

I don't own Mass Effect (the ending, oh my god the horror, the horror!) or Ranma, not nearly enough Nabiki or Kasumi.

**Thank you for the great reviews so far, I have again corrected this chapter to the best of my ability.**

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## **Chapter 2: New Ways of Thinking, Old Ways of Kicking Ass**

Ranma woke up and almost negligently broke the last binding holding one of his legs as he stretched. Looking around at the seven gals around him Ranma noted absently that one of them, the one that looked like a 'matron' but acted like a 'maiden', the one who had been a stripper in Kurdack's fortress, was gone.

Ranma wasn't at all certain that he really understood what the terms 'maiden' and 'matron' meant, but they were connected somehow to age and maturity (and wasn't that an odd concept, that it was only age that determined maturity, hah, that idea never ran into Happosai) and the other Asari didn't seem to know how to treat her. Yet that really wasn't the most important thing on his mind just then.

*So that's what sex is like* he thought to himself, shaking his head, *wow, just wow*. That had been a lot of fun, but for some reason while they were involved his thoughts kept on going back to Kasumi and what might have been. The girls had pulled him from those thoughts rather quickly every time however. It had definitely been a learning experience in every sense of the world for both him and them.

Most of the asari around him were only called maidens because of where they were in the cycle of maturity that their people followed. This entire group had in fact been pretty experienced in terms of sex, which shouldn't have surprised anyone given the fact most of them had been slaves for varying amounts of time before Ranma and Herb came along. The asari matron and the in-betweeners were even more so, but being with Ranma had been incredible on many levels.

For one thing he was by far the fittest and most athletic human they had even imagined. He had more endurance than any human should ever have in their opinion, wearing them out one by one and then two by two. To add to this he was well endowed, not overly so like the krogan, but in the upper range for a human. And somehow, despite not knowing what to do at first Ranma was able to learn all the maiden's reactions to everything they were doing, and simply got better at giving them all pleasure as time went on. He went from inexperienced and simply following their instructions of just laying there and letting them do everything to fully participating and bordering on masterful. It turned out that Ranma could turn his ability to learn martial arts to other physical exertions, and his ability to read opponents had also come in handy in this new undertaking.

Then the asari matron had done the rather silly thing (in hindsight anyway) of trying to 'embrace eternity' with him.

The asari species did not reproduce like homo-sapiens did, despite the fact that most of their sexual organs were entirely the same (except for the fact that asari had no nerves around the anal area to make that an erogenous zone). Instead they reproduced by connecting their nervous systems to their lovers, and taking their DNA into them. Of course they could connect nervous systems and not take in the DNA. That served as simply a way to heighten the sexual experience.

The matron had thought it would simply take sex with Ranma to a whole other level, and she was right about that. But it was more the equivalent of expecting to take an elevator from one story to the next and going from the first floor to the 30th via a rocket propelled elevator.

She only lasted a few seconds of a screaming orgasm the likes of which she had never even thought could conceivably exist before she collapsed. Luckily most of the other maidens had already been out of it and didn't attempt the same thing.

For his part Ranma had felt someone connecting to his ki, a feeling he had never really ever felt before. Then the older asari that had been on top of him gyrating her pussy down onto his dick suddenly seemed to stiffen then spasmed and screamed like a madwoman. She also clamped like a vise around him, which made him stop questioning what the hell had happened and simply enjoy the sensation of cumming deep inside her.

Not wanting to wake them Ranma gently eased himself out from underneath the matron (whose name was Reeza T'velma, the others had never actually told him their names) and one of the others, then gently picked up the two that were on the floor and tucked them all into the giant bed. He quietly got dressed and made his way out the door, intent on finding Herb and some food.

Serendipitously Ranma found Herb in the cafeteria sitting down and thoughtfully sipping an asari tea. The asari teas were sort of like Asian teas in flavor at times, but also ran straight from there into alcoholic drinks, and this was right on the cusp of that line. Whether or not alien alcohol would affect a person of draconic blood Herb didn't know, but it was rather tasty, which was what he wanted right now.

He looked down at the screen of his omni-tool as he worked his way through of the files that he had taken from one of the head slavers. He had taken them on a whim, thinking the authorities might be able to use them to shut down any other slaver hideouts they mentioned, but that was before he really understood how weak-willed the council really was. So long as slavers kept their bases in the Skylian Verge, the Citadel council wouldn't act to take them out. The humans might however, and he was determined to hand this information over to them but that brought up another issue that he had found.

He looked up from his work as Ranma entered and smirked as he saw the younger man was wincing occasionally he walked. "Are your hips sore?"

"A little," said Ranma sitting down gingerly. "Not so much honestly, give me an hour or so and I'll be fine I think. What are you working on? And what do you think our next plan should be?"

Herb sighed angrily. "I don't like what I'm reading about the human systems alliance, and I don't like the Council even more."

Ranma grinned at him leaning back and crossing his legs as he put them on the table between them. "Now is that because you're not on the top of the food chain here, or something else?"

Rather than take offense Herb barked a laugh. "That might be true in a way. I do **NOT** like the idea of other people trying to have power over me, both as a descendent of the Dragon and as a prince. But it's more than that. When you are a ruler it isn't just a right. A King like myself or my father, we are bound by blood to the land we rule and to the well being of the individuals on that land. It is by that mandate that we rule, but we must also serve the land in turn. I see no reason to believe that that would be different even on a galactic scale, and the people who rule must be willing to make the tough decisions which are best for their people in the long run."

"The council has decided not to make war on the batarians because they don't want to appear as if they are trying to change their culture." he scoffed angrily spitting to the side contemptuously. "And this is what they tell their people when they complain about slaver raids on their outer colonies, it was actually a statement by them on the news: 'Well if you don't want to be raided don't live there!' I might have paraphrased a bit there, but that was the gist of it. It's the height of self-serving, lazy, shortsightedness!"

Ranma sat back, letting the other man get control of himself. He hadn't realized that Herb took being royalty that seriously, or in such a fashion, but it made sense. Leaders were supposed to make the tough decisions, not the ones that were easiest in short run but the best for their people and while not going to war with the batarians would be hard (or so Ranma supposed, he hadn't been impressed by them, but knew he didn't have any information to tell him how good their space forces were) it would save your people from their depredations. And who cared what the Batarians thought about you kicking their asses? "Well, at least the humans here seem to be sticking up for themselves."

Herb shrugged. "I have other issues with the System's Alliance, but I'll wait until you look over the information, I don't want to influence your opinion and I want to see what you think. In any event I'd estimate it would take us a about three or four days to come to grips with all the technology and information here, but I really want to delve into human history here."

He shook his head. "I haven't been able to find anything older than the 21st-century on the Internet here. We need to head to a human colony at some point, see if we can figure out if history is different from what we know, that'll tell us if we're in the future or an alternate dimension."

Ranma nodded but had his mind on other things. "My main problem is the amount of ki these guys have. Those four-eyed bastards were unbelievably weak. The asari with their biotics, they have some kind of energy in them, but it isn't ki. Even the humans don't have nearly as much as a normal human being would back where we came from."

Ranma shook his head. While he was learning his ki sight before and during his training with Master Vulkan he had routinely looked at other people's ki including just random passersby on the street. The ki levels of the humans he had thus far met in this dimension were so below what he was used to it was astonishing.

Herb nodded then actually shook his head a little bemused. "For some reason the quarians seem to have a little bit more, not a lot but a little. And you're right the asari don't have ki so much as some other kind of energy something that looks almost artificial." He shook his head. "I wish one of the lore Masters was here, I wouldn't even mind if it the lore master in question was an Amazon."

Ranma shrugged. "Nothin' we can do about that now. For the short term I want to find someplace to set up an old time smithy." Herb cocked an eyebrow and Ranma chuckled a little grimly. "While you let yerself get caught back on Torfan, I spent my most of my time dodging the girls that were interested in me and checking out a few of the heavy weapons that survived. Only found one of them in workin' order though," he shook his head.

The batarians had turned on one another with incredible ferocity, and while it had played well with their plans it had really surprised Ranma. He wondered idly if that was part of their culture or the fact they were all pirates, but in the end it didn't matter. "I didn't test it on myself of course, but trust me I don't think our body strengthening techniques would be up to speed stopping it. Hell, I think a sniper round to the head would be able to give us at least a concussion, maybe even knock one of us out completely. Anything else we could take though."

