we would have to deal with them on the fly rather than through prior planning. I believe we have seen recently how that can go. More information is always better than none. Now if you could please answer the question?"

"The Turian navy will be joining the Human push into the Verge," Sparatus said bluntly, watching both his fellows closely. Tevos evinced no reaction, which he expected given her seven hundred plus years as a politician. Valern too didn't look surprised, which given the STG's abilities again wasn't surprising.

"You were not able to talk your fellow Primarchs out of becoming involved?" Tevos asked.

"I tried to tell them that it would leave us vulnerable if the humans became aggressive or if trouble came from another quarter, I even said that our fellow council races would see this as a bad thing. I was told in no uncertain terms to back off. With the recent formal declaration of war between the Batarians and humans, my fellow Turians refuse to sit on the sidelines any longer."

So saying Sparatus looked over at Valern. "Well, why don't you tell us about what units are on the move hmmm?" Valern stayed silent and Sparatus huffed. "Instead of sending full fleets in the Turian navy is peeling off units from all of its sector fleets, frigates for the most part, with Home Fleet sending six dreadnaught divisions." Capital ship divisions were composed of four ships of the class in question.

"The humans will provide the carriers and the marines, while the Turians will provide frigates to guard the supply lines and the dreadnaughts to defend against the Hegemony's fleets. We will also supply army corps to hold any Hegemony planet taken."

Tevos nodded slowly but her look at Sparatus indicated she wanted his thoughts on this and Sparatus sighed. "It's a decent distribution of force, and one which takes from both our fleets and theirs. But it relies on Humans and Turians working together closely." Sparatus didn't want to see that. He was afraid the expansionistic humans would stab his people in the back. Or that when it came time to sanction them as he knew it would the Turians would no longer have the stomach for it.

Sighing Tevos leaned back as Valern mouthed platitudes about how his government would not approve of this, but Tevos refrained from doing the same. While she disagreed and indeed had no desire to see the humans and Turians becoming friendlier or for the war in the Skylian Verge to grow, and indeed saw it as gross stupidity, the rest of the 29 did not agree.

In fact Tevos had just received a report that the 29 were creating several volunteer commando squads to send in into the Verge. The Asari biotic commando was the deadliest irregular troop in existence, and their inclusion would show the Asari were also a military power to be reckoned with even if they didn't have the numbers or the ships of the Turians and humans.

I still do not agree with this war, but I cannot change facts. The Batarian Hegemony's days are numbered. Tevos thought coldly with all the cool calculation of her hundreds of years as a politician. *All that remains to be seen is how many lives it will cost to kill it and how long it will take the corpse to stop twitching. And of course, who is able to carve what from said corpse...*

Leaning back further Tevos turned her attention to her omni-tool sending out several messages to her aides. With the war now inevitable, it would be up to her and the Asari as a whole to create the peace to follow.

Even as Tevos removed herself from the present discussion, Valern and Sparatus traded barbs about the Turians movement, which really amounted to little more than noise. Valern knew Sparatus was against this move, but Valern also knew his own people were becoming very leery of the lessening of tension along the Turian/human border, for a very good reason.

The Batarians were no threat to the Salarian people, and of little consequence but they didn't like the closeness the human and turian command were showing. It wasn't a 'no hard feelings' concept, but it was a closeness built of cold respect and approval of one another, which was even worse since it was a more sustainable thing.

The balance of power will be forever changed, by this, and we Salarians have been unable to profit from it. Valern knew that the STG had offered their services wanting to join this new military alliance, but they had been firmly rebuffed. The humans didn't trust the STG to not go snooping where they weren't wanted, and were somewhat disdainful of them thanks to their actions during the Krogan rebellion, a stance Valern simply could not understand and put down to naiveté.

But bio-weapons were seen as an ultimate evil to humans regardless of their planet of origin, and the genophage, which had simply been the best solution to a nasty problem, worked against the Salarians in their eyes. *Illogical that they blame us for it when the Turians were the ones to deliver the weapon, but humans are inherently illogical creatures in any event.*

With that avenue of enrichment closed to them, Valern's orders from the Matriarchy were clear: pour as many council resources into finding the two humans who started all this with their takeover of Torfan. In the long run finding those two and putting their talents to use or perhaps even reverse-engineering whatever super soldier program they had been a part of would be of greater benefit than the positive PR from joining the assault on the Hegemony or joining in the new military alliance the Turian and humans were developing.

With that thought in mind, Valern changed the subject abruptly as was his people's wont. "Have we discovered where the humans who started all this are?"

This brought Tevos back to the here and now with a scowl actually appearing on her face. "With Matriarch Benezia's clear involvement with their disappearance from Sijou, Spectre Vasir has been unable to follow the trail."

Sparatus scowled, though he was internally grateful for the subject change, since he really did not like to contemplate the changing relationship between the Systems Alliance and the Turian Hierarchy. "I still do not understand why we cannot simply call this Benezia in to answer for her actions here."

"Matriarch Benezia might be young, but she is still one of the 29," Tevos replied sternly before going on in a more conciliatory tone. "We cannot call her on the carpet like that, she is simply too important an individual to do so without significant political ramifications in the Asari Republic. Besides, it is not as if she broke any laws helping these two super-soldiers off Sijou."

"So what you're saying is there is no problem with a senior Asari Matriarch, one with significant ties to your government, to have access to two human super-soldiers?" Valern said archly.

"I understand how bad that might sound, but I have heard no inkling that there is any connection between the 29 and these two humans," Tevos shot back. "Have you?"

Valern fell silent, since the STG's inability to really penetrate Asari space as they could everywhere else was a sore point. They had far more penetration than the Asari knew about, but with the law that would allow them to do so legally having been shot down, the STG units sent into Asari and Turian space could be legally evicted or even attacked, and were often when they were discovered. The Asari were also much better at that than any of the other council races.

"No, this was a personal thing Benezia did, and I think it might be because of some historical texts of my people that point to Asari having developed similar skills before the coming of the Goddess Athame." Tevos went on after a moment. "And because it is, we can still send Vasir after them."

Valern decided to play his trump card. He activated his omni-tool, connecting it to the plinth in front of him which shot a hologram into the air between the three of them. It showed a star field, specifically a star field which showed the route Benezia's ship had taken. Vasir had discovered this, but had then decided not to add the last jump to her report, an oversight Valern found disturbing, but which had given his people enough of a lead to figure out the last jump Matriarch Benezia's ship had to have taken. "And what could you tell us about this system?"

As he had expected Tevos stiffened, but what he heard was not the secret he had expected. "That is a monastery world, where we Asari consign the Ardat Yakshi to." She held up a blue hand before either of her fellow Councilors could speak, continuing in the same stiff, formal tone. "The Ardat Yakshi are genetic defects, Asari who cannot control the melding and who kill those they meld with. Further the melding for them becomes addictive, a drug whose pull cannot be denied, hence their isolation from any other Asari, let alone the other races. I have no idea why Benezia would take the two humans, have we even discovered their names yet? But if she has there must have been a reason. And you will leave them alone, the Ardat are to be pitied and left alone, by everyone."

Valern nodded slowly. "Getting them out of the public eye for a time? We are not the only ones after them, after all." Tela Vasir's report on the events on Sijou had been very thorough, and she had even hunted down and captured the Cerberus operative who had attempted to convince the humans to go with him.

