

## Chapter 7: Kicking Over an Anthill

“God dammit, I’m telling you, we need more help down here!” a turian, one of the few who worked directly for Alice shouted into his intercom as he cowered behind a destroyed wall, his arms above his head as he made himself as small and as hitting a target as possible. Cowering was not normally in a turian’s nature, but right now, his natural armor and the body armor he had spent a lot of his pay on did not give him any comfort whatsoever. “We are getting our asses handed to us! The Blood Pack is going crazy, and some fucking insane superhuman in red and black armor is fighting it out with them in hand to hand. I’ve seen him get shot, and he just laughs it off!”

“Damn it, have you been at the drinks while workin’ Kirkklan?” the voice on the other end growled out. “We’re supposed to believe that? I know there was a disturbance reported down there but that’s insane. At least make your drunken ramblings believable, man.”

“I don’t care what you believe! By the Spirits, it’s the truth damn your eyes! Can’t you hear the fighting?!”

With that, he held up his omni-tool so that the microphone embedded into it could hear the ongoing sounds of combat. It had seemingly hit a crescendo a moment ago, but it was still going on, the sound of metal being tortured, a sound like a machine gun, and the bellowing of krogan and howls of pain from the same. And looking around, it was obvious the entire sector had practically changed.

A millisecond later, the gangster yelped pulling his hand back quickly just as a body slammed into and through the metal reinforced faux-concrete wall he’d been using as a barrier. Another guy, a human this time, was kicked straight over his head. “Okay, so that superhuman bastard doesn’t take it easy on his own people...” he muttered.

A shadow crossed over him, and the man responded by yelping like a scared cat and ducking out of cover. He rushed towards a nearby building, which was still standing at the far end of the area of destruction, thinking prayerful thoughts. *Spirits, just guide me through this one day, to a day where I don’t have to deal with the impossible sight of a human punching out a krogan and then leaping stories into the air without biotics! I swear I will return to Palaven and become an upstanding officer!*

Landing on the rubble, Ranma kicked a portion of it towards a charging krogan, hitting the man in the head. “Huh...at least I think you’re all male. They certainly act like a bunch of bulls, but I can’t remember if I ever actually looked up information on how to tell the difference when it comes to you lot.”

“You calling us females, you fucking pyjack!?! I’m going to rip your quads off and maAKKK!” a krogan who had come close enough to overhear Ranma’s words shouted, only for his words to cut off as Ranma dodged around his charge, grabbed his back and piledrove him into the ground so hard the metal plate underneath them ruptured, leaving the krogan stuck, his upper visible in the roof of the sector below his arms trapped in a position where he was helpless to free himself.

The sight of his feet flailing caused Ranma to laugh, and he decided on the fly to let the fleeing turian escape. The turian had no weapons, having dropped them at some point during the fight, and packs of vorcha had begun boiling into the area from elsewhere on the station.

Ranma had heard of these aliens before, although their sheer ugliness still came as a shock. They looked vaguely fishlike, or rather a fish crossed with a skeleton, a vampire and an eel and then beaten with an ugly stick. They had the jaws of the vampires Ranma had seen in a few movies when they were really pissed off, the teeth of an eel in a face that had fins and... *You know what, none of them look exactly alike. The only thing they all share is they’re ugly as shit.* That and, Ranma knew, short lives, a lot of aggression, and something about their DNA allowing each of them to evolve in days instead of generations. Ranma hadn’t really cared about all that, and at this point, there was only one question he had.

“Huh, I wonder why they were being held back? It is it a machismo thing?” As he said that aloud, Ranma dodged around a charging krogan, kicking his legs out from underneath it, then leaping up and over a second one, coming down to land lightly on its head, his arms flicking out to either side. Long metal bits of metallic rubble, which he had stowed in his item space appeared in his hands, smashing out into two of the other krogan, sending them sprawling.

Then he was dodging a biotic blast, noting absently to make that guy one of his next targets. Most of the krogan here were young, and didn’t really have much going for them besides their natural physical abilities, but the ones he had heard were called battlemasters were a step above in terms of skill and power. A few of them could actually be dangerous, even if only one or two seemed to have biotics.

*Still, the taunting technique is working even better on these krogan than it ever did on Ryoga.* That brought a momentary snarl to Ranma’s lips as he stared off to the far wall of the station, contemplating Pig Boy and what he had done to Ranma and Herb by sending them to this galaxy somehow. Ranma hadn’t really thought about that moment for a few months now, but that didn’t mean any of the initial anger Ranma felt toward the Lost Boy had faded.

*On the other hand, we have done some good so far, freeing so many slaves, teaching the asari ki techniques and so on. To say nothing of us helping Samantha find this mass murderer of hers.* The fact the pair of them might have started a war did occur to Ranma, but he didn’t think too deeply about it. *Slaver scum is slaver scum, after all, and while I’m sorry for any deaths on the good guy’s side of that battle, buTTT!!*

One of the krogan battlemasters hammered into Ranma's side with as much force as a runaway train, hurling Ranma away. "Where's your mind, pyjack! You don't get to pick a fight with the Pack and then check out on us!"

The strike hurled Ranma the length of the current battle zone, and he skipped along the metalwork of the road for a few moments, the metal underneath buckling with each successive hit, making Ranma wonder idly why some of the houses here seem to be built of brick and wood like would be normal on a planetary surface, while others were made sensibly out of metal like the background station. *The construction is so haphazard*, he thought, even as he pushed himself to his feet, grumbling at the hit. Neither the initial hit nor the skipping actually hurt, indeed, they hadn't even dented his body armor, but it was still annoying.

However, Ranma stopped thinking about that as he saw that one battlemaster had been joined by two others. These three, unlike the others Ranma had seen, were spreading out, snarling orders to the Blood Pack, getting them actually organized as vorcha joined the krogan still able to stand on their own. "You fucking idiots. He's making damn fools out of all of you, using us against one another. Spread out, circle then spread, again, and again until you stomp the little pyjack into the ground!"

Hearing this, Ranma laughed, but he wasn't about to let these three wreck all his good work he'd done to rile this crowd. "About damn time! I was getting bored, you idiots! Maybe this way ya can actually make this a fight instead of a farce. Though I doubt it. As for calling me a pyjack, I think you lot need to work on yer insults. They have to be personal to the person you're insulting, you know. The next thing I know you'll be calling me an overgrown monkey. Then again, you lot look like a cross between a lizard and a snail in its shell, so maybe you're too slow ta think up anything better?"

The snicker he added at the end of his insults worked like a whip to the nose of a bull, that final bit of fury needed to drive the krogan into sheer frothing fury. The krogan roared, and even the three battlemasters, the newly arrived vorcha and the ten regular grunts they'd been able to corral charged forwards. The vorcha, realizing they were being insulted and seeing this single human in front of them were not well enough trained to hold in place, but they did move forward in packs of seven. The krogan, numbering about thirty all charged, each on their own.

The other krogan either were busy fighting one another, or were unconscious at the moment. Ranma knew from experience though most of them would be back on their feet shortly. The krogan had amazing levels of durability and could recover equally quickly from anything that didn't instantly kill or cripple them. *They definitely do have some ki to them, fun. Huh, do the vorcha have the same?*

Setting that aside, Ranma cracked his neck, and slamming one fist into the other palm, before crouching down. "Now, here's a bit of a homage to my favorite made up alien race, one that you lot kind of resemble. Heck, you even have your own gobs. Even if you're a lot weaker than da biggest and da baddest." *Thank you, Kasumi, for getting me into Sci-fi and games. As*

the krogan once more roared in renewed fury at being called weak, Ranma charged towards the incoming krogan shouting, "WAGGGGHHH!"

As he went, Ranma ignored several of the shotgun shell blasts that a few of the krogan sent his way. Those close enough to actually hurt, if they struck his skin, went wide, along with two grenades, which exploded behind him. A piece of shrapnel caught him in the back, but his armor once more stopped it easily.

A second later, he and one the charging krogan met, battering ram against battering ram, one fueled by biotic power and weight, the other by ki and armor. To the astonishment of the other krogan even now, the lead battlemaster found himself going backward and pushed into a pack of vorcha as Ranma's shoulder met his chest, lifting him off of his feet. The battlemaster's arms went around Ranma, but Ranma broke the grip with a quick upper body twist. Grabbing an arm, Ranma hopped into the air, legs flashing out in a mule kick to crash into a vorcha, which doubled over, the \*CRACK\* of bones audible through the tumult. Flipping himself up and into the air, Ranma broke the grip of another biotic grab, and launched a key blast into one of the other vorcha, before landing on the third, rolling under a thrown warp.