"So you're thinking him making some armor for us?" Ranma nodded. "Can you really make it light enough to allow us full mobility yet still protect us from heavy weapons?"

Ranma grinned, showing all his teeth and pulled out one of his gloves. He held it up to show Herb, who looked at it quizzically then gasped as Ranma flared a bit of ki into it, and the small wires that had previously simply been laying along the outer side of his fingers widened into armor plates covering each segment of his fingers with a bit of articulated armor. "I made these about two weeks after you left, with them I could probably punch through the outer armor of this ship. Trust me, if I can get a smithy set up and enough local metals to work with I

can make a suit of armor." He laughed suddenly. "I'm probably gonna model them after a game I once saw, just so you know. I thought it was the coolest combat sci-fi game ever!"

Ranma shook his head then as that thought brought up another problem. He handed his glove across to the other man to examine while he brought it up. "I'm still a little bothered about the lack of tech here. I can't imagine humanity, with all the sci-fi stuff Kasumi showed me, hasn't figured out more than the tech that is allowed by this 'element zero' crap. I want a lightsaber damnit!"

Despite the fact that the Musk dynasty were hidden well beyond civilization as the rest of the world knew it Herb had still heard about Star Wars and lightsabers. He chuckled, nodding agreement and the two of them sat there dreaming of wielding such a weapon for a time.

Their reverie was interrupted as the door to the cafeteria opened, and the asari matron Ranma was starting to think of as the in-betweener came in. Seeing the two martial artists she ran over and swiftly latched onto Ranma's side chattering excitedly in her own language.

Herb shook his head. "We seriously need to figure out how to get one of these translation chips implanted. Preferably quickly, the omni-tool is just too ungainly for everyday conversation."

Ranma nodded his head got a little or at least it looked like it, but it might have been just from the asari girl shaking him. Despite the fact that he knew the girl was probably older than him by several hundred years, possibly even older than Cologne, the term 'girl' seemed to fit her more than anything else especially at moments like this. With difficulty he extricated one arm and tapped the omni-tool with his fingers, and the translation of what the girl was saying popped up. "Hey hey, last night was really great, can we go again, or oooh.... can you show me that stuff you did back when you killed those guys, like that martial arts stuff, it was so cool! And that stuff you did with your energy, it was so awesome!" and she began to make noises, like a child trying to describe magical attacks or something.

"Can you understand me?" Ranma asked. The girl looked blank, and he sighed and tried to fiddle with the Omni tool enough to let her see the translation. She looked at it and nodded indicating she could read it. "What's your name?"

The girl answered and he looked at the name as it popped up. The last name didn't mean anything to them but the first. Ranma believed in coincidences, but what were the odds of meeting an alien girl with that name? "Your name is Usagi?" He asked incredulously.

Herb looked at him questioningly then looked at the translation and the first name of the asari and blinked in shock recognizing it as indeed the Japanese word for 'rabbit'.

Surprisingly both martial artists recognized it from a single popular source. Ranma had read it a few times as a girl to blend in a time or two, and Herb had seen the videos a few times

because Mint and Lime developed crushes on two of the girls in it (Pluto for Lime and Ami for Mint) and he had to drag them out of several hotels along their journey which showed it.

The two exchanged a glance and Ranma shook his head. "I swear if she's this universe's equivalent of Sailor Moon I'm going to scream."

"Well," Herb replied, chuckling a little manically, "At least we haven't seen any talking cats yet, or the equivalent around here anyway."

Ranma shuddered at the very idea, but shook it off quickly. "If we meet up with the equivalent of Rei, the one from Mars with the red striped fuku? I'm going to have to kill someone, preferably her. I've had enough of violent bitches who attack anything they see as perverted already."

"I should think you would have a lot of help. After all most of the asari we've met so far wouldn't be safe from such themselves," said Herb dryly.

Ranma turned back to the girl in question who was still hanging onto him. She hadn't followed their conversation much, but hadn't relinquished her grip either, and he blushed as he took in what she was wearing. Most asari didn't seem to be as body conscious as humans normally were, but this one didn't seem to care about nudity at all. She was wearing some kind of bathing suit thing that barely covered her breasts and pussy underneath what looked like a white see-through negligee.

At that moment the door opened, and several of the asari and human children rushed in, and began to tickle and play with Usagi.

The two captains and the others who had taken over organizing the freed slaves back on Torfan had decided that they would send as many family groups with children out as they could aboard the frigate along with its original crew and a few others. This helped the food situation immensely and got the kids and their parents, none of whom were militia or army trained, out from underfoot.

Both Ranma and Herb had been impressed that not a single turian had decided to try and leave with them. Instead captain Sukat had taken over the defense of the city and his entire crew had set to with a will to prepare defenses. Ranma and Herb had both decided watching this that while the turian government and army might have given them a bad impression because of the stupidity surrounding their initial war with humanity, there was something to be said for the turians as individuals after all.

Ranma looked at the kids trying to tug Usagi away and looked down at his omni-tool. According to what the translator was saying she had used a game on some kind of console that a few of the adults had rigged as a game system for the kids during the trip (mostly to keep them out of trouble). Usagi had beaten all their high scores and then saved the file under 'Usagi

was here'. Now they were all begging her to show her how to play the game, and she was nodding along happily and being pulled away.

The two martial artist looked at one another and since this looked like fun Ranma grinned and raced after the kids.

Herb shook his head in amusement, and went back to his work. He began to look up information on the planet they were going to, a planet called Sijou which was on the outer edge of asari space. It was the home system of the frigate they were currently in, called *Sijou's Eyes* and was actually more developed than most systems where slavers and pirates could operate with impunity. The raid that took this ship was extremely daring really.

He frowned angrily at the thought then activated a recording of a business deal that he had found among one Kurdack's data-files. The man must've been a complete idiot to keep files like this, or perhaps more intelligent then I wish to give him credit for. He might've kept such for blackmail purposes or defensive, since if the other person decided to move against him this could be used to send the authorities after the other person.

On the screen was a human smoking a cigar and leaning back in a chair. Most of his features were covered by shadow only letting the cigar and the hand that held it be seen along with a slight glow where his eyes might be, which was almost certainly artificially produced. His voice came out in English, then translated as part of the recording into some other language Herb couldn't read. "I'll have a ship rendezvous with you at the usual coordinates, good job on filling your end of the bargain."

Another voice responded, but Herb had already set up his omni-tool to show a translation for it. "Your information about the training trip for the frigate *Sijou's Eyes* was spot on, so I am quite happy to fulfill my end of the bargain and hand over a few of the asari we captured. Your information on the human colonies defenses was good as well, but I have to ask why you are so willing to sell out your own people like that. It is a most commendably pragmatic attitude, but one not often found in humans."

The man puffed on his cigar for a moment before answering. "A necessary sacrifice. The authorities are closing in on half a dozen of my group's cells, and your attack will allow me to spirit my agents away in the confusion, as well as a few scientists that I have had my eye on for a while. And Cerberus needs to get a handle on biotics most human biotics are snatched up for training too quickly for my agents to snag them. As such we only have a few human ones working for us, and of course I'm not going to study them as intensely as I will be able to study asari. Of course this will also make humanity strike back at you slavers even harder, and will show the rest of the universe we are stronger than they think. For too long has the council held back humanity fearing our abilities and strengths and the Systems Alliance has allowed it to happen. The attack will be a rallying cry, and we can show the universe that they cannot hold us back! You have the time for that assault of course, so you and yours can get out in time? I would hate to lose such a... valuable contact."

"I get the slaves and you get your goods, eliminate many of my rivals, and we possibly start a nice little war, with all the opportunities involved therein" said the alien voice again. "So nice doing business with you Mr. Illusive Man." The voice broke out into a chuckle at something, but whatever it was Herb couldn't follow the 'joke'.

"Indeed," said the human so addressed, but something in his manner seem to think that he was already thinking of double-crossing this labor, and Herb snorted in disgust.