"Perhaps, though why she would have chosen there I do not know." Tevos sighed then nodded her head slowly. "I will start to approve other of the 29 to see if I can find out more that way. Beyond that, Vasir is a Spectre. Short of trying to approach Benezia herself she can do whatever she wants to bring these two humans before us. That is all we can do."

OOOOOOO

Days turned into weeks as Ranma worked with the shipbuilders. Now that the keel had been laid and the armor plates for it readied, he found he had an audience every day, and that at least half of his day turned into discussions about his blacksmith abilities, the mix of metals, how he infused the metal with his life force and so on. Showing that wood would be hardened to a greater degree than metal proved to be almost enough to send Rane'lle and the others she had brought in to observe into epileptic shock, but they got over it. And the idea of using wood hardened like that or the interior of the vessel appealed both in terms of durability but cost and aesthetics as well

Herb on the other hand spent most of his time researching how they wanted the interior layout to look like and helping Ranma work out his boredom via spars at night. That and keeping Usagi out of Ranma's hair, which turned out to be a full time job, aided only occasionally by O'taku. At the same time, Usagi took it upon herself to force Herb to spend time in his female form in order to acclimatize to it. Several times this had resulted in fights between the two. But Usagi would always just run away over the rooftops, forcing Herb into a chase that would go on long enough for his anger to fade.

That was not to say that there was no excitement during that time. Indeed, both Ranma and Herb ran into some action during those next few weeks on Mostromos. The first to do so was Herb.

Walking down the street back to their temporary abode Herb perused the I book open on his omni-tool avidly. It had interior designs of not only Asari, but humans, Turians, and many others. The Salarians was not helpful in the extreme, but the human and Asari portion were and this was the first book he'd been able to find that didn't read like a dry textbook which compared the two species' differing styles.

He paused and then ducked his head as something small with tiny fins flew through the air his head had previously occupied. Turning in the direction of the dart he raised an eyebrow, only now noticing that there were no Asari walking along the street. *Hmmf need to work on my situational awareness. What would Ranma say about me being caught out like this?* "Come out please, let's get this over with, I still have reading I need to get to."

From that direction came four Asari walking out of an alleyway their eyes locked on Herb. One of them had just clipped some kind of dart gun to her side. At the same time three more Asari approached from his other side. All of them were flaring their biotics, blue glows appearing around all of them. One of them too raised a blow dart firing at Herb without a word.

"Ah, the silent sorts, how irritating," Herb muttered, smacking the dart aside with a wave of one hand.

"Get him," ordered one of the Asari, racing forward. Biotics flared from them all, and four of them reached out with Biotic Stasis holds while the others rushed forward physically.

But Herb flared his ki, the corona of orange and gold that was his ki's normal color flaring out like a miniature sun breaking the Stasis locks despite the number of them attempting to hold them in place. The Asari charging him were a greater threat, but Herb ducked under the first Charge then whirled out of the way of the second. His leg lashing out, Herb's foot caught one charging Asari right into the side of her knee, which shattered sending her screaming to the ground.

Biotic Orbs, Slashes and Lashes now lashed out, trying to pepper Herb which forced him to dodge rather than deal with the other two Asari foolish enough to Charge him. *As if that would protect them from such as me*, Herb thought with all the haughtier of his upbringing. *Now for the rest of them.*

Dodging the numerous Biotic assaults, Herb did not close as the Asari attacking him seemed to think. Instead he launched himself into the air, lashing out with his own long range attacks. "Hito-Ryu-Zen-Ha!" he roared, cutting his hands forward in a chopping motion.

Herb's ki blades lashed out cutting through two of his attackers before they could get Barriers up, but splashing ineffectively against the Barriers of the others. One of them went down bisected, the other fell screaming, her arm amputated at the shoulder. The others returned fire, only to stare as Herb remained in the air with nothing there holding him up.

"Damnit, this is no simple snatch and grab, we're pulling out, fade!" barked one of the Asari, a scar from some past battle marking her neck and chin. "No money's worth being cut down like this."

"Tell me who hired you and I might even let you go, along with your wounded," Herb said magnanimously. None of these Asari were as skilled as the sisters of the monastery, and were far below the level Benezia's commandos had been when he and Ranma began training with them. They had the same number of attacks and some training in working together, but they hadn't expected his abilities and their speed with their biotic powers left much to be desired.

"Wish I could tell you, but it was an anonymous bounty on you and your companion, the one with black hair." The Asari replied, reinforcing her barrier at the same time as she began to move toward one of her injured fellows. Their screaming had stopped, the two girls having pumped their bodies full of pain reducing drugs, which was part of their uniform, light body armor and the sign of an Eclipse on one side of their chests.

"And you have no way of knowing where it originated or even the species of the sender?" Herb asked skeptically, idly preparing a ki attack in his hand but not launching it just yet. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"You were a target of opportunity. Me and my hunting pack were stranded here waiting for the rest of the company to come pick us up after our last client stiffed us on half our pay." The Asari groused, not showing concern. Barriers had proven to stop the human's attacks after all. "It came in from an anonymous e-mail sent to 'all merc groups currently on Mostromos. Not through the rest of the company. I thought it was kind of shifty, but we decided to go with it rather than face the cash penalty we will have to call for transport when it wasn't planned."

"I see... well this should teach you to take random jobs without researching your targets first. Was there any way to tell what planet it came from or what species?" Herb pressed.

The Asari fell silent both thinking and obviously buying time for her fellows behind her to gather the two wounded and the one dead member of their party. Luckily for all involved the fight didn't seem to have damaged the surrounding buildings, but if they kept fighting that was almost a certainty. "I would guess from the way it was worded the originator was a human, who was acting on his own information, but that's all I could say, It didn't have any information on you, so it didn't come from the Shadow Broker, or any local crime group. But that's all I can say."

Herb scowled, but nodded, waving her off. "Very well, I suggest we both get out of here before whatever you did to the local security grid fails. I don't want to deal with the police any more than you lot do. But in the future know I will not be so lenient."

Grunting in acknowledgement the Asari waved her hands at the group behind her, who began to move back into the darker alleyways. Behind them Herb stood for a moment then turned and walked off, wondering what that had been about. *I would wager the Illusive Man, who I doubt has many resources in Asari space. Still the fact he knew we were here at all is a sign that we should perhaps be moving on. Yet how to do so with the work on the ship still ongoing?* To that Herb had no answer, but as the attack was not repeated in the next few days decided to stick it out for now.

In contrast to Herb's which came out of nowhere, Ranma's bit of adventure started out much more docilely.

Ranma had demanded that he could spend every fourth day at the beaches with his friends as a break from working on the ship and since he and Herb were paying for said ship no one could argue. They went to different beaches or parks each time they went. Herb discovered a love for theme parks which normally catered to children and Maidens exclusively, but which were a lot of fun for the humans who were still not used to the tech level in this universe. Underwater water rides, rollercoasters that went up over three hundred stories with rails as thin as their arms and little in the way of structural support were incredible to them.

Ranma noticed they were being followed on these sojourns after the third time out. Since there was no sense of danger and whoever was watching wasn't even concentrating on him, it had taken Ranma a while to notice. But once he did, the watcher stood out from the crowd, especially in the theme parks.