The battlemaster Ranma had initially crashed into had enough time to send a warp at Ranma, but the red and black armored Ranma dodged around it. Another second, Ranma was in his face. He deftly avoided the flailing fists of the older krogan, hopping making them miss underneath them. Before the battlemaster could raise a barrier, Ranma's fist hammered down. The punch, strangely gentle in comparison to most Ranma had dealt out, shattered the man's armored frontal, dumping him to the ground in a welter of blood and a scream of raw agony and no small amount of fear. "AGHHH!!!"

The Battlemaster wasn't dead. Instead, Ranma just left him there, leaping away to a new position. Indeed, Ranma hadn't killed many of the krogan he had faced so far. knocked out and occasionally crippled, but he had only killed three or so despite being forced to pull on his chest plate to go with his greaves and boots when the bullets really started to fly.

If anything, though, his leaving the battlemaster alive after shattering his armored forehead plate made the surrounding krogan even angrier. Before, this had been just a fight, and when Ranma had ripped out the armored frontal plate of a young pup, it had gone almost utterly unremarked thanks to the youth's age. But seeing him do the same thing to one of the senior battlemasters of the Blood Pack, and after having seen Ranma charge forward as he had? Indeed, the clash between him and the battlemaster had even resembled the traditional challenge for leadership that krogan used amongst themselves.

All those things called on responses that were embedded in the very genetics of every krogan. They had been challenged, and there could only be one response.

As one, every conscious krogan there, which included more than a few who had pushed to their feet as Ranma dealt with the first vorcha to reach him, roared and charged forwards

once again towards Ranma. Gone was any semblance of order the work of the battlemasters completely undone. Even the vorcha no longer worked in packs, just howling and charging forward or cowering in place, overcome by the battle lust of the krogan.

Other krogan who had just begun to arrive on the scene from elsewhere in Omega were slightly more controlled. Slightly.

Before this, Ranma had been dealing with the youngest group of krogan within the Blood Pack, and a very few spattering of older veterans. Now though, more of the middle-aged krogan were getting involved, those who weren't quite battlemasters, but who had developed enough self-control to know that charge and roar was not the only tactic. And while krogan always preferred their shotguns, that didn't mean they wouldn't use other weapons. Rifles, rockets, missiles, although the missiles had a devil of a time locking on Ranma, all began to fire on the dimensionally displaced martial artist.

The results of this were less than impressive. Seven vorcha and two krogan died to friendly fire, no big loss to anyone involved in the battle although Ranma paused as he saw one of them die right in front of him. The ugly ass creature exploded when it was hit by a rocket, his absence messing up Ranma's landing and making Ranma gag in disgust as vorcha blood splattered his legs up to his waist.

Most of the fire was thus absorbed by the krogan and vorcha around Ranma. What little hit him didn't do any harm, thanks to the armor he was wearing on his upper body and his natural durability. One errant rifle shot did graze Ranma's head, but didn't do enough damage other than making him let loose a deadpan, "Ouch," before punching a krogan to the ground with a broken jaw.

During all this, other krogan were also coming out from the Blood Pack headquarters, which was very obviously much bigger on the inside than the outside. Indeed, given the number of vorcha and krogan involved in the battle already, it had to have other entrances to the floors above and below this one hidden inside.

However, more importantly was the fact that several of these krogan were not rushing forward to join the battle. Four of them were obviously battlemasters, equal in strength and age, even through the tumult of the fight around him, Ranma could see the flaring power of biotics around their bodies as they moved out to the sides from the entryway, pushing forward to either flank of the battle going on.

The last one held back, though. He was heavily scarred in the face, and his armor was a deeper, more crimson color than the rest of the krogan. He seemed to stare through the battle towards Ranma, his wide lizard face split into a wide grin, before staring over Ranma's shoulder.

Twitching around, Ranma was able to look in the same direction and instantly saw what the older krogan was looking at.

Throughout the battle between Ranma, the Blood Pack and then Aria's tugs, a significant chunk of the area around the Blood Pack's headquarters had been flattened. The battleground was now a ruined landscape of metal spars, rock piles, and torn, twisted metal hull, where only portions of buildings remained where before there had been factories, shanty houses and so forth. The civilians of the area, of which there hadn't been as many as Ranma had first feared, had all begun to flee the moment the krogan had come out from their base to fight Ranma, a process that had sped up as the battle continued. Now they were all either gone, fleeing entirely into other sectors of the space station in every direction, or holed up in the largest, most durable buildings at the far ends of the sector, rising straight up to the ceiling.

Over that broken, blasted terrain, came what looked like three companies of mercenaries and mechs. Ranma wasn't sure of their numbers, but felt that was about right. All of them wore the mark of the Blue Sun mercenaries and were heavily armed. Mass effect rifles, pistols, rockets, lots of guns and even a smattering of knives. With them came a single YMIR Mech, along with a scattered number of another type of mech that looked vaguely doglike, a type Ranma hadn't seen before this except in commercials. Still more moved up over the rooftops of the few buildings that didn't reach to the ceiling above, sniper rifles taking aim at Ranma.

But not just at Ranma. No, this firepower was simply pointed downrange, at all of the krogan. The krogan and their vorcha allies saw this instantly and were already spreading out away from Ranma as he took all this in.

A batarian near the YMIR was armored in a real, full suit of armor, one that looked almost brand new it was so well-cared for. The sign of the Blue Sun was also shouted, "Put the lizards down! Aria's ordered this mess brought to an end by piling up the bodies. Time to make it clear to the Blood Pack where these lizards belong on the food chain!"

The krogan and vorcha barely had time to turn their attention towards the Blue Sun mercs before they and their accompanying mechs opened fire. Mass Effect rounds flashed downrange from three sides, causing Ranma to realize that other, albeit smaller, teams had already moved into the district. Only a few were actually people, instead these teams of flankers were mostly made up of small\_chest high robots armed with single guns on long legs, floating into the air now at the leader's signal. The majority of the fire came from the main force, but enough came from the sides that it should be able to pin down any normal force. Rockets, heavier caliber weapons and even mortar rounds arched through the air from the main force, uncaring of who they hit.

Realizing that the weight of firepower coming towards him was enough that even he would be battered by it, Ranma hastily pulled out his helmet, just as the first of the rockets began to land. And these were not the grenades that the krogan had been using up to this point. No these were larger munitions, so large that when they landed, the whole floor seems to rock as they hit, and they blew holes through the plaything underneath, dumping many of the krogan that they didn't outright kill into the level below.

For a moment as the explosion of those rockets roiled throughout the area, the Blue Sun mercenaries held their fire, waiting to see if that had been enough to cow the Blood Pack, although knowing that it wouldn't. Indeed, the leader of this group of mercenaries, the batarian Jaroth thought they only had a fifty-fifty chance of ending the battle that quickly. "At least we should have put that bastard down! Although, I doubt he was human at all. Some kind of advanced robot maybe? Made by those freak Geth made to infiltrate the rest of the galaxy."

"If it was made to infiltrate, don't you think it would try to blend in? This guy sure as fuck didn't. Not here, and not in Torfan. But putting him down sure felt good anyway. I..." his second-in-command, another batarian trailed off. "Wait, I just saw a biotic flare. Looks to be at the back of the pack we just fired into."

"Probably Garm. That bastard's led the Blood Pack for more than a decade, stands to reason he'd be hard to kill. Target him with a few of the rocket teams. Put him down, the rest will break."

The smoke finally cleared, and more than one biotic shield had been erected throughout the crowd of krogan. Nevertheless, at the center of the group, Ranma stood. No biotic shield had saved him, rather, his helmet was on his head now, and his lower body also armored, thanks to the Martial Arts Quick-Change Technique that he had learned from his father. The golden gleam of his visor was surprisingly intimidating to those who saw him standing unharmed within the rubble of the Blue Sun's initial attack.

"What in the hell?" the Batarian pair muttered, while a few of the humans with him looked at one another in confusion. One of them even spoke, saying that the target looked familiar to him. "What the fuck is he?"

Charging forward, Ranma made for the Blue Sun mercs, ignoring the recovering krogan. The vorcha had mostly been torn apart, but like the krogan, if they didn't take crippling injuries they would be able to survive anything else. As for the krogan, while Ranma had been able to batter through armor and biotic shield alike, they truly were extremely durable when it came to what normal people or ordinance could do to them. Already groups of them were firing back at the teams of drones on the flanks, and more than one Blue Sun merc fell.