As a prince he knew he would possibly be called upon to sacrifice himself and a few of his people to save others, but this man wasn't the leader of his people, he was a parasite feeding off them. He wasn't a leader he was a user, who didn't feel the deaths he was causing, he didn't understand that people's lives mattered. They were simply pawns to him his entire attitude screamed it to Herb's eyes even with most of his body out of sight and despite wanting to couch his actions in rhetoric.

He reminded Herb rather strongly of one of the Emperors of his line who had been killed by his son the moment that son had reached puberty. He had been among the most hated Musk Emperors ever, much like Domitian of Rome. To say that Herb loathed this man on sight was an understatement and he made a special note of the name of him and this Cerberus group of his.

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Ranma gaped at the video screen as beside him Usagi began to dance in place, certain portions of her anatomy jiggling in a way that would have distracted any other heterosexual male of any species. But Ranma simply kept on staring at the screen as around him the kids giggled at the face he was making. "I cannot believe you just beat **me** in a fighting game! One more time!" he shouted but the kids all piled in and grabbed the remote from him. He pouted and leaned back, and his lap was immediately taken over by a few of the human kids and two of the asari one of whom perched on his shoulder. He shook his head and sighed.

He was okay with kids, simply because they could be a lot of fun if they weren't brats or too needy, but his notoriety among the kids here was a little too much for him to be happy with.

To the side several parents stood, including two fathers of the kids now trying to beat Usagi down in a melee of six players. Both of them were chuckling in good-natured commiseration with the young man their kids were climbing all over at present. The mothers however thought it was rather cute, and a few began to record the scene on their omni-tools.

Ranma noticed this and sighed again. This was going to be a long trip.

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Herb looked up as the door to the cafeteria opened once more, and one eyebrow rose in surprise. The massive Elcor they had first run into in the same pens with the turians moved slowly through the cafeteria. It wasn't so much that he was ponderous, but as if he was simply being very careful of every little move he made. It made for an interesting sight to his trained eyes, and he wondered if that control was a personal thing, if he was his people's equivalent of a martial artist or soldier, or if it was an evolutionary trait for his species.

The being sat in a corner well away from the other tables. The Elcor had apparently decided to come in to eat at odd hours, primarily because he didn't like crowds. Again how much that was because of personal preference or because of his societal desires, Herb didn't know. On the other hand the large being was almost as strong as Lime, and didn't seem to have his former bodyguard/manservant's self-control.

Herb decided to get a different perspective on this universe, and walked over to join the large creature at his table. "Excuse me," he said in a pleasant manner, after all good manners cost him nothing, "Would you mind answering some questions for me?"

The elcor slowly looked up at him, every move it made slow yet controlled, despite the fact that it held in one hand a rather delicate teacup though where that had come from Herb did not know. "Amused answer: I can respond to questions, though the type of question you would like my help with over anyone else eludes me."

Herb sat down across from him wondering how much to explain then shrugged. It was going to become public knowledge at some point anyway, and there was little that anyone could do with the information of where he and his friend came from. The secrets of their skills and what extra ability they had would remain a secret of course.

"Ranma and I are from another dimension," he said flatly, "Or at least that is the supposition we are following the moment. We haven't studied enough human history here yet to make a real conclusion, but that seems to be the case anyway. As such I'm trying to get a handle on the government and the universe here, and I was wondering if you could tell me what you thought about the Council and the big three as well as give me your opinion on how they will respond to us."

Herb was trying to figure out how the Council would react to their presence and otherworldly abilities. While he was quite capable even eager and willing to enter into any kind of open fight, he didn't want to be constantly looking over his shoulder for ambushes or checking their food for knockout drugs and always be on the run.

On the other hand, he most certainly did not want to join with this counsel in whatever capacity they tried to see fit. He was a dragon, a prince, he would not be subsumed or subservient to anyone else. And the idea of making Ranma subservient to unilateral rules or laws was laughable. Ranma only followed laws as far as he believed they were necessary, after that he followed his own sense of honor. Neither of them were very happy with the way the

Citadel council simply sat on its collective ass and did nothing while the batarians had been raiding the humans and their own people with impunity, and if what Herb had found out about how they treated the quarians was accurate, his opinion of them would become even lower.

Kundra gazed at him, its alien face not showing any of its interior shock. Herb simply waited, having gotten the impression that the alien wouldn't respond quickly even verbally and would only answer after it had been able to come to grips with what he had said.

For his part the elcor surgeon was at first astonished then quizzical, almost scornful and finally somewhat accepting. Whether or not it was the truth the human in front of them obviously believed it, and it did seem to explain the odd powers he and his fellow human had shown when they had made their campaign against the pirates in Torfan.

He wasn't going to say yes or no to that the idea, but if the human believed that to be the case he was indeed in dire straits and needed information. "Thoughtful statement: I am able to accept your supposition, though logic and my own incomplete understanding of physics and known sciences would dictate that it would be impossible. Analytical response: in relation to how the top three are seen by those of us who are not represented on the council, many races I know resent it. Your people, humans for example, do not like the fact that the original three dominate the council so much. Amused comment: My own people tend to take a longer view, and ignore such things short term irritations. Proud statement: On top of this our society and economy are mostly independent, with few imports or exports that we cannot make on our own."

"I take it from your tone that that is not normal?"

"Unequivocal response: That is indeed the case. Every other race that is part of the council have their economy welded to that of the council as a whole. The humans to a lesser extent as they are still relatively new to the galactic community but they become more and more a part of the larger whole year after year."

"I read something about medical gel?" Herb asked.

"Grateful statement: Yes, it is one of the major exports of the human worlds, and one of their greatest discoveries one even my own people make use of. And one that has made my own profession as a doctor much easier. All the races of the council now make their own, but the human's medigel is still considered slightly better quality, and they still make much more of it."

Herb frowned thoughtfully. He had not been impressed by what he had seen of the alliance, comparing them to his father's court and finding them wanting in many areas. For one thing, was the fact that they had not forced the turians to pay recompense for starting a war for such an idiotic reason. Despite his approval of captain Sukat that stuck in his craw and hurt his pride as a human himself.

For another, they seemed to be expanding far more than they could control which was idiotic in the extreme. Any leader worth his salt knew that you didn't expand into disputed territory until you could supply your troops or in this case, protect you civilians. Unless the humans here propagated far faster than those of his own dimension (far more than even China before the one child law) then there was no need for them to expand to the degree that they were, and it left them too open to attacks from the slavers and from machinations like those the so-called Illusive Man seemed to be using.

He was also concerned about their foreign-policy which seemed idiotic and schizophrenic at best. At worst it looked as if they themselves didn't really know what they wanted. Some factions wanted to break from the council laws and go their own way, others wanted to get closer to the council so long as they could earn a seat among the ruling triumvirate.

Herb was incredibly unimpressed with the amount of information he could come up with about the ambassador to the Council, who was named Udina. He sounded like the kind of stupid fop that appeared sometimes in his father's courts before being challenged and killed in an honor duel. The Musk dynasty was not a place for weakness or those whose only skill was to talk and there seemed to be a lot of that in the Alliance for some reason.

On top of all that was the growing xenophobic nature of some of the human responses to things that the Illusive Man seemed to be at the heart of which he, as a direct descendent of a dragon and not exactly entirely human, looked at with narrowed eyes. On the other side the humans were looked at like upstarts and dangerous by many turians and others. These two feelings weren't everywhere and maybe it was the fact that he as an outsider saw more of the game, but it was definitely there.

"How do you think that the Council will respond to Ranma and I?"

The elcor was silent for a moment thinking, his body utterly still as he did so. This was a response to evolutionary stimuli, since the gravity on his homeworld world was so heavy that a single fall could prove fatal even to one of his race. "Thoughtful guess: I do not know how they would react that would probably be affected by your own choices. Neutral Query: What are you two going to do?"

"We don't know yet," said Herb honestly. "We just want to go to ground somewhere, get out of the spotlight and away from people while we get a handle on things here. I would personally like at least a week and access to a better source of information about human history before we decide our next move."

"Astonished statement: that will not happen," said the elcor. "Clarification: You do not seem to comprehend the speed of rumor and news. No matter what you do the slaves you freed, including myself, will share how you did it at the earliest opportunity, and that will spread like a contagion through the intranet."

Herb chuckled a little. "We have certain skills that will be able to get us away if we can get out and away from the ship quickly enough. My main question is how forcefully will the council look for us, and what will happen if we need to defend ourselves?"