The follower was an older Asari, possibly only a little younger or older than Benezia. She seemed to have a stern, if somewhat kindly face. She wore a red body suit, which probably doubled as body armor of some kind, with accents of gold here and there. She wore some kind of headpiece done in red on her forehead.

And her eyes were always watching O'taku while they were out. At first Ranma thought O'taku might have picked up an admirer. But after the second time they were followed, Ranma decided that couldn't be it. Even elderly Asari were not exactly wilting flowers when it came to approaching someone they were interested in, even if Ranma thought they would go about doing so differently.

"O'taku, you have any enemies here?" he asked one evening after coming back from the park.

"UM, no? I don't have any enemies at all, Ranma leas as far as I know. Why?" O'taku asked, blinking and staring at her friend.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," Ranma replied, waving one hand as they continued to walk.

The next day Ranma had off, O'taku talked him into staying in for a day. Herb was off actually taking in a play of all things with Rane'Ile, who had decided to cultivate Herb's appreciation of the arts, expanding it into other areas beyond architecture. Usagi was also out that day, having found another Asari to in her words 'pal around with' I.E. sleep with for a time with no complications added.

Since it was scheduled to rain that day Ranma was amenable to this, and the two of them stayed in that night watching an old Earth show, or at least it was old to O'taku. From there they segued into something more modern O'taku had just bought, a comedy/action which had been written a year after the First Contact War ended. The series, which had been developed by humans, put a Asari captain in charge of a mixed crew, including a human second

in command. There was romance between the two of them, but it didn't take center stage for several episodes.

"Oh come on!" Ranma groaned, laying his head back against the bed. Their rooms were relatively small, since he and Herb had opted to spend as little money on that they could get. The room was barely large enough for the beds and other furniture in it, though it oddly had a very nice balcony looking out into the city. "Why do you have to go and ruin a perfectly good action comedy with romance?"

"Because some of us like that kind of thing you philistine!" O'taku retorted. 'It's bad enough you kept on making fun of the action sequences, now you're making fun of the romance too?"

"Not making fun of it, I've got little idea of what real flirting, romance and crap are like to do that. No, I'm just saying the inclusion of it beyond, y'know, the little hints which we saw before this is dumb." Ranma replied hotly.

"GAH, how dare you! The love of T'lona and Clark is the quintessential Asari/human romance you, you barbarian!" O'taku shouted.

"AH, I see now," Ranma said with a grin, happy to get under the girls skin. "Is there something ya want to say O'taku? I'm sorry, you're a good friend but I don't like you that way. Still, there's always Herb if..."

That was as far as he got before O'taku smacked him in the face with A Biotically hurled pillow. The impact sent him tumbling off the side of the bed to land in the little area between the far wall and the bed. Ranma grabbed the pillow and slowly pushed himself to his knees, glaring over the bed at O'taku. "You realize this means war."

With that he leaped up, hurling the pillow at O'taku who flipped herself up and over the chair, kicking off the wall to leap away, grabbing at a small pillow from the chair to hurl it at Ranma. For a moment the two of them danced around one another, their pillows flailing then Ranma closed thumping his pillow into O'taku's head, sending her reeling.

Stumbling back, O'taku stepped on the TV remote. With her omni-tool once more filled, they had been watching a series of data discs on the TV's actual data reader rather than her omni-tool. O'taku's foot hit the volume control, which turned the TV up on loud. This would not have been so bad if the romantic moment which had begun their argument had not been about to reach its climax. The resultant shout from the Asari actor rang out, extremely loud.

Outside on a nearby roof the Asari Matron who had been following O'taku stood watching the darkened blinds leading into the room the younger Asari and the human stayed in, next to the other human and Asari pair. That pair didn't interest her at all, no it was this pair that interested her, because the Maiden was a marked Ardat Yakshi. By this point a lot of the

watchers concerns had faded, but a neutral watcher would have never been able to tell given her tense posture.

Then came the loud shout of "Embrace Eternity!"

Without even a second's thought, the Asari Matron launched herself forward in a Biotic Jump mixed with a Charge, the flare of Biotics around her swift and powerful. She crashed through the window landing in the room, her Biotics flaring out in a grab only to pause for two reasons.

One was because rather than the carnal moment she thought she was interrupting, she found the Ardat Yakshi she had been following just standing there looking at her in shock with a pillow clutched in one hand. In many ways this was a better sight than what she had feared she would find, but on the other it meant she had overreacted badly.

A bare second after she had taken in the view the second reason arrived in the form of a fist lashing out toward her stomach from the side. The Asari Matron was a veteran of more than seven hundred years of combat, and she was able to turn and bring up a micro Barrier to block the blow. But there was a sound of bussing and repeated electrical discharges and then she was falling back the Barrier shattering.

She was about to lash out at the human who that attacked her when the rain from outside invaded the room, wetting the human just enough to change him into the redhead that the Asari Matron had watched going around with the Ardat Yakshi Maiden before today. And to that sight even the Matron's centuries of experience failed her. she stood back, staring, her biotics flaring out of existence as her hands dropped to her side. "By the goddess Athame, what just happened?"

"Not your worry right now bitch!" Ranma growled, moving forward. "Why the hell're you attacking us?"

"I..." As Ranma watched the Asari matron turned to look at the screen then back to the now terrified Ardat Yakshi maiden and the angry human stalking toward her. It was evident that as the intruder she would have to be the first to make overtures of peace. "I apologize. It appears I overreacted." With that she stood back, holding her hands in front of her as she bowed very lightly towards them both.

Ranma is this the woman who was following us that made you ask if I had enemies here?" O'taku's voice was shrill as she asked her question, her eyes wide and locked on the older Asari like a rabbit staring at a hawk.

"Yeah, and if she isn't an enemy why are you looking scared?" Ranma asked, stepping between them and glaring at the interloper. "If you've got a problem with my friend, you've got a problem with me!"

"She's a Justicar!" O'taku said, still sounding scared. "She hunts Ardat Yakshi!"

"**Rogue** Ardat Yakshi," the So-called Justicar said calmly, emphasizing the first just slightly. "That is one of my duties as a Justicar, but only one of them. I apologize once more. I had been following a lead on a... extremely experienced and wily Ardat Yakshi when I spotted you weeks ago. I had feared she had taken the form of a sister in order to try and slip away. Until tonight however I had nothing but that mild concern and the utter lack of any other trail to follow to base my assumptions on."

Again the older Matron bowed, this time toward O'taku. "Again I apologize. I am Samara, a Justicar as you realized thanks to my crest."

O'taku calmed down almost instantly hearing her name, and stepped forward holding out her hands. "I am O'taku of the monastery of Crastus. Abbess Joldrea'as has mentioned you a time or two. I... I also know the one you seek. If she was indeed on this planet, then your concern about me is warranted." As Samara grabbed her forearms, she went on more sheepishly. "But um, if you had just come up and asked I could have cleared up any confusion."

"Again, I can only apologize." Samara replied. "My hesitation came from the fact this would not be the first time this particular quarry has used that trick. She has even mastered the ability the order's tattoo's."