The front lines of the Blue Sun mercs instantly opened up, but foolishly only small groups fell back or moved into cover. Instead, the others just stood where they were, firing at Ranma from where they had been standing. This cost many of them, as the krogan returned fire, but that was as nothing to when Ranma, still taking fire, rammed into the one YMIR Mech the Blue Sun mercs had brought to the battle.

Smashing the main gun into pieces, Ranma tore the arm out of the mech, his gauntlets glowing with ki enough that the metal of the mech began to warp and melt under his touch. A kick sent the mech smashing into one of the smaller mechs and two batarians, while Ranma punched a human off his feet sending him into several others, knocking them all off their feet.

Astonishing Ranma, one of the humans he'd knocked over pushed the other man off him, grumbling, "Fucking bastard hits like a Spartan too!"

"Fall back! Fall back fire and manGG!" the batarian who had just begun to shout orders found the armor-clad warrior's hand clamped around his throat. "W, wh, what the f, aregggh, you!?" he gasped.

Ranma was grinning at this point having heard the comment from the human mercenary, although the expression was now hidden inside his helmet. He hadn't told Herb where he had gotten the inspiration for the design of their armor, but that line was just too good to not to respond to. *Halo was one of the few games that Kasumi got me into that I really enjoyed, and I figured that kicking alien ass while wearing armor that looks like a Spartan would be an awesome homage to it. Although it is kind of weird that the humans actually do recognize it without needing to go look it up.*

Setting that minor mystery aside, Ranma turned activating his suits exterior speakers. "Call me Master Chief... you little bitch."

At that point a rocket slammed into Ranma from his side as the Blue Sun mercenaries fired at him from every angle they could, causing Ranma to drop his captive before he leaped into the air, dodging a lot of the incoming fire. The batarian landed on his rear, but quickly twisted round, crawling away as he began to shout orders into his omni-tool.

Behind Ranma, many of the other krogan also charged forwards, their anger at Ranma derailed for the moment, while others still charged after Ranma himself. The vorcha, the few of them that had survived the recent assault, also began to fight back, keeping their distance and using guns for the most part.

Seeing this, the krogan called Garm paused, reining in his own fury with some difficulty as he forced himself to think about something more than the battle in front of him. Unlike even his fellow battlemasters, he could see the big picture here. He didn't know whatever this super soldier human was after, but his assault on the Blood Pack had forced Aria to turn the Blue Suns on them. That was easily enough to spark a mercenary war between them, and if Eclipse got involved, there would be all out war throughout the space station.

He wondered idly if Aria realized that, then realized in turn that didn't matter. The Blue Sun had taken this opportunity to try to break the Blood Pack's numbers here on Omega, so the damage was already done. His krogan would never agree to go back to the normal status quo after being so challenged. All that mattered now would be that there would be only one side standing at the end of the day. With that in mind, he turned away from the battle going on in front of him, gesturing to one of the other krogan who had been recovering from earlier in the battle. The younger krogan grumbled, but turned aside from where he had been about to charge after their challenger.



The golden-visored human was still moving around the battlefield like a particularly annoying and immortal bug of some kind. As Garm watched he landed on top of a KEI-9, smashing it into pieces and then hitting the pieces so hard they flew with all the force of a flechettes round going off into several batarians' faces. *Whatever that thing is, it ain't human, that's for sure.*

"What the fuck do you want?" the younger krogan growled.

Garm didn't bother replying verbally, simply reaching over and grabbing the younger man's armored fringe twisting and bringing him down into a rising knee. That sent him sprawling, and Garm spoke as if that moment of violence hadn't even happened. Between two krogan such an exchange, both challenge and the response was so rote as to be automatic. Whatever clan you were a part of, you always had to fight for your position within it. That was even more important in a group like the Blood Pack, which was set outside the normal social norms of their people. "Get the word out to our smaller outposts throughout Omega. They're to find the nearest Blue Sun or Eclipse group and wipe them out."

The younger krogan's eyes widened, which was immediately followed by his grin doing the same. "You mean..."

"Aria declared war on us, we're doing the same to her and anyone that might back her!" Garm growled. "Now get on that, while I deal with the bastard who started this all! Superhuman or not, the fucker will fall to our might just like Aria will!"

The younger krogan whooped at that, and quickly raised his omni-tool to his mouth, speaking into it rapidly. Seeing this, Garm turned his attention back to the fight. Moving forward slowly, he watched for an opening, biotic energies beginning to shiver around him.

**OOOOOOO**

Garm was not the only one thinking of using this event in some fashion, as elsewhere, John Shephard was also becoming aware of the massive firefight Ranma had sparked.

His first response though was nothing like Garm's, for instead of greed, John felt shock and incredulity.

He stared at his enhanced team of hackers, then slapped his face, before slowly letting his hand slide down, before looking back at them with a gimlet glare. "I'm sorry, I must have heard you wrong. You did not just tell me that John 117 has somehow appeared and is starting to wreak havoc, did you?"

Wordlessly, one of the hackers held out his omni-tool, the edge of it turning into a hologram device, while a cord was still plugged into the computer relay that the three of them had hacked into in order to get access to the scattered cameras throughout the station. A lot of

them were offline but there were more than Sheppard had expected. Once the group had found a unused computer information port, it had taken the Hack'n'cracks about thirty minutes before they could access the cameras, giving the strike team a good idea of the general layout of the station.

Even if, as one hacker had put it, "We're having a devil of a time keeping our access from being discovered by the locals. Aria definitely has quite a lot of tech people working for her and not all of them are incompetent. Worse, the OS here is screwy as hell, a mesh of various styles and even whole systems melded into one. We're learning as we go, but its an uphill battle."

Sheppard and the rest of his platoon watched as an image appeared, an image of a battlefield somewhere on the station. Nowhere near the team's current position, as none of them could hear sounds of the battle, although they could make out a certain amount of rumbling through the metal flooring beneath them. And the image showed what looked like a large amount of krogan and Blue Sun mercenaries fighting it out.

And in the center of it was an armor clad individual. While the coloration wasn't familiar, the cut of the armor and the golden gleam of the visor brought Sheppard back to his teenage years for a moment. "Holy hell! He really does look like the Master Chief! I used to love that game..." he murmured; not aware he was saying that aloud.

"I know, right?!" John's youngest sergeant, Markus said enthusiastically. "Dude, when they came out with the VR version of that, when X-ony were just revamping all those old 21<sup>st</sup>-century games? That was amazing!"

"Very few games from way back then held up once we met real aliens, but yeah, that series was still fucking awesome. I swear if the Alliance had somehow been able to use that game as recruitment tool, that would have been a brilliant idea," one of the hackers intoned.

The humans all snorted at that, as the two asari and five turians watched on in confusion. The two asari were the commandoes that Hackett had promised John. Livia T'Nola and Trios M'dufa were their names. They were Maidens, the oldest, Trios, being three-hundred and fifty-two. Both were extremely capable, and John was happy to have them along, which he could also say about Garrus and the turian riflemen. They were soldiers, plain and simple. While their banter was different and some of their equipment, in the main, after a bit of friction to start with, they fit in well with John's people, bringing his previously battered platoon up to near it's normal strength.

Their confusion deepened tremendously as one of the hackers, not even looking up his work, solemnly said, "Cortana with the special skins mod! I don't care if her existence would probably start a galactic war or put me out of a job. It would be **so** worth it."

All of the humans there nearly fell about laughing at that, causing a few civilians to look at them warily then move away quickly. Regardless of race, large groups of laughing men

routinely meant trouble on Omega, especially if they were as heavily armed as this group was. This was made worse by the fact they were deep into one of the slum zones aboard the station, where smalltime gangs could rule with a single gun and a handful of toughs.

In contrast, this group was heavily armed. Although they had left their mechs behind, the team had come loaded for bear. Tactical armor, with their helmets on their backs, rifles and other weapons, although all markings that could have pointed to them being marines had been removed from everyone's armor, turian and human alike, meaning they looked like Aria's men, another reason to give the platoon a wide berth.

They had left behind their crew-served guns for now, though. After all, the mission was to try diplomacy first if they could. But they did have a few infiltration-type drones up and moving around them, controlled by the sole salarian among them. He too was looking a little bemused by the sudden good humor among the humans but was concentrating on the data his drones were passing to him.

Deciding the humans had been having enough fun amongst themselves for the moment, Garrus reached forward, smacking his hand lightly on Sheppard's shoulder. "I realize that boosting morale by laughter is a thing among humans, but I don't think this is the right time for it, John. Exactly what is going on? And what does it have to do with our mission?"

That sobered Sheppard up, and John nodded at Garrus thankfully, turning his attention back to the trio of hackers. "Run that data back for a bit. Give me a sitrep on what actually is going on there."