Again the elcor was silent for several minutes as it cogitate it then it's fingers twitched in the elcor equivalent of a shrugged. "Uninformed supposition: if that is the case then the Council probably would search for you with orders to bring you in unharmed. They may even assign a Spectre to the task. Hesitant addition: Other 'special interest' groups might not be so forgiving and I do not have any information on how the human Systems Alliance is likely to respond to the two of you."

Herb nodded thoughtfully then shrugged. "We'll see how they respond one way or another, thank you for sharing your opinion with me. Now, could you tell me some more about your species? It is always better to get information straight from the source rather than secondhand after all."

"Good humored response: I can indeed." For the next hour the elcor filled Herb in on his people, the fact that his home planet's gravity was several times more than any of the other species home-worlds and how that affected their evolution. He explained how even today their society was built around the small clan with a assembly of elders as the main governmental body, and what that had meant when they arrived on the galactic scene.

Herb listened to it all and an idea began niggling at the back of his mind. After all, he and Ranma were far stronger than any humans here, and if other species had such a hard time the elcor home planet it might be a good hiding place for the two of them. *It could also be good training*, he thought to himself smiling a bit at the thought. *Wasn't there some kind of gravity generator or something in that fighting anime that Mint and Lime liked so much?*

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About two hours later Ranma came back and was amused to find Herb still in the cafeteria looking over some information on his omni-tool. He chuckled and grabbed some food from the dispenser, some kind of nutrient paste in a tube (the slaves back on Torfan didn't want to send a lot of their food supply along with this trip, and all the real food had to be saved for the kids) then sat down in the chair across from him. "Hey, you still tryin' to figure out what we should do?"

Herb looked up with him a little irritated. "OF course I am, we can't all be carefree fools like you." Ranma merely chuckled and Herb rolled his eyes, finding some of his irritation fading swiftly. "In any event, I wasn't trying to make solid long term plans, that would be impossible. No, I was looking over the information about these Spectres the council seems so enamored of."

"Huh. After I got out from under the kids and Usagi I looked over the information about biotics. I'd give ki an edge over most, even the most well trained Asari Matriarch. Sure as hell if we can keep the fight close there ain't gonna be many who can face us." Ranma had long since gotten over his surprise and fear at being so far from everything he had once known, and was now most definitely looking on the bright side. "Still, the Spectres huh, yeah I didn't like the sound of how they're chosen, but the idea itself was a good one."

Ranma laughed a little, leaning back and looking at Herb with a searching expression. "You know, like those stories of traveling monks and martial artists who solve problems and righted wrongs. Those stories always kind of appealed to me, though the martial artists were never connected to the government, in fact they were more loyal to the people than to the assholes in charge. And I do love traveling."

"There is a point in there somewhere Ranma, but why don't you spit it out." Herb responded.

"I'm saying you're over-thinking things oh prince of dragons," he said tossing his now empty tube at Herb who caught it deftly and glared at him. "Here's all ya need to now, leave all the rest for later. You're free from all your obligations and I'm free from mine. There ain't no old man to try and drag me along on some dumbass scheme. No Emperor to look down on ya because of yer recent change or any obligations to him or your people, since there's no way you can be held to any such given what happened. So, let's go **exploring**! We have an entire frackin' galaxy just waiting for us to explore! Screw the powers that be, let's just wander where we wish, when we wish!"

"So you're saying we shouldn't ally ourselves with anyone and simply go it our own way? I don't know if that's even possible." Herb responded skeptically, yet deep down the idea definitely appealed to him.

Somehow Ranma picked up on it and grinned. "Possible or improbable were going to do it. You can't tell me you don't feel some wanderlust either."

Herb scowled at him angrily always a little irritated that the other boy was able to read him so easily.

For his part Ranma had gone beyond seeing the bright side of things and was well on his way to truly enjoying the idea of making a new life for himself in this galaxy. He had enjoyed traveling with his father both before and after he began to realize that the old man wasn't exactly a good role model. He loved seeing new places getting to know new people and learning their local martial arts of course, but that was just part of his enjoyment.

Ranma had also sort of wanted to have a home to come back to at times, but his time at the Tendo's did not at all fill that criterion after Kasumi left. Even now and despite knowing it had been the right thing to do, that memory still hurt. Here however, he could have his cake

and eat it too since a ship was necessary to travel between planets and could double as their home.

Herb did indeed have a bit of wanderlust that Ranma could apparently see far more clearly than he could wish, and the idea of exploring the universe appealed him greatly. His search was more for knowledge than for fun, but in the end it was the same thing, and like Ranma he had no desire whatsoever to tie himself down with any of the powers that be in this galaxy.

Ranma saw his friend was wavering and continued persuasively. "We'll need to figure out a way to buy a ship of course and outfit it the way we want it to be, but with our skills that should be pretty simple. And maybe we should stay around just long enough to be given a reward or something for saving all these slaves."

Herb frowned thoughtfully at that. "We probably shouldn't, but I... I'll agree to buying a ship as a short term goal at least. But we do need to get some kind of translation chip implanted, I would vote for the elcor Khundra. I talked to him earlier, he's a surgeon, he owes us for his freedom and he seems a trustworthy sort."

Ranma nodded enthusiastically. "Sounds like a plan. But, that's enough planning for now," Ranma went on, grinning and cracking his neck. "I thought of something a few minutes ago after I finished playing with the kids and Usagi; you and I never finished our fight back on Earth. We never got to see who is better since we last saw one another, you sucker-punching piece of lizard shit." Ranma knew he always thought better after a good fight after all, and didn't think it would be any different for his royal friend.

Herb blinked at the sudden shift in conversation and the sudden insult, then began to laugh low in his throat. "Simple," he said, "you make everything so damn simple as if nothing complicated matters!" He stood up swiftly, kicking the table which had been bolted to the floor up at Ranma. Ranma simply grabbed the edge and flipped with it midair, landing in a crouch on its top as it came back down to the ground. "Fine, let's see how good you really are, you, you pig-tailed punk!" Herb shouted then shot forward faster than most humans would've been able to follow.

Ranma wasn't most people however and he matched Herb's speed easily, hands flashing and parrying as he leaped over a kick to land one of his own on the older boy's chest.

The battle seesawed back and forth, moving from one end of the cafeteria to another. Both of the combatants tried to gain the other hand using the various chairs and other obstacles, but they did not succeed, though they did also try not to damage the furniture too much.

Herb shook some blood from his mouth as he tried to tag Ranma with a kick, but Ranma brought his hands down, smacking his leg down and using it to power his momentum as he

back-flipped away, landing briefly on the bar on this side of the cafeteria, his leg lashing out, but Herb caught it and pulled, punching Ranma three times in the chest before he turned and tried to slam Ranma down back-first onto the deck.

Ranma hand's went up past his head, catching him right before impact and he kicked out first with one foot, getting Herb to release his other leg, then with a mule kick that sent Herb skittering backward. With a roar they charged again, meeting in the center of the room where they kicked it up a notch. The fight continued for two hours, neither fighter giving an inch, yet neither trying to really kill the other either.

At that point Usagi and a few of the parents came in to make something for the kids and for themselves then stopping looking on in shock as the two humans that had rescued them exchanged blows faster than any of them could see. They were simply blurs, their bodies the only thing visible as their legs and feet were moving too quickly for anyone there to follow.

Usagi looked on in awe, her eyes getting wider and wider as she practically bounced in place. The rest of them however were too busy recording what they were seeing and gasping in astonishment to notice her very un-asari like expression.

Ten minutes after the onlookers arrived the two ki users called a halt, more because both of their stomachs rumbled than anything else. Ranma stepped back grinning despite a split lip and aching ribs. "That knock all that stupid complicated crap out of your head? You ain't been chosen as the man to solve all the problems you're finding Herb, don't burn yourself out trying to see the big picture, just live in the now and have fun."

Herb laughed, feeling much more upbeat than he had, and feeling a surprising rush of freedom wash over him. He wondered for a moment if he had ever truly been free before, and concluded that no, he hadn't and he was looking forward to this. "You do have a way with words my friend. I also notice that you didn't use any of your energy attacks."