"Hold on," Ranma interjected. Having gotten out of the way as O'taku moved forward, he now stepped in once more, bringing the two Asari attention to him. "I've never heard of Asari being able to change their bodies like that, not even Ardat Yakshi, and since I spent months at the monastery I think I would."

"It is an ability Ardat Yakshi gain by draining the life essence of their victims of centuries." Samara replied then glared at the human. "Needless to say it is a secret known only to a few. If you attempt to share it or it becomes common knowledge through your actions I will be forced to kill you."

"Oh ho, ya went and said something interesting there." Ranma said, showing her teeth. "You think you can?"

"I am a Justicar, if I say I will do something I see it through, even if it cost me my life." Samara replied simply. "We would not know until I try if I could succeed."

"Tsk, you put it like that and I lose all my interest in fighting ya right now." Ranma shook his head then gestured toward the window which Samara had smashed through in her haste to try and interrupt what she thought was going on. "By the way, can you pay for that?"

After doing so and apologizing to the hotel manager, Ranma and Otaku attempted to explain what was going on to Samara. Since they could not get in contact with the monastery, it

having no planetary net, let alone a quantum communications grid, they couldn't corroborate their story. But since the planet did have records of Otaku coming here before on supply runs and causing no trouble, she decided to believe them. That, and Ranma's curse helped to convince Samara their entire story was the truth, rather than any one part of it which might have explained O'taku being here without an attendant sister.

She was not happy with the idea that O'taku was alone. But given how she had acted in the past, Samara's idea of justice would not allow her to act prematurely against the younger Asari.

Worse for Samara, this meant her Code was pulling her in two different directions. On the one hand she should stay and watch O'taku until she returned to them monastery or a senior sister arrived to watch her. On the other hand she had to find the trail of her current quarry, whose name she did not share during their cross-interrogation.

Ranma was in much the same boat. He didn't like that Samara would attack and kill O'taku if she thought the younger Asari was going out of control 'due to an urge to merge' as he put it, a phrase that caused Samara to simply raise an eyebrow and O'taku to blush hotly. But like Samara, he wasn't about to attack her just in case she'd attack his friend.

Eventually much to Ranma's chagrin the night ended with a whimper rather than a bang. Samara vowed to watch O'taku without preconceived notions and Ranma... "I promise not to try and kick your shit in if you twitch in our direction."

O'taku, who was rather in awe of Samara and had remained such throughout the discussion, waved one hand in front of her face as the older Asari looked at her. "That's probably the best you're going to get Justicar Samara."

"Yes, I can sense that it is. The young often have more bravado than they know what to do with." She smiled thinly at Ranma, but did not rise to the bait, since she could tell that was precisely what the youngster wanted, whatever the actual outcome would be.

The 'tsk' noise the strangely 'cursed' (and wasn't that an odd issue?) girl-turned-to-boy made told Samara she was correct and an unusual bubble of amusement welled up inside Samara. *Hmm... messing with this child could be rather fun...* "I will be on planet for at least another few weeks trying to pick up my quarry's trail. Until then, you'll just have to deal with my suspicion." She smiled beatifically at Ranma growl, amused further.

OOOOOOO

Benezia leaned back in her quantum communication room, her normal cool aplomb diminished by the discussion she had just been involved in. But that didn't change what she had to do now. Opening the ship's internal communications, she hailed the bridge. "Shiala, there

has been a change of plans. My presence is requested on Thessia within two weeks for a quorum of the 29."

"Mistress? What about our current mission?" Shiala asked from the bridge, sounding very surprised and well she should.

"Well, considering we haven't been able to pick up Saren's trail just yet, we won't be losing anything," Benezia replied tartly. That was the truth after all. They had attempted to find a trail of Saren Artreius, the Spectre Benezia feared was going rogue, but had no luck after leaving the monastery. "Besides there are more important things than even a rogue Spectre. The Quarren fleet has entered Asari space once more."

Shiala then understood. Her mistress had pushed several times in the past for the Quarren Migrant Fleet to be let into the Asari Republic, thinking it would be a massive technological and industrial boon. But the stigma against the Quarren had proved too hard to overcome. Still, if another quorum was being called on that point, then Benezia and her faction might well be able to change that decision. *It won't be easy by any means, but it might be very important going forward.*

Shiala sent Benezia their projected route onto her multi-tool, and Benezia studied it for a moment then slowly smiled, reopening the com. "Shiala, if I am reading this route correctly it will take us past Tharisia Segundus? And it will only take us a week to get to Thessia?"

"Yes mistress." Shiala replied and from the tone of her voice Benezia realized her aide was possibly ahead of her on this.

"In that case, take us to Tharisia." Benezia ordered. *In her last communique Liara mentioned that would be her next dig site. It's a small one but the first one which she is in charge of. That's very, very good indeed at Liara's age. I wonder how she will react to me just dropping in...*

The answer was everything that Benezia could have hoped for. First was shock, such shock that Benezia wondered if her daughter had stopped breathing for a moment. Then came happiness as Liara moved in to hug her mother tightly, ignoring for the moment her dirty coveralls and mud splattered appearance. Tharisia Segundus was a world with near 16 hour a day rainfall, and what land which wasn't rock was sudden mud. "Mother! I, that is, it's so good to see you, but you should really have called ahead!"

"Nonsense. That would have defeated the purpose entirely Little Wing." Benezia replied fondly, ignoring the mud getting on her commando tunic. "Now, let's get you cleaned, and then you can tell me about your work here. While I tell you at least a little bit about what I have been up to lately. I daresay," she finished with a lopsided smile, "That it is a bit more exciting than you might think."

"Actually I doubt it. Pirates attempted to raid the dig site yesterday. I never thought I would be thankful for that commando training you forced me to endure mother, but it definitely paid off. I lost three of my aids and two driller droids, but the pirate lost their entire crew." Liara replied, smugly at first then somewhat more grim. It had been the first time she had been forced to take a life, and she hadn't liked it, not one bit.

"WHAT!?" Benezia stated, her eyes narrowing before she turned. Standing behind her Shiala had already sprung to attention, awaiting orders and Benezia once more reminded herself to do something nice for her. "Shiala, take the ship back up, scan the area for traces of this pirate group's ship. I want to know if this was a real example of piracy or something else."

Liara looked at Benezia questioningly, and Benezia sighed. "Child, like it or not you are the only daughter of one of the 29. And this site is so new, which makes more sense, an attempted kidnapping or the fact these pirates knew about your dig so quickly?"

"...point. I don't like it, but I suppose I can see your point Mother." Liara replied.

"I would wager you have done many things of late you don't like. Now come, let us talk about that, and your work here." Benezia ordered, taking her daughter by the elbow and leading Liara toward her basecamp.

There Liara offered her mother the hospitality of her tent. It was large, but mostly filled with equipment, an expensive portable bed, and an extremely simple drying stall with some specialty equipment designed to remove the local mud, which tended to cling to everything like dirty glue.

After getting cleaned up, the both of them sat on the bed, talking about the pirate attack and how it had felt to Liara to take a life. Liara explained how she had nearly frozen, and it had cost one of her workers, a Hanar, his life. After that she hadn't hesitated, but when the battle ended she had the shakes something fierce.