The entire mixed group watched as the playback began, and more than one soldier there gasped in shock at the violence one man could seemingly bring to bear. But Sheppard kept his attention on the most important thing: not what was going on, but what it could mean and who was doing it. "All right. That guy is a high target for the Alliance, his name's Ranma from our intel."

"One of the two who took Torfan from the slavers," Trios added with a nod. "Him and... Herb, I think the other one was named. Our Matriarchs told us about them, although we weren't given any specific suggestions about what to do if we encountered them."

The two Asari Commandoes did not come from the United Asari Republics Military. That military was almost as tied to the Citadel Council as the turians were. Rather, they came from one of the dozens of smaller militia that fed troops into it. That was not a knock on Livia and Trios' skill though, as it would have been for any human militia. Further, they were volunteers, having joined the war against the batarians under their own recognizance, hence the use of the term suggestions rather than orders from their high command.

“For our part, we’re to request that the pair come in for questioning if we ever run into them in the field. And I don’t know about any of you, but if we ever do meet him, I’m going to be very, very polite about doing so,” John quipped.

“He just punched out a krogan, and is currently battling it out with large groups of krogan and more Blue Sun Mercs than I’ve ever heard of being seen in one engagement, while hopping around like one of your earth type caterpillars. I would say being polite to him is a **very** good idea,” Garrus muttered, although the way his flanges had parted into the species equivalent of a grin told Sheppard that he was just as pleased as Sheppard was with what they were seeing, as were the other turians.

“And no wonder,” John reflected. The Blood Pack had mangled several companies of turian mercenaries barely a week ago. While none of the turians assigned to his platoon had been involved in that fight, it was one example of why Sheppard, the remnants of his rifle platoon and the aliens had been assigned to their current mission: to somehow ensure the mercs could no longer come into the war on the batarian’s side, either on the front lines or behind them.

And because of that, regardless of what ‘Master Chief’ was here for, it was giving Shepard ideas.

Ideas, which amplified a moment later, as one of the other hackers reported seeing someone that matched the description of the other human who had been involved in taking over Torfan. “Although this one seems to be a woman rather than a man. Same armor as Ranma, though, and the hair color matches.”

Given that she and Samara had been discovered by the powers that be on Omega, Herb had divested herself of the hat covering her hair soon after agreeing to meet with Aria. The thing had been uncomfortable, but despite her current gender, it had somewhat given the game away.

The instant the image of Herb, moving through a crowd in one of the mid-districts, came up, one of the asari gasped, drawing everyone’s attention to her.

Livia blushed a little, and deliberately did not meet any of the humans’ eyes. While a fully trained biotic commando, she hadn’t really worked alongside humans before, and had not been prepared for how handsome they were, or how alike asari in body type. “I don’t know why the humans are here, but that asari walking next to that second one, the one who isn’t involved in a fight, that matriarch is wearing the colors of a Justicar.”

At the blank looks from the humans and turians, the two asari looked at one another, trying to figure out how to explain without going too deep into the societal taboo that no asari **ever** wanted to talk about even amongst themselves, let alone with members of other species. “Think of them as wandering lawmen, a mix between judge and policeman,” Trios began. “Their

task is to go after mass murderers, people who are insanely dangerous to anyone around them. Well beyond the normal level of criminal, I mean. If a Justicar is here, and these two dangerous humans are working with one of them, they might be after someone like that.”

“Regardless of why they’re here on Omega, the Justicar and Herb are currently being led towards where we were told Aria’s has her headquarters,” the other hackers answered, having continued to track the strange pair through the security cameras real time. Meanwhile, the last of the three human hackers worked on creating a map of Omega, conversing quietly with the Salarian all the while.

Shepard paused, crossing his arms and thinking about it before looking over at Livia, smiling very slightly at how she blushed under his gaze. He’d found both Asari Commandos assigned to his team to be quite interesting as individuals, to say nothing about how easy they were on the eyes. But Omega, and indeed their whole mission was not the place for such thoughts and he put them aside. “Will a Justicar work with a local criminal Lord like Aria?”

“Maybe? It depends on their attitude, and if they are willing to either help or at least look the other way, while the Justicar after their primary quarry. Like I said, those the Justicar go after, they’re...” Livia floundered, looking over at one of her fellow commando for help.

Trios spoke up quickly having already thought of a comparison. “Think of the worst mass murderers in recent times, the Mad Mangler who was recently caught on the Citadel. Then merge someone with that ability to kill in disturbing and unusual ways with someone who is also a sexual predator of the first order, who doesn’t care who she prays on, only that they feel pain. And then make them an asari biotic of insane power, far more power than a normal biotic like the two of us. Those are the kinds of individuals that the Justicars are sent after.” Trios shivered a little, shaking her head. “Murderers like that don’t appear often in our society, but when they do, and if somehow they are able to move from planet to planet, the Justicars are the ones sent after them.”

“They almost sound like Spectres in miniature. Okay...” Sheppard murmured, going over what he knew about the two transient humans. Setting aside the strangely confused basic information on their genders. Then he considered their mission, and then, he began to think big. *After all, I somehow doubt this Herb is going to be willing to work with Aria. Not after he and Ranma dismantled the Torfan slave rings. And if peace is off the table, then...* “Specialist Voljei, you’ve been here before.”

“Yes, yes. Previous knowledge of Omega, reason why this one was given the duty to join you over Specialist Jalusi. Societal knowledge was deemed more important than another set of hacking hands,” the salarian answered, not looking up from his omni-tool.

John had gotten used to the Salarian method of speech before this, and did not comment on that. Nor did he comment about the fact he seemed to be both watching the cameras from the drones, and working with the map maker while also running some kind of

subroutine, another set of small images popping up and off the main hologram on his omni-tool. "Do you think you could guess at the number of mercs here?"

"Upwards of four thousand mercenaries, another two thousand gangsters answering to Aria in peacetime. Other gangs, all loosely affiliated, paying tribute, not obeying directly except at need. Gutter trash," Voljei answered, now looking up from his work, when John indicated he wanted more information, he gave it, "gangs, not well armed in comparison to the mercs. Aria's people, spread out they are, keeping order in the public spaces. Mercenary numbers, always fluctuating. Currently, with the war on, estimate I do they are on a low ebb. Specific breakdown: Blood Pack providing at least a hundred krogan directly to Aria in lieu of payment for being on Omega. Eclipse, answering directly to Aria. Aria is rumored to be, one of their founding members, illogical but a powerful rumor. Blue Suns, purely monetary relationship yet..."

The Salarian gestured. "Reason they were involved perhaps because of that. Rivalry and more existing between the three mercenary groups, however. Blue Suns, overstepping their mission parameters perhaps? Or perhaps krogan blood too high already to listen to reason."

"We're seeing signs of that. Krogan from all over the station either are heading towards the conflict going on, or are moving towards the places Voljei marked as belonging to the other two groups. It looks as if the krogan are using this as an excuse to settle things once and for all," the mapmaking hacker, Corporal Ashter said.

"Ironic, because I think we can use this too. So, there's no way they will be able to bring what numbers they have to bear. Good. First, can we lock down all outgoing comms?"

"Difficult, but possible," Ashter answered promptly. "We could do a better job if we connected to an already existing central terminal, or the actual comms center. In those places we could not only lock outgoing comms, but handle all incoming comms too, regardless of sender or receiver."

"Alright. Ashter, you'll handle that. Sergeant Truss, you're with them, get them to the comms center..." here John paused letting Voljei copy out the map they'd made of Omega and mark down a route, "and then afterwards secure the area against anyone else."

"Got it, boss," Lisa Truss, the only female sergeant answered crisply. Despite being the only woman among his noncoms, John had already marked her out as possibly someone who could go mustang, going from being a noncom to a ranked officer.

"Ashter, while you're at it find out what comm lines the locals all use to communicate between themselves. We may need that information later down the line."

"You're making some interesting sounding plans, my friend, but what is our goal here? It sounds as if you've tossed away the idea of doing this peaceably," Garrus observed, a wry tilt of the head accompanying the words. "Not that I'm complaining."

While he wasn't the most senior of the four turians on this mission, Garrus routinely spoke up before the others could, and as he had the sniper specialist badge, the others followed his lead as none actually had any rank. More of John's noncoms had survived than riflemen, so it made sense that way.

"Heh. I think we can take it as a given that Aria and this Herb is going to come into conflict. And while she's concentrating on that, we can concentrate on taking all the power on Omega right out from under her," John explained. "Omega is a space station. A gigantic one, but still a space station. Space stations all have the same inherent weaknesses as a starship: Air and power. Lock one down, take over the others, and you become the owner of the space station for all intents and purposes until someone can force you out."