"Neither did you," said Ranma shrugging. "After all, I don't want to know what would happen if we really got out of control on a ship." The two laughed, then sat down to eat some (or more in Ranma's case) of the pre-prepared meals, as the rest of the people came forward gasping in astonishment and trying to ply them with questions.

Eventually Usagi was able to worm her way forward to latch onto Ranma again, and snuggled his arm between her breasts as she tried to get him to answer her questions. She didn't succeed, but she came far closer than the others, and when she decided to take it up a notch, actually guiding Ranma's hand down toward her privates and whispering promises into his ear Ranma blushed a bright red and fled, with Usagi in hot pursuit.

This sight for some reason made Herb remember a silly American cartoon with a rabbit in it, though in the cartoon it was the rabbit that was running away. At the image his

imagination provided the prince of dragons broke into a gale of laughter, surprising all the people around him, and for a time silencing their questions.

OOOOOOO

The next day Ranma and Herb were on the frigate's bridge as they neared the first mass relay. The mass relays were, according to the data the two had looked at, were the real backbone of interstellar populations, allowing them to move from system to system far, far faster than any other current technology could.

Ranma and Herb stared at the massive thing. Made of unknown material, larger by a factor of a thousand than anything made by man, the gates looked like an ornamental kunai to their eyes, with twin prongs at one end and a ring at the other containing concentric rings that glowed when they were powered up. Ranma however couldn't shake the feeling he had since learning about the citadel having been built long before the Asari found it, a certain wariness brought about by his adventures with ancient magic and other things. The fact no one else here saw it bothered him as well. After all, the things had been apparently built by the Protheans, who had mysteriously disappeared (and that had been funny, seeing that even serious history texts called their disappearance a mystery, most of them not even speculating how or why it had happened) fifty thousand years ago.

Even with mass relays however it would take them about two weeks to get back to what most of those onboard called 'civilization'. Most of the mass relays in the Skylian Verge were the sort called secondary relays, which could interact with any around them in a short area. If it was a primary, they could zoom from one side of the known galaxy to the other, but with only secondary relays they would have to traverse from system to system in jumps moving towards their destination. Actually if they had access to the greater intranet, the two would have put this time to excellent use, as it was, all they could access was the ship's web, and they had already gone through most of it.

As the two martial artists watched, the central section of the trio of rings began to glow blue, and space inside the ring seemed to shiver and waver. The Eye moved forward entering the ring and suddenly the view blanked as they entered the relay corridor.

At the same time the ring began to spin and glow Herb and Ranma gasped, blinked then shook their heads. Something very odd had happened there, and both of them resolved not to use their ki sight during a jump ever again. Ranma in particular was clutching at his head, Herb was merely grimacing and rubbing one temple. The two shared a glance And Ranma muttered, "What the hell was that?"

Herb shrugged. 'I don't know, some kind of 'feedback' backlash, I've never felt the like before.' He shrugged off his curiosity for now, they had more important things to worry about than why the mass relay seemed to almost attack their ki sight. "Come on, we've got an appointment with the doctor." Ranma grimaced, but nodded and the two left the bridge.

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The trip continued uneventfully, well for a given value of uneventful. Ranma and Herb got their translation chips installed easily enough, and enjoyed actually talking to the others in Galactic. Unfortunately for the Asari maidens, and in particular matron Reeza, Ranma wasn't interested in having another romp. He had enjoyed himself, but he felt that sex was something you should only do with someone you had an emotional connection with, and while he liked them all well enough he didn't care for them like that. Some of them were determined to change that, but frankly they tried too hard, scaring him off further.

Herb too turned down most of their attention, disappearing into the depths of the ship to continue to familiarize himself with the technology and history of this universe as much as he could. He too hoped to have an emotional connection with his partner, especially now that he had finally solved all the mysteries of the human form.

Now that they could actually talk Usagi made herself insufferable by constantly trying to nag Ranma about teaching her, offering any kind of sexual favor she could think of to get him to agree. But she was so cheerful and friendly Ranma didn't have the heart to turn her down or tell her she probably couldn't learn his tricks. So instead he gave her some exercises to raise her overall stamina and speed. Her physical fitness and coordination were already extremely high, both from her time as a stripper and surprisingly from what the other asari could spot as advanced commando training.

After he found that out Ranma and Herb took to sparring every other day with her and a few of the others. The maidens were only too happy to get some training (and groping) in on the two martial artists, and both of them learned a lot about their biotic abilities. While none of the asari were experts it definitely gave them an idea of what biotics could do and how to counter them.

The Barrier and Throw powers were decent, but Stasis didn't work on the two martial artists as all they had to do to break out was flare their ki, and Lift was useless against them, since they were both as at home in the air as they were on the ground. Shockwave and Slam were better, but couldn't cause enough damage to put them down. Orbs were decent and quick, but easily countered or dodged. Usagi mentioned a few other powers, but as she was the only one who even knew their names, Herb and Ranma couldn't plan for them. In the main however Ranma was proven correct. If they could close the distance and keep it close, none of the biotic users could match them.

The asari maidens in turn were becoming stronger, faster and better than they had ever expected they could but were chagrined to learn how incredibly they were outmatched physically. Usagi and the others who had seen them in action (or slept with either of them) knew they had endurance and strength beyond anything they had ever heard of, even krogan, but to be beaten at speed was something no asari commando could ever have imagined.

Now, about halfway to their destination the group was resting sipping from zero-g rated bottles of water. Usagi looked over at Ranma poking him in the side. "Hey, why does my translation chip pop up the word rabbit sometimes when you say my name in your native language? What is it?"

Ranma shrugged. "In Japanese names most times have second meanings, your translator is possibly picking up on that. Usagi means rabbit in Japanese." He looked at his omni-tool flipping through it trying to find a picture to show her. The two ki users proficiency with the devices went up daily and he found what he was looking for quickly. Raising the omni-tool into the air, he showed Usagi the picture there. It was of a white fluffy bunny, about the size of his two hands put together, with large floppy ears button eyes and a pink nose.

Usagi squealed in delight and grabbed his arm as she looked at the picture. "Ooh it's so cute! I wonder where I could get one, it would be a great pet!"

The other Asari rolled their eyes at their acquaintances antics. Usagi was actually well into her matron years, and should have been much more mature than this, but for some reason they didn't understand she oscillated wildly from acting like a young girl to acting like a curious maiden, and also had a surprising amount of training in biotic and commando warfare. It was very strange to them, and even the idea that it was probably caused by her time as a slave didn't make it any easier. Being around her made them uneasy.

After a few minutes of exclaiming over the picture Usagi turned to Ranma. "Wait so if names in Japanese mean different things, what does Ranma mean?"

Ranma blushed a little and tried to avoid the question, but Herb replied from where he was leaning against the wall. "It means wild horse."

Ranma glared at him, but Usagi merely brought up one finger to touch her chin thoughtfully. "Oh, that makes sense I guess."

The maidens in the room that hadn't been among those to jump Ranma tried to ask her what she meant, but Ranma successfully interrupted her and the training continued.

**OOOOOOO**

Three days later, the *Sijou's Eyes* exited the mass relay out into its home system, and immediately began to broadcast its arrival and the amazing news it carried, both officially and not officially. The asari and the others, not realizing and in many ways not caring that their saviors wanted to remain anonymous for a time, began to broadcast over the extranet as soon as their systems stabilized after the jump.

While the Captain made a formal report all of this information hit the web, and was immediately picked up by several interested parties. This included the Council itself, eventually

anyway. At first it would be seen by several lower-level functionaries. The human Systems Alliance see it first. they had several spies set up to monitor for any information about slaving, slavers and any bases including and especially the one that the two martial artists had taken out, which their military was even then in the process of planning an assault for.

The STG, the salarian equivalent of spec. ops (and dark ops and every other kind of operations forces you could care to name) also noticed it, but because they only thought based on what could be proven with logic and thoughtful reasoning they discarded it almost immediately as fiction for a time, until more evidence made itself known later.

The turians did the same until that is the captain Surak got back and sent his own report into his former superiors. The turian people always believed their own people's version of events over anyone else's, and his word would give the rumors about Ranma and Herb's abilities more weight.

The Shadow Broker, a major crime boss specializing in espionage, information gathering and selling also did the same, but decided to send in the local chapter of the Blue Suns to see if there was anything to the videos and if so, to bring them in. This, like most plans that involved Ranma, would not turn out the way he wished.