"Liara, I am very proud of you." Benezia said, smiling at her and reaching over to gently rub her fingers over Liara's hard head ridges. "It takes no courage to take a life, but to put yourself in harm's way to defend others? That takes great courage. I am also proud that you realize the weight of a life. Far too few people do, and soldiers, even the best, can become inured to it. I hope that never happens to you."

Whatever Liara had imagined from her hard as nails, former Biotic commando and all around hard-ass of a mother (though Liara would never say that aloud, not in a thousand years and certainly not when she got drunk two year ago), that was not it. Liara would never say that aloud of course, but it was still somewhat jarring to her worldview that her mother not only understood where she was coming from, but also praised her for her reactions afterward.

"th, thank you mother," Liara replied, basking in her mother's approval for the first time in far too long. After a moment she decided to change the subject to something she hoped would be less emotionally fraught. "So, um, what **have** you been up to mother?"

"Hmmm... where to begin. Well first, have you ever heard of the Soul Fire, Bera'van'tuwan?" When Liara's eyes widened, Benezia went on. "Well, it turns out that..."

What followed was a series of shocking revelations for Liara. That her mother would take in two humans wasn't so outrageous, but the rest certainly was. *If it was anyone else, I would never believe them, but I just cannot see my mother lying about something like this.* Then a smile began to appear on her face and she let out an involuntary giggle.

Benezia stopped talking about what Herb and Ranma had taught her and the others at the monastery to look at her questioningly. "Something you want to share Little Wing?"

"Well, it's just... this Bera'van'tuwan that these two humans use? It's from the ancient past correct?"

"Our race's ancient past yes, though not from their perspective, if young Herb's theory of dimensional travel is correct. Why?"

"Then doesn't that mean I've won our argument?" Liara asked impishly. "You always maintained the future was more important than the past, but look at what you've been doing."

Benezia opened her mouth, then sighed and nodded her head. "Alright little Wing, I'll give you that one." At that Liara actually held one of her fists up in the air pumping it like her favorite chess champion had just won a round and the older Asari went on quickly. "Although I will say that while not as ancient as the Protheans who you have devoted so much time to, learning from our own past as a species is more relevant."

"I disagree," Liara replied promptly, becoming more serious as she looked at her mother. "Actually we Asari seem to have learned far more from the Protheans than I had first suspected." At Benezia's questioning look she went on. "Well, it was rather difficult to figure out, and I had to travel to several of my older dig sites to make certain I was right, but a lot of the Mass Effect technology we Asari use parallels some of the technology the Protheans use."

Benezia's eyes narrowed at that. "Do you have evidence of this, or is this just a feeling?"

"I..." Liara wilted a little. "I have some evidence mother, but most of it is circumstantial at best. It is really more a... leap of logic I suppose." She cringed internally, waiting for her mother to eviscerate her or smile and dismiss her, wondering idly which would hurt worse.

Instead Benezia looked at her calmly, her own thoughts hidden. "Hmm... well that does make Herb's perspective oddly more believable even if it is just your feeling. Still elucidate your points of conjecture." *I'll have a look at your evidence later...*

What followed was about forty minutes of Liara explaining Prothean construction practices via Mass Effect, as well as hints of their shield technology and civilian sector Eezo based tech, which were the only examples that had thus far been found. She pointed to similarities in Asari tech, though on their end the technology had been turned to military purposes. Their construction practices, at least on their cities and buildings, were similar. Liara couldn't tell anything about their shipbuilding practices since no examples of that had survived.

In all honestly it was indeed very little in the way of evidence. Indeed if it hadn't been her daughter saying it and if Benezia hadn't had discussions with Herb about how odd it was that all the races of the Council had researched things along similar lines, she would have dismissed it entirely. But now she found she could not logically do so.

One point above all others bothered her however, but she did not voice these thoughts now. To Liara the parallels mattered only so much as Liara could use them to discover further Prothean ruins somehow, she had no hint of the worry Benezia had begun to see. "That was indeed very interesting, I really do need to get you in touch with young Herb, I think the two of you would get on famously."

As Liara sputtered, her face darkening with a blush, Benezia went in for the kill. "After all, there are things beyond the dusty, or in this case muddy, ruins you so enjoy exploring. At the very least let me give you a way to contact him."

"M, mother!" Liara finally gasped, barely managing to get the words out due to how hard she was blushing. "Are you honestly trying to play matchmaker?! I am not a normal Maiden Mother, such things do not hold interest to me."

"Oh, so it wasn't you who tried to purchase a subscription to the human magazine Playgirl when you were only eighty?" Benezia mused.

As Liara floundered once more, she went on, pulling up a video of the two martial artists. The video was of the two of them moving through some katas across from one another prior to a spar. Ranma was in his female form for some reason Benezia could not remember, while Herb was in his male body. And he was shirtless at the moment.

Watching Liara's blush become far deeper and her eyes lock on the image Benezia smiled, but Liara tore her eyes away quickly. "Mother, I am not at all interested in, in that. The, the subscription to Playgirl was just, just academic interest that's all!"

"I'm sure. But you will at least let me give you a way to contact them. If you are ever in trouble and can't reach me they could be a help in the future. From pirates or anything else up to, though possibly not including, a full army corps coming after you," Benezia said dryly.

"Oh, very well," Liara muttered, holding out her omni-tool to Benezia's and watching as the older Asari tapped a series of command on her own, orange-screened omni-tool. A second later, a series of files transferred from one to another. She didn't even look at them at the moment she was so embarrassed at the moment. She would become far more embarrassed later when she realized her mother had sent her several dozen videos like the first to her omni-tool.

But that wasn't all Benezia had done. Under the guise of transferring those files, Benezia had also inserted a program which let her hack into her daughter's tool, copying all of the data stored in it. For now however she put that to one side in favor of continuing to make her daughter blush. Liara however rallied admirably and returned fire, wondering aloud if Benezia was projecting her own interest in the two young humans onto her daughter and the teasing went on from there.

Later that night as Liara made use of the facilities on board her ship Benezia sat in her room, the door locked as she went over the information Liara had gathered. As her daughter had said, there was nothing conclusive there, but it was circumstantially damning. One thing Liara hadn't noticed, or perhaps hadn't realized the significance of, was that the changes in design paralleled the coming of the goddess Athame.

That was... disturbing in its possible implications. *Could the Protheans have aided my people in the past, as we have the Volus or the Hanar? That would be a blow to our pride as a people at best. At worst...* With that thought Benezia knew she had a second reason to go to Thessia.

Late the next day, Benezia stood by the landing ramp leading up to ship, holding Liara's arms as she did the same to her. "I'm sorry I can't pull you away from your work to spend time with your old mother, but please promise me at least that after you are done on this dig site you'll take a brief vacation? I'll even set up a stipend on the recreation world of your choice, but you do need to get out more."

Having won not one, but three arguments with her mother since she had arrived, Liara decided she could be magnanimous. "Alright mother I promise. I have always wondered what it would be like to go to Sullia Tertius anyway." Sullia Tertius was a tiny planet, smaller than Sol's Mars, with little in the way of heavy metals but an incredibly hospitable environment and beautiful terrain. Its waterfalls in particular were famous throughout Asari space.

"Excellent. That is all I ask my dear," Benezia replied. She had initially wanted to bring her daughter along to Thessia in order to spend time with her, but given what Liara had discovered and its possible implications, it was for the best that Liara remained separate from

Benezia's investigations. She was going to go hunting for answers which might just have more impact on the Asari people than her fears about Saren would on the Council.