"That's one of the rules of this place," Voljei answered. "Don't fuck with Aria, and don't mess with the generators. It's the only part of the station that's kept at peak efficiency on this whole station. Everything else can go bang as far as Aria is concerned. Horrifying to contemplate. People here didn't keep them running on their own, but haphazard, untrained hands in many places. Shiver at the very thought."

"And how do you think the locals will react to a change of government?" Sheppard asked, allowing a vicious grin to cross his face. "Because it seems to me that a new government willing to look the other way for any past crimes and bringing some more order to this place might be well received, hmmm?"

The asari, Turians and Salarian all reacted differently to that. The asari simply frowned pensively, wondering about how they could bring that about and the long-term ramifications. The Salarian was silent, cocking his head in an almost snakelike fashion as he contemplated exactly how various local groups would respond to a human/turian occupation of Omega. While the majority of people here were renegades and rogues, the idea might actually merit some consideration from large sections of the truly civilian body. Especially, if the station could be made cleaner and a better place to live.

For their part, the turians all paused, a look of pure bliss coming over their faces. If they were human children, John would have thought he had just told them that they could have Christmas every month, such was their body language.

Once more, Garrus spoke up for the others. "You know, when you humans first appeared on the scene, humans and turians? We had our... difficulties. Then you go after the slavers and show the galaxy how horrible they are. Something that we had wanted to do for at least thirty years or more. You earn our respect, and even friendship in some cases in that campaign, adding to the respect you earned with your medical advancements. But to take over this place? Omega's been a thorn in our sides since near the end of the Krogan Wars! It's the center of dozens of illegal trades and deals going on throughout Council Space! Taking over this place, making it stick? Spirits, our Primarchs will line up to give you that human kiss thing for that!"

Shuddering a little at that bit of imagery, John shook his head. "Okay... moving on. I think it's time to head back to the ship and roll out the big guns. Sergeant Guster, you'll take the turian fire team, fire team two and the mechs."

Much like originally giving a platoon a captain to lead it, typically a combat platoon had two sergeants and four corporals, one of which served among the hack 'n' cracks. John's platoon had lost only one corporal, but the equivalent of two full rifle teams battling the Eclipse mercenaries and before during the war against the Batarian Hegemony.

*And honestly, I should be glad no one's gotten trigger happy one way or the other so far,* John reflected now. The majority of civilians on Omega were a mix of batarian, asari, volus, Elcor and Salarian, with a spattering of turian, human and krogan. However, while the batarians had not looked at them with favor, none of the locals had opened fire on them, or vice versa. *Seems as if the sight of the Hegemony using their own people as suicide bombs or meat shields has done wonders to paint the Hegemony as the enemy rather than the common batarian among the troops. Thank god. The last thing we want to deal with is a angry populace.*

"Head to the power station, take it over without damaging the power station at all, and then fort up," he finished aloud, before turning to Trios. "Trios, I want you to take the hackers to the Blue Sun headquarters. Do whatever you can to further damage whatever that mercenary group has left. Hack into their systems, tear apart everything, pull all their funds you can, as well as any locations they might have on their systems of other recruitment or bases. You know what to do. Do that there, then move on to Eclipse."

The infiltrators and hackers all looked at one another, dangerous smiles flicking across their faces that closely resembled one another despite the trio of races they represented. "Sounds like a grand time," Trios answered.

"And what will you be doing, sir?" Guster asked cautiously. He couldn't help but notice that Shephard had already designated a large amount of their firepower and men to other tasks.

"I will take Livia with me, and we'll head to the strip club Afterlife. Whatever happens there, I want to be on hand for it, if for no other reason than to meet this Herb guy at least. Garrus, you head to the fight going on between the Blue Sun and Blood Pack. If you can open up a line of communication with Ranma, I think doing so might help us," (*and the Alliance,*) John added mentally, "in the long term."

Garrus blinked at that, frowning. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Frankly, it sounded to him as if Sheppard was trying to sideline him. Oh sure, watching that level of violence close up would be fascinating. But not being able to get involved in gunning down mercenaries would put a serious crimp on his enjoyment.



“Positive. I want to know if we can work with these two,” Sheppard said, gesturing to where the image of Herb still hovered in the air from one omni-tool then back to the other image. “Long or short term, I don’t care. But the best way to take care of chaos like this is to find whoever is causing it and make them into an asset. Besides, I’m not sending you down there just to meet with this Ranma guy.”

“I think that’s a very good idea,” the man said, still watching Omega’s security cameras real time, shaking his head. “That fight is turning into a massacre, and I’m seeing more Blue Suns, more gangsters, and even a large company of Eclipse mercs moving to get stuck in. I can’t tell you how big a chunk of their troops that is, but it must be hurting them.”

“Right.” Raising his own omni-tool, Sheppard kept at it several times, and a series of images popped up into existence. Garrus looked at them all, and recognized every face there instantly, as did the rest of the team still standing around. These were the leaders and the high-ranking officers, if such a term could be used, for the three primary mercenary groups. “You’re the best sniper here. Even better than me,” Sheppard grumbled, shaking his head. He still hadn’t gotten over the fact that he had lost their little shooting competition when Garrus first joined his command. “So I think I can trust you with this mission. That mission being, if you see any of these officers over the next few hours, and if they are involved in any kind of fight whatsoever, you have my official orders to take them out.”

Garrus brightened considerably at that, rubbing his hands together eagerly, a motion that his folk and humans had in common despite the differences in their fingers. “You should have lead with that, Shephard! That is the kind of mission I can get behind. Decapitate the varren, and the body will die easily, especially if our fellows here can grab as much information as they can from their bases.”

The hackers and infiltrators all nodded firmly, now fully comprehending the scope of Shephard’s on the cuff plan. It was ambitious as all hell, but if Garrus got lucky and was able to decapitate even one of the mercenary bands, and if, as Sheppard hoped, they could help remove Aria from power here and then step in as temporary leaders, they might be able to get away with it.

But that was the beauty of the plan from Shephard’s opinion. If any one aspect worked, they’d win in the long term. It wouldn’t be a complete win, but their mission here had been left so deliberately vague, that any positive was a good thing in his mind.

He waited a moment, then as no one moved, asked mildly, “Well? What are you all waiting for?”

Within moments, Garrus and the others had peeled away, leaving Shepard with Livia T’Nola. “Well, this is going to be a bit weird. Arriving at a strip club, and not only going to one, but with a male companion already on hand,” the asari said with a cry chuckle, and Shepard had to agree.

It was indeed weird, but then again, Shepard felt that would be the least of the weird things they had to deal with today. "I have seen a video game character seemingly brought to life by some strange genetically modified human whose origins no one has any idea of and show reasoning for it is impossible to figure out. I think I can handle a little bit more weirdness."

Livia nodded, and the pair moved off resolutely.

**OOOOOOO**

O'taku had meant to stay on the ship with Inu. She reallu, really had. But Usagi was nothing if not persuasive, and it had only taken the strangely immature matron a bare ten minutes to talk her into coming with Usagi and her fellow Ardat-Yakshi, Cru'be, and Mu'lava. Not twenty minutes after Herb and Samara had left, she found herself with the three other asari, not breaking up further as they moved through the station.

Usagi led them easily, uncaring of the looks four asari received as they reached one of the districts where there were actually living people. While the three other asari felt somewhat overwhelmed by the sheer number of other sentients around them, , moving through the crowds like a dolphin through the ocean, grinning or smacking hands away as she wished and the faces of the individuals touching her deserved, whether accidentally or on purpose. Usagi knew she was attractive, and didn't care if other people wanted to look. Touching though, she reserved. "So what are you thinking of doing for fun? You want to go shopping? The market here is really fun. The food isn't all that good though, so if you're looking for something to eat, you have to go to the few official restaurants. And the prices would be enough to give a matriarch a heart attack."

The other asari with her all laughed at the admittedly old joke, which Usagi had delivered perfectly.

"Some shopping, specifically, computer parts?" O'taku asked, holding up her omni-tool to display a list. Most of the sisters didn't have one, since part of the idea of the nunnery on Crastus was to get away from technology, but she was allowed to use one as a starship pilot, and one of the sisters who was trusted enough to handle the technology they did have. "That, and some medical supplies."

"Oooh, computer stuff is fine, but medical supplies? Unless you're linked to Ranma and Herb's accounts they will be really expensive here!" Usagi answered, before her eyes widened in surprise when O'taku nodded before she could stop herself. "Well, why didn't you say so in the first place! To the bazaar we go!"