OOOOOOO

The Illusive Man looked at the video one of his people had just sent him marked urgent and scoffed. "Is there a reason why you brought this to my attention?" he said icily, indicating without any special inflection that there had better be or else. "All it looks like is some old time b-rated martial arts video."

"I-it's real Sir," said the agent on the other line. "It's coming in from the asari planet Sijou, it and others like it are literally flooding the extranet. Apparently these two humans showed up on Torfan, a slaver base in the virge then began a campaign against the slavers that wiped them out. All of the former slaves are free and extolling the fact these two saved them along with their odd powers. It's coming from dozens of sources, all of them showing this video or others taken by omni-tools."

Illusive man steepled his fingers in front of his face, one eyebrow rising in surprise. If that was true these two represented an entirely new phase of human evolution, or perhaps scientific discovery. He ignored the fact that he was supposed to have gotten a shipment of asari slaves in return for it the information he had passed on, knowing that his agents within the alliance military might be able to abscond with some when they went in against Torfan two day from now. Their task would apparently be much easier however if what his agent was saying was correct.

He frowned at the image, watching as one of them, the one with a pigtail fought his way through an entire crew of slavers with a little asari girl perched on his shoulders. It was obvious

that they were at best anti-slaver but they could also be pro-alien, which would be unfortunate. He asked the air above his desk "Do we have any strike teams near Sijou rated for capture rather than assassination?"

His secretary's voice answered quickly from a small speaker set into his desk. "No sir, none of our strike teams are anywhere nearby. We have a agent on the ground, one of our scientists was there to pick up a shipment of medical data. Codename Dasher, he works with agent Lawson as her procurement officer."

The Illusive Man smiled thinking of one of his most capable up and coming agents, the brilliant and beautiful agent Lawson. Her beauty was only surpassed by the mind behind that beauty. He couldn't bring up an image to go with the codename Dasher though. When he looked at the picture in his files for that name he saw a thin, almost effeminate man with an utterly bland face, so normal he could disappear into the crowd.

His musings were interrupted by his secretary. "Sir, we just picked up a bounty for the two in the video sent to Sijou's chapter of the Blue Suns. They are to be detained and brought to a location specified later."

TIM nodded thoughtfully. It would seem someone else, and he had a few guesses as to who, had the wherewithal in place to go for the hard sell or was possibly trying to ascertain if the video was in fact real. Regardless it left him an opportunity. "Have Dasher move in to observe the two targets the moment they exit that ship, don't let them go to ground but don't engage them. Once the Blue Suns attack, have him upload real-time video to one of our drop off points then forward it to me here. If what is in these videos proves accurate these two men are a fantastic resource that we must turn to our purposes."

**OOOOOOO**

Another person was monitoring the information in the Sijou star system, and even though it wasn't the information she was here to look for, she was still in a position to act upon that information.

The asari commando Shiala looked up in shock as her boss did something completely out of character spitting out the mouthful of warm tea she had just been drinking and gasping, thumping her own chest, as if she had just been scared like a little child during that odd human holiday called Halloween.

The two of them had come to this planet in search of information on a spectre that her mistress, Matriarch Benezia was concerned had gone rogue. Their party had bought an apartment in the capital city here, and Benenzia put her considerable abilities to work on the local datanet.

While her mistress was doing this Shiala went out to look for information on the ground with her fellow asari commandos, a core of 50 highly trained biotic soldiers. They were trained even more than the run-of-the-mill military commandos in both espionage and combat by their Matriarch, one of the most powerful biotics her people could boast, though she kept that information to herself. She was also one of the more militaristic matriarchs, and was actually one of The 29, the ruling body of the asari, even if she was relatively new to that position.

Most people, even many asari, thought that counselor Tevos was the leader of the asari race but she was not. Her rulings had to be ratified if they had any impact on the asari people by 28 most respected (and oldest) matriarchs. They came from all walks of life, military, politics, industry, science, even the food industry. Combined they could bring over 22,000 years of accumulated experience to any issue. Most of the time they chose to simply let Tevo's decisions go, but if they spoke, it was with the word of law, and even Tevos would have to bow to the majority.

It had only happened once at the very beginning of her tenure, when she had tried to get a law passed that allowed the STG free reign on all asari planets regardless of local law, but the others did not stand for it, and vetoed it immediately. Tevos however continued to think that working more closely with the other two major powers was the best idea. Yet her beliefs were not well received by the others of The 29, who were always on the lookout for other laws like that one. They believed that the asari and the other races should stand apart militarily, so there was a sense of checks and balances.

Benezia was the youngest of this body and the most active personally. She did much of our own legwork, which was admirable in their species and held several beliefs which directly contradicted or challenged proven concepts. One of them was the idea that the asari should have never allowed the Quarrians to be prosecuted as they had been after the Geth revolts. She felt the quarrians were a massive resource that should have been added to the asari Republic, thereby enriching their people. She also felt that the council should as a whole back the human expansion into the lawless Skylian Verge. That way they could use them as a buffer against the pirates and other groups that made it and the Terminus systems their home, including the batarians, whose slavery she saw as anathema.

Unfortunately these thoughts did not make her popular among her fellows, though it had garnered her a large following of younger asari. She had become increasingly concerned by a few of the Spectres as well, which the council didn't like at all. They didn't like anyone else trying to investigate their star trouble shooters, especially the one she was most suspicious of.

Saren Arterius was the most decorated Spectre currently serving the council. He had the most successful mission rate seen in three hundred years, and had been the youngest to ever be inducted into the Spectres. He was a bright star, shining as an example for turians everywhere, yet Benezia saw the shadows behind him.

For one thing, he never seemed to care about collateral damage during his missions. He was a blunt force, a hammer even at times when a scalpel would be of better, easier use. And his hatred of humanity obviously clouded his judgment.

How else to explain that he blew up a factory killing over two hundred humans, when he was supposed to only investigate and if necessary remove the factory's manager/owner, and then made it seem as if the young human he had been evaluating for Spectre status had done it? it was also an obvious cover up, one anyone who looked at the data could see through, which told Benezia and those of like mind things they didn't want to hear about the council's complacency.

Yet on top of that there had been a few missions in the past few years that worried her more because of the lack of information than anything else. Saren had taken several missions on the fringe of council space where it interacted with former Quarian space. That area was off limits to most for a very good reason after all. Two missions, both having to do with possible Prothean relics, and a third with a full crew of scientists along with him to survey a derelict dreadnaught of possible Prothean construction had occurred in this area. Yet that last mission, despite the number of people involved, had not turned up anything. The doctors had all disappeared, according to Saren en route slaughtered by pirates for their ship and systems. Of course, since he had apparently single-handedly wiped out the pirates, the only source of information was Saren himself.

Now however Benezia had just seen something that drove out all thoughts of Saren from her mind and left her gasping, the tea she had been drinking having gone down the wrong tube at speed.

Shiala moved swiftly around the table thumping Benezia on the back. "Mistress, are you all right?"

Benezia wordlessly transferred a video she had been looking at on her omnitool to a computer screen on the wall. The two of them watched what looks like a human male with a strange pigtail assault a large amount of slavers with an asari child perched on his shoulders. The video showed the human actually dodging bullets as his return blows sent the batarians flying like they had been hit by a krogan battlemaster in full fury.

The video changed, showing another human with the most ridiculously fake hair style (and coloration) Shiala had ever seen. She rather liked human hair most of the time, especially what the women could do with it in terms of styling, but this was well beyond anything she had seen before. The fact he seemed to be flying in the air of an underground cavern and throwing around strangely colored biotic attacks, which were far more powerful than they should have been, didn't help matters.

Shiala shook her head. "I don't understand mistress. Why would some strange human action movie were you?"

By this time Benezia had cleared her mouth, and she shook her head. "It's real," she murmured. "It just came over the Internet from the frigate Sijou's Eye. According to the local news it's packed from end to end with liberated slaves, slaves liberated by these two humans."

Shiala continued to look at the video, scoffing as the human with the pigtail seemed to use some kind of biotic beam to smash through a wall and take out a dug in defensive position. It was so obviously faked it wasn't even funny.