OOOOOOO

Tela Vasir smiled as she stepped off the ship of the spaceport. It had taken weeks but finally she had discovered evidence of her quarry's presence. Through her underworld contacts Tela had seen camera evidence of both of the humans who had taken Torfan from the Batarians on Mostromos. Heading there had taken some time, but she was finally on station.

But the Spectre's arrival had not gone unnoticed...

OOOOOOO

"What do you mean I shouldn't come into work?" Ranma asked quizzically, staring into his omni-tool screen at the project supervisor.

The butch Asari shrugged her heavy shoulders. "Just what I said. Someone, I wasn't told who, is here looking for you and the pretty boy." Matching her appearance the supervisor didn't really have time for the more effete of her species, and considered Herb's looks as a sign he was one of them, despite not having every shown any inclination in that direction. 'The boss doesn't want any trouble, and so told me to pass that on.'

"Huh, so she doesn't want the yards involved, or the ship found makes sense. Ask her if she has erased any evidence of my being up there would ya?" Ranma shrugged at the Asari's look through the omni-tool. "Hey, just thought I'd ask."

I wonder if this is a belated response to Samara bein' here. He thought as the connection ended. That old broad ain't the type anyone with any sense would be able to overlook, though I suppose if she couldn't sneak around she wouldn't be able to run her prey into the ground, whatever her name is. And that Code, from what she said the other night, I'd bet that Code would make her very unpopular with any corrupt locals. Not a problem on this planet, but I'd bet it is on some.

Still, if I don't have to go in to work on the ship, I can at least have a day off. Hmm... suppose I could try to goad Samara into a fight. Now that they were aware of her, Samara had stopped attempting to spy on them from a distance, and had instead simply begun following O'taku and Ranma around whenever they weren't up in the construction yard. Haven't had much luck there, but we'll see. Funny thing though, I'd swear she's having fun just not giving me what I want. Old biddy.

Of course in looks Samara was anything but old. She was younger than Benezia but with the same sort of proportions as the Matriarch and looked as if she had kept in shape her long,

long life. So there was more than one reason why Ranma wanted to see what she could do. *Or I could just find Herb and see if he wants to play some?*

It turned out that Herb was willing to take a day off his personal research, having decided on the design he wanted the interior of the ship to follow, though he didn't want to spend it sparring for some odd reason, at least to Ranma's mind. So the four of them, and of course their Justicar follower, made their way to the beach. Once more in their female forms, Ranma and Herb laid out on the sun for a bit with O'taku, while Usagi hopped off to join some kids in creating a monstrous sand nation.

It was huge and growing quickly, conquering all nearby groups of kids and their incumbent castles slowly but surely. Looking over at it Ranma could only shake her head. "Y'know that thing is going to be big enough to ask for Republic membership soon."

"As long as it keeps Usagi out of my hair that's fine," Herb replied. The dragon prince genuinely liked Usagi, not as much as Ranma did but they were close. However Usagi was simply unable to sit still for any appreciable length of time. With anything that did not involve combat or sex she had the attention span of an ADHD teenager without the proper medication. And her continued pushes for Herb to become more comfortable in his cursed form grated.

"Hush," O'taku murmured from beside them laying out luxuriantly. Asari didn't tan as humans did, but their skin was just as sensitive to heat, and laying about in the sun like this was, despite it being very low tech, considered a fine, if rather sedentary way to spend your time. "Let's not talk about Usagi for now. What with the work on the ship and the Justicar always following us I need some time off. Speaking of, is she around somewhere?"

"Heh, no. I think Samara is a bit queasy about coming out to places like this," Ranma replied, gesturing to several nearby Asari, who were wearing bikinis that would have fit right in at a strip club. The only Asari who weren't dressed like that were parents here with kids, kids themselves, and elderly looking Matriarchs. And not even them all the time. *Y'know, if anyone had said I'd ever be used to this much skin on show I'd have called them a dumbass. Now, it's not exactly blah, but it isn't enough to make me stutter or come apart.*

Then her thoughts became a little more serious. "Actually we are being watched, but not by Samara. There's an Asari out there, a little darker skin than normal with some dark reddish marks around her head, but not on her face. She is dressed like one of the locals, but she's been staring at Herb and me for the last five minutes."

"Are you sure it's us? I assumed that was another Justicar, Like Samara due to the red marks." Herb too had seen the Asari in question, but had discounted her as a threat.

"I'm sure. Still, it could be one or the other, and I feel like going swimming." With that Ranma stood up and raced into the ocean, heading out towards one of the diving platforms.

The woman in question didn't follow, instead she moved away slightly to where she could watch both Herb and Ranma at once. Pulling up a magazine on her omni-tool, she began reading it as a cover as she sat on a lounge chair.

Eventually Ranma came back and the two of them left the beach with O'taku to head to a nearby restaurant. Usagi stayed behind, still putting the finishing touches on the massive sand cityscape she and a horde of Asari children had created.

After changing back into their male forms, the two martial artists and their friend walked back from the beach into a section of the city which catered to it, much like any such which could be found on Earth. However as they sat down at their chosen restaurant after ordering their food, the trio was swiftly joined by the unknown Asari. "Thanks for saving me a seat loves," she said, winking across the table at Ranma who she had sat across from. "Did you already order for me?"

Ranma was about to open his mouth but Herb smacked his elbow into the younger man's stomach, speaking up quickly as he shook his head at O'taku. "Indeed we did, you know we're in a bit of a hurry."

"Yeah, yeah," the Asari replied, her voice and body language like that of any normal airy Maiden. But when she spoke next the tone in no way matched the body language. "I am Tela Vasir Spectre of the Citadel Council. I am here to bring you to them, they wish to know where you've come from, and put your abilities to the good of all."

"Um... no." Ranma deadpanned, shaking his head. "Sorry, but I'm not that big on politicians, and I'm not a joiner either."

"Indeed, I will have to decline as well. I have no interest in meeting with the three Councilors, nor any of their minions. As for your abilities, they are ours and what we do with them or if we teach them to others is our decision to make," Herb replied sternly, no longer playing along with Vasir's attempt to make this look like a regular lunchtime. "We have seen and heard much about your Council, and I for one find them wanting on many points."

"That's not your decision to make. You can come willingly or not, but my orders are clear. Bring you in however I can." Tela replied, her own mask falling by the wayside. "I know you think you might be hot shit for what you did against the Batarians and the Blue Sun mercs, but I'm a council Spectre. Now, I'm trying to be nice here, but don't mistake that for a unwillingness to use violence."

"Wow, you must think you're hot shit, but I'd think even Asari would have a phrase equal to the old saw about not writing checks your ass can't cash." Ranma said, his tone drawling, his eyes lighting up with eagerness. *Finally some action!* As Vasir stiffened in her seat, Ranma went on. "I don't give a rat's ass about the council or your Spectre status. I go where I

want, and do what my own Code dictates. Nowhere in that Code does it say I need to make nice with any government, let alone one that ain't mine."