The bazaar turned out to be an entire district, several floors up and down around the size of two football pitches from one side to another from where they entered. The Carrd District was run be elcor, who had made it a habit to welcome refugees from a series of 'wars'

going on in the district around them. The volus and elcor worked together, keeping Carrd safe and profitable.

This area was one of the better kept up districts, although the shops themselves seemed almost haphazardly stuffed wherever they could go. Even so, it was an amazing sight as they entered, a riot of colors, styles and races and the three sheltered Ardat-Yakshi stopped and stared around them for a few seconds, before exchanging small smiles, and following Usagi into the crowds.

These crowds were also a little bit more civilized, O'taku noted. Fewer people were carrying weapons. And those who did carry guns, mostly elcor with their signature battle-platforms, were obviously security, stationed at specific areas throughout the zone, calmly watching the crowds, while above, cameras shifted this way and that, following the crowds. Even the lifts to the other levels of the bazaar worked far better than the others they had used to get here in the first place. Moreover, O'taku saw signs for what looked like hotels offering 'both security and any pleasure or nicety any sentient could wish! Vetted by Aria herself.'

"Aria's name is in a lot of places," O'taku noted mildly, to which Usagi just shrugged.

"Before her there was someone else. Before that guy, another person. Aria was the first to really try to make it official that there was one person in charge, to be open about it, I mean. But some criminal or other has always been in the top spot on Omega. However, people here in this district are as close to civilized as you're going to find on Omega. That might not be saying much in comparison to Asari Space, but to the Terminus Systems, it's a big deal."

Forty-five minutes of shopping passed with only a few incidents. They might have gone longer but all of them were little disappointed in the clothing offered here. That, and O'taku was an extremely organized shopper. The others all picked up small knickknacks for themselves, but as Usagi had pointed out, the price for good food, especially asari style food was exorbitant, and none of them were up to wanting to try any of the more exotic food on display. Despite how much better than the rest of the space station this area looked the fast food stalls still looked a little dubious to all of them.

"I don't know about you all, but food and drinks sound like a great idea," Usagi said after an hour had passed, then grinned. "And I bet we could even go to a place that would give me a discount."

"I feel like I'm going to regret asking, but where would that be exactly?"

O'taku was correct in her assumption: she did regret asking. She regretted even more going with Usagi suggestion twenty minutes later when they showed up at what was undoubtedly a strip club. It was a giant strip club, four stories tall, and about as wide as a city block on a normal asari world. Nevertheless, it was still a strip club. The holograms of dancing asari maidens outside, interspersed, interestingly to several of the sisters, with a few human

girls, showed that without a doubt. Even if their most important bits were filtered out, covered with gray pixels.

Usagi blithely stepped past the bouncers, waving to one of them, who stared back at her, his four eyes blinking, before shrugging his shoulders and waving back, looking at the trio of asari with Usagi quizzically but making no move to stop any of them from entering the club. Seeing that, his fellow bouncers also didn't bother them, although looked after them quizzically.

A confusion that O'taku shared as she hissed, "How do they know you, Usagi?"

"I worked here as a dancer for a few years until I perfected it. Then I got bored," Usagi answered blithely, exchanging waves with two of the matrons who were operating a bar nearby. Both of them stared back at her in shock, but Usagi simply ignored that, and led the younger girls forward.

All of the asari with her blushed and tried hard not to stare at the amount of skin on display. While all three had decided that, they preferred the male form to the female after interacting with Ranma and Herb, that didn't actually matter in a place like this. There weren't as many male human dancers as there were asari or human women, but they were still here, and drew the trio's eyes like lodestones. So much so that they didn't realize Usagi had led them into a corner and ordered food and drinks for them until said food arrived in front of them. "Well, what are you doing, eat up! And drink too. The drinks here are amazing, the best on Omega."

Usagi chattered on as the trio of girls ate, drank and started to slowly relax, noticing that they weren't getting any more strange looks now that they were actually sitting down eating and credits had been exchanged.

Halfway through the meal, the pole that dominated the center of the oblong table they were sitting at drew one of the wandering dancers. She looked at her fellow asari quizzically, then gestured at the pole. "Do you want a dance, girls? Sorry, but all our boys are booked solid for the day. By Athame, there's not merely enough human men who know how to dance! And don't get me started on the batarians. They can be good-looking enough, but their idea of dancing is just so wrong!"

Usagi laughed, then commented on how it still had to be better than what the Turians called dance, to which the dancer nodded sagely, looking at her in confusion. "That's a good point. But... do I know you?"

"Maybe. I might have been here when you first arrived," Usagi said chirpily, before getting to her feet. "But as for needing you to dance, nope. If I wanted to, I could do that myself." She hopped up onto the table, and to the surprise of the dancer, quickly wrapped one of her legs around the pole, leaning back and swishing around the pole in a circle as all of her

weight rested on her leg holding her upright in the air at a 90° angle from the pole. She also loosened up her blouse, letting far more of her cleavage be seen than previously.

It was as she was twirling, and ignoring O'taku's gasp of "Usagi!" She spotted Herb and Samara entering the club, surrounded by a group of Aria's thugs.

Usagi grinned then, a mischievous little grin, even as she pulled herself upright, flicked around, and began to dance around the pole, tossing her shirt aside as the original dancer watched on, looking torn between professional annoyance and wanting to take notes. The Ardat-Yakshi all looked similarly stunned, which Usagi had to giggle at. Even so, when she leaned her now barely clad chest into O'taku's face, the words she spoke had nothing to do with the show she was putting on. "Don't look now, but we might be getting another type of fun soon. Herb and Samara just arrived, and they didn't look happy to be here."

Blinking and trying hard not to concentrate on the rolling hills of asari flesh in front of her, O'taku looked up, and seeing Usagi nod, tried to bring her hormones under control, leaning over to her nearest sister.

**OOOOOOO**

Walking down the road towards Afterlife, Herb had to pause and stare, perforce stopping their so-called escort in place as well. "You know, most of this station looks so normal. Run-down, monstrously dirty and more like something out of the historical wild west period from America given the proliferation of weapons. But then you run into this, a strip club with quite a bit of advertisement and a size that would equal a... a city's governmental building."

Herb had to fumble at the end for something to replace the term she had wanted to use, that being 'my father's palace'. While she and Ranma had not gone out of their way to keep it a secret, some aspects of their old lives had yet to come up with anyone and one such was the fact Herb was a prince.

And yes, she was a prince of the Musk regardless of her current gender. Anyone calling her princess would end up on the ground looking for their spleen. Unlike Ranma, who was semi-comfortable with his female form, Herb still had a lot of societal issues with being a woman.

"It is a sign that here, unlike elsewhere, vice is lauded and even seen as a positive," Samara said sagely. "I was once a maiden, and such businesses were interesting places to learn many things, but I have never seen one so open about what is within. I feel it takes away from the mystique of the female form, to put it on display even holographically like this."

"True." Herb would have said more if not for someone foolishly trying to poke her in the back with a rifle. "Heh, ya might need to get into it to pay off your debt for ignoring Aria, pretty one. I think I'll ask for a dance as soon..."

Whirling, Herb tore it out of the offending batarian's hand, crushing the barrel in her grip and tossing it to the deck beneath them. "Try that again, it won't be your toy I break, scum."

The batarian stumbled back, all four eyes wide, and Herb harrumphed before turning back towards Afterlife. "Come. Let us go see the Queen of Omega."

After some posturing by the rest of their escort, Herb and Samara continued their journey, heading into the strip club. After getting used to the lighting within and the various dancers around them Herb quickly noticed Usagi and her friends of course. Usagi was most distinctive, even if currently, she was bent over backwards, her large chest swaying in a way that nearly blocked her face from view. But Herb also knew O'taku by sight, and the horrified, interested, and intrigued face she was currently wearing was one that she was also intimately familiar with after being around Usagi for so long.

Next to her, Samantha also noticed the group of asari, and sighed faintly. "It would've been too much to hope that they would stay out of trouble, wouldn't it? Maidens, honestly, the best part of my life was, when my mind shifted so I no longer thought like that."

"They are not in trouble just yet, simply taking part in the normal background trouble that is Omega," Herb rejoined. *Although being here at this point when I fully intend to kill Aria at some point today is like putting yourself at the epicenter of an earthquake for shits and giggles.*

Surprisingly, despite the two of them speaking in very low voices, and there being a lot of background noise, one worthy nearby heard them. A Salarian, a member of a race that Herb and Ranma hadn't had many dealings with before this, leaned in, having taken up a guard position as they had been handed off by the group of infiltrators. Although thankfully, he had only heard a portion of what they said to one another. "There is to be no trouble. Aria rules here, if she decides there is trouble there will be. You decide nothing. Smile, nod, you may live."