Yet when she looked at her mistress's face, that idea took a hit. the shock and awe Benezia's face was openly showing was beyond anything that Shiala had seen there before. "Mistress?" she asked cautiously

"Bera'van'tuwan," she whispered. "Soul flame, the golden light of the internal, I have seen written accounts of this in some of our oldest texts. There were tales of this well before the goddess Athame came to our world, well before the nature of biotics was really understood. This is..." she shook her head and stood up abruptly. "They're coming here, we must go to meet them." She paused thoughtfully wondering where these two humans came from.

*I have never seen any sign of any race having the equivalent of Bera'van'tuwan, and I studied the humans extensively after the turians foolishly attacked them and nearly plunged us all into war. This is not a secret that can be kept in modern times, so where have these two come from? Did the humans have slow-boat colonies before they found the relays? Some forgotten planet or other, cut off from everything else, such powers could possibly surface In such an environment. They are so young looking though, how did they get so good, all the notes I've read on the Soul Flame said it took years to actually produce anything, let alone master to the extent those two showed. I must know more about them, but how would I react in their place?*

"Shiala," she said slowly, "we will go to the spaceport, but will not interact with anyone else. Find us a high spot, an observation point far enough away that we can't be spotted, but close enough to see anything unusual, far enough away from the spaceport to avoid the inevitable crowds."

Shiala still didn't understand what the big deal was, but she had been following her mistress for decades now and knew when to follow orders. So she simply nodded, and left to make preparation as Benezia went to get her commando armor.

OOOOOOO

On the ship, Ranma and Herb had become aware of just how large their welcome was going to be, and were becoming more and more irritated about it. They wanted to disappear for a time, not be at the center of official and irritating attention like this. "I don't understand,"

said the captain looking at their darkening faces, "your heroes, why wouldn't you want to be rewarded?"

"Rewarded maybe," said Rama shaking his head, "questioned, interrogated, detained and possibly experimented on, no."

"What do you think we should do?" asked Herb glumly, looking up at the screen that was showing a massive mob of well-wishers, gawkers, security personnel and a lot of local news agents and a few interstellar ones posted on the planet prepared to see if there was any truth to the videos that had come out to greet the ship as it came in. Herb hoped that his younger friend was able to think up a solution for this one, because at the moment he didn't see a way to get out of here.

Ranma chuckled a little, amused as always that Herb tended to 'conveniently' forget they had a certain resource that could come in handy in times like these. "Well, I do have an idea, but you're not going to like it."

Yet again he was correct in this prediction, and not ten minutes later, about five minutes before the frigate was due to land, Herb stood glaring at the younger marital artist from out of a large hood. "I hate you Saotome. It is important to me that you know this." Herb's voice was now a much lighter contralto, and that wasn't the only thing that had changed, evidenced by the two somewhat large protrusions on his chest.

"And I revel in your hate," Ranma, stood next to Herb wearing a similar hood but pushed back in her case. Ranma was well past the point of being embarrassed or shy about his alternate form. He still didn't like it much, but he knew when to use it and when not to. "Come on, you know none of the people aboard this ship other than the captain and crew know what I look like in this form, and no one's seen you in your female body. It's the only way we can possibly get through that crowd out there without being mobbed."

"I understand the logic I just don't fucking like it. Thanks to my being locked in this form I have already spent far too much time in it! And why the fuck am I bleeding down there again!"

Ranma gaped at the other aquatranssexual. "Wait, you've been locked for what, nine months or longer, and you still don't know what that means?"

"I told you that among my people women are segregated, and I was neither fish nor fowl. I couldn't interact with the women because I was still lawfully considered a male, and was looked down on and insulted at every turn by the men because physically I was a woman. Why, is it something natural?"

Ranma groaned, and was about answer when she suddenly gasped as her breasts were grabbed through her clothing by two blue hands from behind. "Wow Ranma, you're nearly as

big as me! We so need to dance together, it would be a lot of fun! But why are you in your girl form?" Usagi giggled, pressing herself against his back.

Ranma shuddered, biting back a surprised moan. He/she was always astonished at how much more sensitive certain parts of his body was in his female form. Usagi was certainly no stranger to touching other women, and her fingers were pressing all sorts of buttons that Ranma, despite no longer technically being a virgin, was not in any way prepared to deal with. The redhead twisted away, pushing Usagi back against the bulkhead. "Keep it down Usagi, we're trying to get out of here without being mobbed."

Usagi very obviously didn't get it but pouted all the same. "Well you're not going to just leave me behind were you? That's mean!"

Ranma was about to reply that it was sort of the idea, but suddenly got a much better idea. *After all if she's as persistent in following us as she was in getting me to train her, then I might as well get something out of it.* "Well if you want to come with us, then you've got to do something for me." As Usagi grinned and moved in again Ranma backed up gulping and said "You have to explain the monthly monster to Herb here."

Usagi stopped and looked at Herb, who still had her hood up. She gasped. "Wow, so both of you can change your forms, that is soooooo fantastic! But what's the monthly monster?"

Ranma stared at her guileless expression and saw not an iota of trickery or deception there. He groaned aloud as she felt a small but very powerful hand land on her shoulder and begin to squeeze.

OOOOOOO

Touza Da'forma was an ambitious asari maiden who had finished her training in interstellar communications a mere two years ago and had signed up with Interstellar News only to be assigned to Sijou, an out of the way asari star system near where asari space met the Attican Traverse, a dead zone between the Terminus Systems and civilized society that included the Skylian Verge and Geth space.

She had thought that being sent to this backwater would be dull as hell, even with pirate raids in the region. After all, there was no way they'd be dumb enough to attack a fully industrialized asari world right? She had no idea how bold the slavers had become, and their taking the frigate *Sijou's Eyes* completely by surprise had shocked the hell out her. She had begun to cover the story the moment the ship was late reporting back from its shakedown cruise, and now this.

A slave breakout this big was the news of a lifetime, and that didn't even mention the odd videos about two humans (just two!) attacking the salvers and freeing the slaves, slaughtering batarians left and right with their bare hands.

So she stood at the front of the massive crowd, her camera pod high in the air above her, her omnitool glowing faintly pink around her arm as she controlled it as she waited for the frigate to set down.

It did so, and the crowd waited with baited breath for another ten minutes then the frigate's hatches opened, and dozens of former slaves came out, blinking under the harsh sun. the crowd surged forward, but were stopped by the spaceports security teams who were trying to keep order.

Yet most of the crowd and Touza and all her fellow newsies in particular were looking around wildly trying to find their targets. As the ex-slavers were led through the crowd and toward waiting officials and medical personnel, Touza frowned wondering where the two humans from the videos were. None of the humans she saw matched their descriptions.

She latched onto two that were travelling with a bubbly looking asari maiden, or was she a maiden, her body looked more developed and mature than usual. In any event the two humans were an odd pair. One of them had the reddest hair Touza had ever seen (thought admittedly she hadn't seen that many humans in real life) while the other one wore a hood up to cover her face, though the cloak made her body shape obvious. The redhead was shorter than most humans, while the other was of normal height but they both moved like asari commandoes for some reason, light on their feet and their movements fluid and controlled.

Her head cocked to one side questioningly, watching as they stopped right by the spaceport fence directly before the security. Then her eyes widened as without any fanfare, no biotic flare or even the need to crouch the two jumped straight up four stories, grabbing the edge of the roof above them and flipping their bodies up onto the roof. Behind them the asari flared with biotics, and her power flared out grabbing the top of the building and pulling her upwards.

Touza watched in shock at this then stared even more as the trio jumped to the next roof over a hundred yards away and two stories up without any apparent effort and began to race away from the spaceport over the rooftops as easily as if it was level ground. Just as they were out of sight, she saw the hood of the one wearing a cloak fall back pushed by the wind, allowing a large blue ponytail to float in the breeze for a moment. She turned and looked up at the hovering camera pod. "Tell me you got that."

**OOOOOOO**

"Holy Shit! After them, we don't get paid unless we capture those two!"

"Am I the only one wondering why the hell those two looked like women just now, when in the video there were men?"

"Shut up and bring the damn hover van around! Radio the others to cut them off!"

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Shiala gaped in astonishment, watching the two humans apparently do with brute physical ability something that should have taken someone with a mastery of biotic power to do. On top of that they were going faster than most commandos could have used biotics to move!