"You see miss, laws are for people who either agreed with them, or agreed to abide by them. We are not even citizens of the alliance, let alone the council. We abide by the local laws because most of them are common sense, but do not think you have any moral or legal means of commanding our compliance." Herb cut in smoothly. In comparison to Ranma's confrontational attitude he sounded almost reasonable, but there was no more give in his voice then there was Ranma's.

"...If you aren't members of the Alliance then you don't have any rights either." Vasir threatened. Not that they had much rights in the first place of course. The alliance was not one of the three main members of the Citadel Council, and as such humans only had rights if it didn't inconvenience anyone of more importance. In this case it wouldn't have mattered at all given Vasir's orders. But she still wanted to see if she could talk the two into coming quietly.

"Wow, really, you're going there?" Rolling his eyes, Ranma waved Vasir off. "if you want to try and take us captive or whatever, you just come ahead and try. Please! I've been getting bored lately."

"Oh, I'll give you all the action you can handle." Tela said, standing up abruptly.

O'taku, who had been silent throughout all this, groaned, letting her head hit the table for a moment as she stared at the two humans. "I knew you didn't want to have anything to do with the Council, but did you have to be that combative?"

Herb answered before Ranma could. "This was going to come to violence whatever, occurred. And it wasn't like she was willing to bend either. She could have simply contacted the council for us, and we could have talked via quantum communications. Instead she was ordered to bring us in, and that smacks too much of people who want to use us rather than learn about or from us."

Before any of the people at the table could reply, their food arrived, and a moment later Samara moved to join them, having come into and watched the confrontation without anyone aware. Ranma blinked at her and rather than attempt to rile her up asked, "Have you had any luck picking up a trail of your quarry? And could you at least tell us her name, calling her 'your quarry' is getting old." He added plaintively.

Samara smiled thinly, sitting where Tela had been sitting before. "I have not, no. As for her name perhaps I will tell you in the future. As for your little confrontation with the young Spectre Vasir, you are correct. Her orders had no give in them, which is rather foolish."

At that Ranma and even O'taku shot the older Asari a look and she shrugged. "The Code of the Justicar is rigid, yes, but our means of going about fulfilling it leaves some room for

flexibility. And our foes are routinely hostile, murderers many times over. You are not hostile towards the Council or even that Spectre, you were simply standoffish, if rather rude about it. Tell me Ranma, has anyone taught you that preventing fights is perhaps a good thing at times? Or anything at all about being diplomatic really."

"Oh that's rich coming from you Miss Overreaction!" Ranma crowed while O'taku simply shook her head sadly. "A bit of the pot calling the kettle black there."

Herb sighed. "Please don't encourage him Justicar Samara, he has no need of such. I think we should simply eat our food and then collect Usagi before heading back to our hotel."

"The Code compels me to warn you that Vasir will undoubtedly attempt to take you captive in some way." Samara said before watching in something approach shock at the amount of food all three of the others at the table put away. She said nothing however, simply waiting for one or the other human to speak.

'Yeah, I know. But just because we're going to let her come to us, doesn't mean we have to be stupid about it." Ranma replied, grinning. "Was that all you wanted to talk about? Or did you want some more pairs of eyes to help search for 'your quarry'," he finished, making quote marks after the last word.

Samara blinked. "You would offer such?"

"Sure, it sounded interesting," Ranma replied. While his Code didn't force Ranma to go looking for trouble, he had an issue with murderers in general and especially someone who went about it like she was a black widow spider.

"I thank you for the offer, but I must decline. My... the one I am hunting, her name is Morinth, is no longer on the planet. I have once more lost the trail. I will remain here for a time before moving on."

"A thought occurs." Herb interjected. Ranma and O'taku had told him about Samara's current quest, and something had occurred to him. "This planet, indeed I imagine most Asari planets, are very law abiding. A murderer couldn't stay on the planet for any length of time given the datanet, certainly not one who kills her victim as a rogue Ardat Yakshi would. So where would her base of operations be? I would search out various dens of iniquity and start my search anew there, perhaps even buy locals eyes and prepare a trap there rather than attempt to hunt her down on the move."

"The Code would not allow me to buy such eyes as you put it from those who have broken the law before, but... the idea does have some merit. I will consider it going forward. Besides, cleaning up such dens would be a worthy goal in and of itself," Samara mused.

Ranma scowled at that. "Okay now you're just making me jealous! I doubt the locals'd really take your presence or your attempts to make them clean up their acts after all. That means ya'd have a lot of fights on your hands."

Beside him Herb rolled his eyes at Ranma's attitude. But he couldn't deny the idea had some appeal. Especially given their idea of acting like roaming Samurai righting wrongs as they found them.

"If you're going to do that, I'd suggest going right to the top, go to Omega." Everyone looked at O'taku who had spoken and she shrunk a little under Samara's gaze. "Um, I might be just a girl from the monastery, but even I've heard of Omega. It's notorious as the largest den of thugs, mercs and other sorts in the known galaxy, though where it is I've no idea."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, though arranging transportation there will no doubt be troublesome. But going back to your own problem. You realize if she wishes it Spectre Vasir would be able to call in local authorities to aid in bringing you in. While you have done no wrong in terms of local law, they would be forced to comply with a Council representative."

Samara's face closed down somewhat, and she looked seriously at the very young humans. It had taken her some time to realize how young they were, since she hadn't ever actually met a human before this, but she had, and it had astonished and appalled her in turn. "If you fight the local authorities or worse kill them, I will have to step in. My Code would demand I do so."

"That's fine. I doubt Vasir wants to draw that much attention. And even there, we don't have to kill her, just get her off our backs. Leave that to me." Ranma's grin was puckish, and O'taku felt a brief flare of sympathy for the Spectre. "I've got plans there..."

"If you wish to handle that aspect do so Ranma, but first talk to Rane'llie. I think we might need to leave planet quickly afterward."

"Meh, I sort of was hoping to anyway. I've completed enough of the armor plates to coat half the ship, and the locals can reheat the metals enough to add them into the existing superstructure without me." Ranma replied. "In fact, I've already been asking about a ship we could borrow for a time, and was offered a tiny tramp freighter, the sort we used to arrive here from the monastery. I'll have to come back in about three months, but until then we can fade into the black."

"You thought ahead?" Herb asked blankly, only to have to dodge a slap to the back of his head from the other boy.

Watching them Samara fought the strange urge to roll her eyes, but still stood up and followed them out. *I wonder what young Ranma has in mind for Spectre Vasir? Judging from his*

tone he seems to be going for humiliating, rather than painful, but I have to wonder if that is the soft option?

OOOOOOO

Later that night, Vasir stood outside of the hotel rooms her targets were staying in. Once she knew where they were, it was child's play to set up an ambush. A drone set up in the basement to cut the power to this floor, a few canisters of numbing agent, and another drone outside to make certain her targets were asleep before pumping in the gas, and that was it.