The two of them exchanged glances, then Herb actually bowed her head politely to the man. Her words, however, were not at all polite. "I could almost recommend you for your unwavering loyalty... if it did not speak from a place of gross ignorance and foolishness."

The Salarian stiffened, but Herb and Samantha had already walked past him, forcing the enforcers to catch up as they moved through the strip club after the batarian who served as Aria's chief lieutenant. The Salarian stared after them angrily, hissing a curse under his breath that whatever Aria decided, the human with the strangely colored hair would pay for that line.

The two of them were escorted up into Aria's office, which overlooked the strip club. She stood with her back to them, staring out over the strip club, before turning to look over her shoulder at them as they entered. Her face was set in a rictus of fury, and her omni-tool's comms clicked off as she did, and Herb held back a smile. *It seems as if Ranma's diversion is still causing her issues. I wonder how many hundreds of people he's already pulled into that morass.*

And it evidently had also changed whatever Aria was going to say to them as, for a moment, she simply stared at the pair. Samara gazed back with her expression locked in its normal, neutral expression, while Herb stared back with all the cold hauteur she could muster. Which, given her training as a prince, was quite a lot.

Abruptly, Aria looked away, moving to sit in one of her chairs before looking back at the pair across from her, locking gazes with Samara first. “Justicar Samara. One of the Justicar’s Eldest, a biotic user whose power is supposedly among the highest known among asari. Credited with shutting down ten drug rings, five slave rings, four corrupt officials and twenty Ardat-Yakshi. Presumably here, because you are in a hunt. And yet, you didn’t come straight here to speak with me. I don’t like that.”

“And I do not like Ardat-Yakshi being allowed loose. Your demand that we come and speak to you has put our hunt in jeopardy,” Samara answered coldly. “While the code does allow a Justicar in the pursuit of her goal to work with criminal elements in duress, I did not see the need. I had already gained all the help I require, and your so-called aid would not be a guarantor of success in any event. As it is, interfering like this I can judge you in contempt of the Code and treat you as any other obstacle if you continue to be belligerent.”

It wasn’t only the rogue Ardat-Yakshi that the Justicars were made to deal with after all but all criminal elements. Yes, the Ardat-Yakshi took precedence as she said, but that did not mean that she would simply ignore all criminals otherwise. That was why she was known to have taken care of even more criminal-type problems than Aria had listed.

Aria glared back at her, then held up a hand, clenching it into a fist. Toughts instantly flooded into the room from behind and two more doorways leading into Aria’s office. Guns cocked all around them and Aria rose to her feet. “You do not speak like that to me here! Not in Afterlife, not on Omega. I am **ARIA!** I **AM** Omega!”

Seemingly finished with yelling at Samara, Aria turned to snarl at Herb. “And you arrive with this one. Herb. Human, male, although there at least they seem to have made a mistake. Rumors go that you are some kind of a hyper advanced cyborg paired with a biotic’s skills. The Alliance disavows any knowledge of a super soldier program that would produce someone like you or your companion, but a lot of video evidence is piled up about your various abilities. I’d be almost impressed. Almost, that is, since your companion has broken the single most important rule on Omega. Don’t **FUCK** with Aria!”

She snarled the last words, her biotic powers flaring around her as she stalked around the pair like a lioness choosing which prey to feast upon. “You try to disappear in the background of the station with Samara, and your friend goes off to pick a fight with the Blood Pack! A fight that has since spiraled so far out of control that I was forced to send in my own people and the Blue Suns! A fight that’s cost me billions in credits to repair the damage to the station and actually needing to pay the Blue Suns to intervene! I don’t care why he picked a fight with them, or what you and this one...” She flicked a finger toward Samantha. “Are doing here! You do not

cause trouble on **my** station! You do not disrespect me by ignoring me and just going about your business and expect to get away with it!”

Her eyes swiveled to follow her finger, as she glared at Samantha. “Maybe, **maybe** if you would come directly to me, if you had paid me both the respect I deserve, and the money for it, I would’ve helped you in your search for whatever rogue Ardat-Yakshi you’re here to hunt down. As it is, I am an inch away from throwing you off Omega without a space suit!”

Samantha simply stared back at her, the cold, call gaze of the other matriarch causing Aria to feel a faint shiver go down her spine. She had dealt with far more dangerous people than anyone else in the known galaxy, but the calm confident gaze Samara was giving her was making Aria wonder precisely how many stories about the skill of the Justicars might actually be true.

But she refused to show weakness. To do so would undermine her position, and with reports going on that Garm had decided now was the time for the Blood Pack to try to take over Omega, and that the original Blue Suns units sent to try and pacify things had been nearly wiped out, an internal challenge to her rule was the last thing she needed right now.

Before she could continue to speak to Samara, Herb spoke up, a sneer on her face, “So you know of me? Is that supposed to worry me in some fashion? If that is a scare tactic, to show how connected you are, I have to say it falls well short of the mark. As for what Ranma is up to, we are not his keepers. If you wish to stop him, do so. Do not whine about it to me.” As Aria seemed to turn purple with rage, Herb simply gazed back, her spine ramrod straight, her hands behind her back, showing an arrogant mien that few would be able to match. “You have attempted to threaten us, and it too falls short. Walk away now and let us continue our business. Anything else would be immensely foolish.”

*I really must learn more about insults. Fool is losing its flavor,* Herb lamented mentally.

“You have business with me because you are on Omega! Everything around here, **everything** is mine! You paid your dues to enter the station. You paid me. You buy food, you pay me. You’re here to find someone, you pay me to help or to not narc on your target! You do not walk around my station as if you own it! And you do not cause trouble like your friend! His life’s already forfeit but I hoped you two were more reasonable!”

“I’m sorry, you seem to have just implied that you have warned our target that we are here?” Samara interjected before Herb could. And while her expression hadn’t changed at all, Herb frowned slightly, moving away from the Asari Matriarch. While he didn’t normally fear the woman, something about the feeling she gave off had just changed. “Then you would truly have become an obstacle.”

“ENOUGH!” Aria shouted. Biotic power warped around her and she reached forward with a biotic grab but too slowly. Herb was already moving, as were Samara.



A biotic barrier so powerful it looked like a solid wall rose around her as Herb blurred, almost disappearing from the sight of everyone around them. Bullets fired, but missed, passing through afterimages she left behind her as she moved into and between two of the gunmen, grabbing their guns and pointing them at their fellows, walking the guns across the crowd. Men fell dead or dying, as Herb released one man, kicking him in the side so hard he flew through the air towards Aria, who smacked him aside with a biotic blast.

“You know where your quarry is, stake out the place, make certain she cannot leave,” Herb ordered, her voice almost conversational even as she lifted a batarian into the air, using him as a shield against a biotic warp from Aria. In her other hand a ki blast formed, slugging the face of the sole krogan among Aria’s enforcers, burning through electronic barrier and armor alike. “I do not need your aid here. Leave me to my fun.”

“FUN!? FUN!? You call this fun!? I will...” that was as far as Aria got before another body was hurled her way. “The fuck is with you and throwing bodies?!” She stopped it in place with a grab, then pushed it right back, only to hit one of her own people as Herb bounced up off the ceiling before landing a kick on a batarian’s head that shattered his skull, using the momentum to flip away from another series of warps and biotic orbs from Aria.

Ignoring the younger asari’s histrionics, Samantha nodded, and turned, uncaring of the guns firing in her direction. She simply kept her biotic shield up before smashing three of the enforcers out of her way with a singularity that pulled them to the side, walking through the doorway back down to the main floor of the club even as other enforcers reacted to the noise of the battle behind her. Five more got in her way, but were dealt with similarly before she raced out of the club.

Grimacing, as she dodged yet another body, Aria decided to ignore the Justicar, pulling back from attacking Herb just yet as the bitch disappeared behind four of her men, waiting for her to become visible again. *If the Justicar’s just willing to walk off, leaving her companion, I’m more than willing to let them separate. Judging from how much firepower the other bastard’s taken to put down, this is not going to be easy even with her out of here.*

When Herb slew the last batarian between them Aria sent out a pair of Singularities that bracketed Herb, slowing her down and halting her in place. They should have torn her apart, but other than a faint grimace, the human woman seemed almost immune to it. However, that was fine by Aria, who lashed her with dozens of biotic orbs, causing the first real look of pain to appear on Herb’s face. “Fucking die!!”