She suddenly looked to her side as Benezia moved, her biotic power shimmering around her and suddenly she was moving after them, faster than Shiala had ever seen her or any matriarch move before. The asari commando shook her head and followed her, much more slowly, with five other commandos behind her.

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Ranma and Herb raced on, with Herb watching the skies in case anyone sent any spy drone or this universe's equivalent after them. Ranma chose their route, moving away from the spaceport and heading away from the center of the city toward what looked like a forest in the distance. Not that it was very close even as fast as they were travelling, this place was huge. It covered more area than Tokyo or even Hong Kong, the biggest cities Ranma had ever been in, though the population seemed less and there wasn't any real smog or anything.

The trip continued with Herb passing Ranma a bulb of hot water after using a similar one on himself sighing with relief once he was back into the body he had been born with. He noticed his young friend however seemed to stiffen as they went on, looking around with a small smile slowly growing on his face.

Ranma's smirk widened as they exited what seemed to be the main commercial or living district and entered a factory area. It seemed much more run down than the rest of the city, and Ranma jumped down from the rooftops for some reason. Herb looked around as they passed a large derelict factory. "And is there a reason you've decided to take us into what looks very much like a slum in the making?"

"We're being followed, we have been since about twenty minutes ago, maybe since the spaceport, one maybe two groups." At Herb's skeptical look he grinned wider. "Trust me, I was chased by a shit ton of people when I travelled with my old man. Ya tend ta develop a seventh sense for such things."

Herb merely nodded while Usagi seemed to stop and think, counting on her fingers for a moment. "And we are here because..."

"Cause I figured we could use some fun, maybe let loose a little bit." Ranma smiled eagerly.

Herb began to chuckle. "That does sound like an excellent idea Ranma."

Both martial artists looked at Usagi, who pouted. "I'm a lover not a fighter, but whatever."

About four minutes later their pursuers caught up with them and the trio were swiftly surrounded by about ten beings, heavily armed and accompanied by giant mechs of some kind that made Ranma's smile turn into a grin of anticipation. "Now I wonder why you all are followin' us. I'm going to bet revenge for smashing those pirate crews, people're always following me around declarin' revenge on me."

Herb shrugged. "No one has ever been stupid enough to try and chase after me, so I'm going to say capture and experimentation."

Usagi pouted. "They're Blue Suns, so could be either. But they'd simply have been paid to do it, they're a mercenary group so wouldn't be doing this for themselves."

The group's leader, a batarian with a scar running under his left lower eye smirked at the trio. "The asari whore's right. You might have been able to take those slaver weaklings, but you'll find us a bit more of a challenge. Now, come with us quietly or come with us in pieces."

"People actually talk like that outside of mangas?" Herb grouched, shaking his head, then without warning crouched and slammed a hand into the rooftop ripping a bit of it up to use as a shield as the mercenary's opened fire.

They seemed to think that if the two humans survived against the batarian slavers, they'd probably survive this. And there were at least thirty more mercs hiding around when the ten confronted the trio.

Ranma concentrated his ki into his body and Herb watched in astonishment as a ki version of the biotic shield appeared there, intercepting the bullets heading his way. "How the..."

Ranma grinned at him, crouching down next to him allowing his shield to cover his entire body. Usagi hid behind the two humans, staring at Ranma in as much shock as Herb. "Heh, I've been seein' it every day for the past week dude, and I can copy or figure out my own version of techniques pretty quick. Yer flyin' trick is trickier though."

Herb shook his head but by the time he stopped Ranma had already moved, jumping forward faster than the batarians could track. The mechs could track him, but couldn't move their guns fast enough to match their targeting software and once they could their IFF programming kept them from firing because he was in amongst the mercs who had just tried to get around the trio and take them from behind.

His legs flashed out smashing mercenaries away as if they weighed nothing, their heavy body armor crushed and broken (along with their chest cavities). His hands glowed red and

grabbed one of the mech's hands in both of his and ripped its arm off, throwing it at another mercenary, this time a human which surprised Ranma, but really didn't register at the time.

Usagi grinned suddenly and Herb looked up as she summoned her biotic power, reaching out to a heavy mech that was trying to fire on Ranma, pulling its arms around so that its heavy rockets impacted among another group of mercs. She jumped away, avoiding more incoming fire and was in among a trio of mechs, using her speed and agility to confuse their firing.

Herb shrugged and picked up his piece of ripped up road, charging the group of mercs that had addressed him and his friends. Their weapons screamed in, but didn't have enough stopping power to bother him. They tore apart the bit of concrete quickly, but by that time he was already in their face, and Herb ducked under several rounds from the closest batarian, grabbing his arm and using him as a shield against the other mercs.

The leader had fallen back quickly, ducking around a corner of the factory and poking his head around it, looking on in shock as he watched his hastily put together yet very powerful ambush get ripped apart. "Even the Ymir mechs aren't doing anything!" He gibbered to himself.

While Usagi was dancing around three of the Ymir mechs Ranma was ripping through the four around him easily, his hands glowing with so much heat they appeared white hot in a technique called the Vulkan School of martial Arts blacksmithing Volcano Touch, which allowed him to melt through the mech's chassis like it was so much butter.

With a squeal of electronic distortion one of the Ymir mechs toppled backwards, its legs gone, melted off at the knees. Ranma watched in surprise as the other mechs and the mercs around him retreated quickly. Looking down at the mech he scowled then kicked it after the retreating mercenaries then jumped up onto a nearby roof. A second later it exploded taking out four of the Blue Sun troopers and one of the remaining mechs.

When the explosion went off Herb looked up from ripping the throat out of a batarian, almost absentmindedly reached out and slapping another one who had fallen to the ground with a ruined knee in the side of the head, crushing his skull and sending the body flying. Seeing the explosion he laughed a little, wondering what the hell Ranma was up to now.

Herb ducked under a head shot from the rooftop above him, and then had to reinforce his body with ki as seven more mercenaries took up position along with the sniper. He snarled angrily as the bullets smashed into him, stinging and bruising. He raised his hands glowing with ki and shouted "Ryu Sei Hisho barrage!" Dozens of baseball sized ki blasts shot upward, slamming into the mercenaries and the concrete of the roof, blowing chunks out of both.

All eight of the mercs died, and suddenly the leader realized he had lost half of his forces already. The Blood Pack would have continued until they won or died, but the Blue Suns were

not nearly so stupid or suicidal. "All forces f—" He was interrupted by Ranma dropping down on him feet first, crushing his head into the pavement.

Ranma had to duck quickly however as a rocket from a Ymir nearly hit him. He pushed off the side of the building, his entire upper body now glowing with tremendous heat. Ranma slammed into the Ymir ripping through its side arms fist then grabbed what remained by its legs and tossed it down the street. Bare seconds later the mech exploded, taking out a sniper that had been hiding there trying to line up for a head shot on either of the two humans, but neither would stay still long enough for him to hit.

Usagi used the biotic Grab trick, pulling two of the Ymir mechs around to face one another just as they were about to range on her. Both exploded and suddenly the fight went out of the remaining mercenaries who retreated quickly.

Herb kicked off the head of a human who was trying desperately to fire on Herb then looked around, one eyebrow raised. "I do believe we're done here."

Ranma jumped down nodding, speaking in English as he had been trying to do lately, not wanting to solely rely on the translator trip. "Looks like it, pity that wasn't nearly as much fun as fighting the pirates. On the other hand it didn't really do much for our hope to disappear into the woodwork for a bit while we get a handle on this universe."

"Well," said a voice behind the trio, and the two martial artists and Usagi turned to see an asari that was obviously a matriarch older than any they had previously seen standing behind them. She had a presence to her that was well beyond anything they had thus far seen, her armor was ornate but functional, and while her body showed no real signs of decay there was simply a sense of wisdom and experience about her. While her biotic aura was still flaring she didn't seem winded or even sweaty, despite possibly racing after the trio since they had escaped from the spaceport.

In contrast the ten asari dressed like commandos behind her looked exhausted, their biotic auras flickering and more than one was on her knees gasping in air.

"If you wish to disappear for a time," said the matriarch in perfect English, "I believe I have a proposal for you."

**End chapter**