It would not have worked against a Biotic who was on her guard since a Barrier could have kept out the gas for a time until it became inert, but against two humans who relied on an entirely different school, Vasir hope it would work *They might have durability against physical attacks, but not attacks which target the nervous system.*

After a few minutes she used her omni-tool to hack the lock on the door, forcing it to iris open. She then entered, only to find that no one was in the room, not in the beds or on the chairs beside them. *No way, they didn't leave from the front... FUCK! Stupid Tela, you know these two can hop around on the rooftops, they could have left that way.*

She moved through the room towards the balcony, irritated beyond belief she had missed something like that, especially after she had viewed imagery of the two humans doing just that on Sijou. *Maybe they are still in sight... or maybe I can somehow pick up the trail, maybe hack into and use the traffic control grid to track them that way? I'll have to get in touch with the locals curse it, order a blanket lock down on all exiting traffic.*

Vasir was so angry with herself and so certain in her conclusion that the two humans had run away, that she stopped observing her surroundings. This was why she missed the trip wire strung up between the TV and one of the chairs. Tela felt the trip wire hit her shin and pull free, her instincts took over and she hurled herself forward rolling along the ground.

There was a bright explosion from both underneath the chair and below the TV but instead of the explosion Tela had feared, the blast simply sent a wave of something sticky over her lower legs and back, the only portions still within the blast radius. Pushing herself to her feet Vasir pulled out her pistol, having lost the rifles somewhere in the shadows of the room when she hurled herself forward. Once she made certain the area was clear and there was no follow on, she looked down at herself. "What in the heck is this?"

The 'this' in question was a bright fluorescent green paint which set against the background of her blue skin was quite simply ugly. But that was all, just paint. "Why the hell would they set a trap like that just to get paint on me? Are they trying to make me mad? Or maybe humiliate me?"

Ignoring the pain for now Tela moved out onto the balcony checking for traps there. Then she saw something that made her blood boil in a way she, as an Asari, should not have felt. There, out on a nearby roof, was Ranma. His omni-tool was activated on what she could see was a video recording function pointed in her direction. *So they do want to just make me mad, well congratulations boy, you succeeded! Fuck bringing them in the easy way, the Broker at least will pay just as much for their bodies!*

With that thought Tela began to fire her pistol with one hand while activating her Biotic powers. A Biotic Jump carried her to the rooftop where Ranma was standing, crashing down like a tiny meteor, cracking the rooftop. She then lashed out with a Biotic Slash towards Ranma's midriff but Ranma leaped over it.

Landing nearby Ranma laughed at Vasir, his entire body thrumming with eagerness. "Why so blue Vasir? Or should that be why so blue and green?" Laughing Ranma dodged again to one side, dodging a series of biotic enhanced bullets and Orbs from the Biotic Spectre, who then charged forward the moment she thought Ranma was off-balance.

Ranma however wasn't, and pushed up off the ground with just his toes, flipping up over her as he began to attack. His fists flashed downward, smashing into a hasty Biotic Shield, shattering it. the momentum of that allowed Ranma to remain in the air, launching several more attacks as he moved around Vasir.

As an Asari, Tela was used to being able to use her natural agility and biotics to always outmaneuver her opponent. But even having seen some videos of the two humans moving around and the fights in Torfan she hadn't been prepared for an opponent who was more mobile than her. She could deal with Ranma being in the air though, lashing out with Biotic Grabs and Pushes trying to set him off balance or to throw off his own attacks.

One of those attacks got through before she could get another Shield up. The blow hammered into her shoulder, shattering the armor there and tossing her backwards a few spaces. Pain blossomed an instant later, but Tela wasn't unused to pain, and she kept firing, finally hurling Ranma away with a Biotic Throw.

Feh, I thought an Asari Spectre would be better than this, Ranma grouched internally as he landed, launching himself forward. *I suppose I caught her on the back foot with all of this, reversing her ambush on her and all, but still she should be using her Biotics better than this. She can't use two powers at once, and there's a noticeable lag when she switches from one power to the next.* Against Benezia or even Usagi there was no lag and the two of them were much better at how they used their powers and enhanced their own physical abilities which Vasir didn't seem able to, at least not to the same degree.

Her omni-tool shifting into a knife configuration, Tela tried stab Ranma when he launched himself forward rather than create another Barrier between them which would have

been a better bet. Ranma smashed the knife to the side with one arm, his other fist hammering into Tela's chest shattered the armor there and hurling her backwards.

Tela grimaced in pain but rolled with the blow, bringing up her pistol once more reloaded her Biotic powers flaring out in the most massive Orb she could create. Ranma rolled to the side, avoiding it, then launched himself into a tackle rather than back into the air as Tela had thought. Instead she found herself grabbed around her legs and hurled to the ground. Before she could right herself she felt a blow to the temple, and then darkness closed in.

Standing up Ranma shook his head. "Geez, I thought these Spectres were supposed to be tough."

From a nearby rooftop O'taku, Usagi and Herb appeared from where they had been hiding the action, waiting to step in if needed or if Vasir had brought along allies. O'taku shook her head, staring at the unconscious and somewhat luminescent Spectre, taking it upon herself to answer Ranma's observation. "Well traditionally they are considered very tough, but I think despite her Biotic powers, Spectre Vasir isn't a frontline fighter. She's routinely sent into jobs that require infiltration. Her specialty is corporate espionage - both discovering said and using it - and sniping. When she closed with you she negated that advantage. You really do excel at angering people don't you?"

"Yep. Make 'em mad, make 'em stupid works every time." Ranma said with a grin. "Now, what to do with her..." Before either Asari could start to worry he had reached into his ki pocket and brought out another small can of paint, followed up by several permanent markers. "Usagi, remove her armor, nothing else!" Ranma glared at Usagi, who simply grinned back cheerfully. "We'll leave her tied up here and take her armor and omni-tool with us, leave her ID though."

About twenty minutes later, Vasir had been stripped of her armor, omni-tool and weapons. Ranma, Usagi and even O'taku began to write out little messages or images on her, in the case of Ranma, while Herb stood watch. They then left her there tied up, whereupon Ranma placed a small finishing touch.

Looking at it, Herb and O'taku exchanged a glance before looking at Ranma, their faces rather deadpan. "Really? 'Better luck next time'? Do you honestly think she needs any more reason to hate you?" Herb asked.

"Heh, no, but she hates me, the more she'll be angry and too quick to attack the next time. Just like my make 'em stupid technique, only on a strategic level." Ranma replied.

"Please don't try to explain away your sadism like that, it makes my head hurt." Herb replied, rolling his eyes.

Immediately after that, the four of them checked out of the hotel via their omni-tools and then made their way to the spaceport, where they quickly found the small tramp freighter

Rane'lle had agreed to loan them to get them away from Mostromos. Outside it however they found a surprise.

"Samara? What are you doing here?" Ranma asked, while the others looked on with various emotions visible on their faces.

"As I said, I have no way to discover the trail of Morinth here any longer. So I must perforce take your advice and move to planets upon which she might be making her home. Sister O'taku's suggestion also has merit. And this way, I can also keep an eye on her rather than try to decide which way the Code would demand I go. And this way, I can also take up your offer of aid."

Ranma and Herb looked at one another, then shrugged, with Ranma replying for them both. "We didn't have anything better to do for the next few months, so sure, sounds like fun. Let's go clean up Omega."

End Chapter

So there we are. I realize it might bother a lot of people, but now this story is going to go back into hibernation status for a long while due to lack of imagination fuel. There just aren't enough good fics in this fandom to help me fight my apathy towards the ME world and all of its stupidity and Deus Ex Machina. Mind you, if someone can find a few that aren't OC centric, feature a well-written Tali/main character romance that could help fuel a comeback. I just don't see it happening.