“Not to you!” Herb snarled, a pulse of some kind of bluish energy shattering the singularities and slamming behind Herb the last three enforcers within the room into the walls from where they had been lining up shots from. Even Aria, several yards away felt it and skidded back, scowling. *Some kind of new biotic power.*

Another asari used a biotic push to smash Herb into one of the walls, then sent her sideways into the other. To Aria's rising fury this didn't seem to hurting her much, but definitely damaging the décor quite a bit as did Aria herself, when she missed with her biotic orbs, only tagging the human bitch twice. Luckily, the grenade went off in front of her face, hurling Herb backwards.

*Okay, that hurt*, Herb grimaced as she pushed herself off the wall, grabbing a nearby piece of 'art' and hurling it at an asari. The asari barely got up a shield in time, and missed the thrown bit of rubble that bounced off the wall behind her and smacked into the back of her head. *Try to avoid grenades or other explosives. Those sting worse than the biotic orbs. Which act like ki bolts, just like Ranma told me they did. Still, Aria seems to be the only one able to use that skill. Time to break out some of my own abilities more.*

Once more Aria reached out with her biotic powers, trying to grab at Herb's throat, but a quick ki pulse burst the hold and then Herb shot forward, two ki blasts firing out from his hands. The clear sight of those coming out of his palms rather than his sleeves as she first thought caused Aria's eyes to widen before dodging to the side. *Fuck, they didn't come from a hidden weapon?! Maybe this asshole really is a cyborg!*

The bolts smashed into the glass, heating and impacting at the same time, causing cracks to appear there along with bits of melted glass, which should have been impossible, as that glass was bulletproof and could even withstand biotic warps.

A biotic lash caught Herb's legs, dumping her to the floor. *Gah! That's new! Biotic energy is certainly easier to shape than ki, that is for certain.*

Herb rolled way from another lash, only to feel herself lifted up and then slammed into place once more. It didn't hurt, though, and once more Herb rolled away from a blast of biotic power that tore up the ground she had been laying on a moment ago, even as rifle shots impacted her back armor and shoulder. *Now that, that looks like it would have hurt.*

Her roll had brought her near Aria, and she came off the floor, coming up into a mule kick that crashed into a hastily raised biotic shield around Aria. At the same time, Herb lashed out to either side towards the last few remaining gunmen, firing off energy blasts far more profligately than Ranma could ever have tried. Each blast crashed with unerring accuracy into a gunman or asari, or particularly tasteless piece of ornament. Herb wasn't picky. *What is it with gangster types in this world seeming to think gold and glitter is more important than aesthetics?*

Across from him, Aria grunted with effort as she held the barrier in front of her, then was moving backward under a biotic push, as Herb leapt up and over the shield, raining down energy blasts. But it was those energy blasts that, hitting the glass behind her, gave Aria room to maneuver. *I can't let this fucker close in with me!*

A hasty warp behind her shattered the now weakened glass, and then Aria was moving through the window out into space over the main floor of the club, lashing out with another spread of orbs at Herb who had followed her out. He somehow dodged to one side, avoiding most of them and then floated in midair, with seemingly no biotic power visible as she landed. The thugs scattered through Afterlife instantly began to fire up at him, while the crowd either got involved or ducked into cover, which was quite prevalent in Afterlife. This wasn't the first shootout in the club, although it had been years since someone had challenged Aria like this.

Something that infuriated her even more, but which didn't blind her to the fact that nothing she had done so far to the human female had done much damage.

As Herb was being forced to shield himself from heavier caliber mass effect weapons, Aria spotted Sayn. "Find Jaroth and get him to bring in his troops! I don't care what it takes, we are putting that asshole down!"

"But ma'am! We already ordered Jaroth to send the majority of his forces into the fight against the Blood Pack. They're nearly there, if we call them backKKK!" That was as far as he got before Herb, having been near enough to overhear at least the words 'Eclipse' and 'bring back', decided to show that giving out orders aloud like that even with a backdrop of a firefight was a bad idea. A brief second of concentration and a ki blast turned the batarian's head into so much fried paste with another ki blast.

That was as much as Herb could do for a second as a shockwave from Aria caught him hurling him the length of Afterlife. This forced Herb into the range of a few elcor, who took him under fire at once, their combat platforms, basically, wide platforms around their center of mass armed with multiple weapons systems, locking onto him instantly. Mass effect machine guns and grenade launchers hit him, and forced Herb to the ground growling in pain and anger, but not doing enough damage to really injure him. It hurts like blazes, but I can deal with that, Herb snarled. Now where did that...

That was all he got out before Aria made a mistake. She launched herself forward in a charge, following up with a blast of biotic energy that more closely resembled a small storm held in her hand. "FUCKING DIE!!"

The storm of energy hit Herb in the center of her chest, but despite the pain of what felt like a lightning bolt hitting him, Herb grabbed the asari woman's arm, and pulled her into a blow to the center of the chest that hurled Aria backward. Her armor and electronic barrier helped save her, but Aria felt her electronic barrier pop like a bubble right before her armor caved, taking two ribs with it. She slammed into the top edge of the main stage, rolling up and over the lip until she came to a rest against one of the poles, and barely had time to get to her feet before Herb smashed into the wood next to her.

Herb's multi-colored hair was standing on end, and bursts of electricity flickered around her hands. But Herb was more furious at the pain than wounded, and she showed this by

attacking instantly, forcing Herb to use her biotic powers to speed up her own body to match even as she stumbled back. "God damn it someone kill this fucker for me! Do it and you'll take Sayn's place! And girls, get your asses into this now, or you'll find out anal isn't just for fun anymore."

Even the elcor reacted to that, attacking Herb with even more vigor, but that proved to be a double-edged sword. Aria was after all right next to their target, making both of them have to dodge the heavy fire coming their way.

The asari who had been by Usagi and O'taku's table was one of many young maidens to activate her biotics at Aria's orders. Before this they'd stayed out of it, since their actual combat ability was something that Aria kept secret for emergencies, something no one beyond the Afterlife Sisterhood, asari who stayed in Afterlife for five years and wanted to be a part of Aria's criminal empire, knew about.

However, the dancer who had been cheering Usagi on never got the chance to join the fight. Instead, she felt a sharp pain in the side of her head and slumped unconscious as Usagi kicked her, sending her sideways into another booth. "Sleeping through this is probably the best thing for you," Usagi said, then flipped herself upwards, until her feet were near the top of the pole, whereupon she kicked off, launching herself forward into two other dancers. A biotic charge built around her right before that crashed into and through their hastily raised biotic barriers, hurling them in different directions away from the main conflict.

O'taku groaned, but her two companions were quite a bit more combative than she was. This also looked just as much fun as ogling human men could have been, even if in this case most of the human men had run away like cowards. While not every sister at the abbey liked to fight, Joldrea'as had picked those who did to go with Herb and Ranma until they had their ship, understanding inevitability when she saw it. "Let's do it!"

"We're bound to get points with the Abbess if we're involved in overthrowing a crime lord, right? Maybe we'll even be allowed TVs in our room!" Mu'lava answered.

At that, O'taku had something worth fighting for. *More tech in the Abbey!*

She surged to her feet, joining the others in charging their fellow asari, who looked incredibly startled, and had yet to get over the surprise of Usagi involving herself. In contrast, many of the armed guards, in particular the older looking ones, turned their attention toward Usagi with somewhat desperate delight. "Gun the traitor down! We can't do shit against the human bitch anyway!"

Or rather, the rifle and pistol users turned their attention to Usagi. The heavy weapons users kept on trying to fire at Herb, and were having no luck. He was simply too mobile for them, and they were doing a great deal more damage to the strip club and they were to him. Indeed, at least ten of the other club patrons had died by this point.

None of the bouncers rushing into the club to join the fight even bothered with Samantha as she slipped out past them, pausing momentarily to look at a human and asari pair who rushed past her. The asari recognized what Samantha was, her eyes widening, and she slid to a stop, but said nothing, instead simply bowing from the waist respectfully and then rushing after the human who had not paused in his headlong charge into the club.

“Well, at least someone has manners,” Samara mused with a small smile, turning and activating her biotics, racing away. *Although I wonder, why a fully trained commando with the tabs of the Athame Sisterhood is doing here? Along with a human who can only be a real soldier of some kind. Interesting.*

Herb meanwhile had been able to stay in close with Aria, and the two of them were exchanging blows in the center of the area. Biotically powered fists and kicks met Herb’s own punches and blows, the two of them going at it almost as Samantha and Ranma had a few hours ago when sparring. But there was no sparring here. Every move was intended to kill, every strike from a biotic fist was accompanied either by a more subtle biotic grab at some part of Herb, wanting to wrench and tear, or the power of an orb or shockwave behind it.

Truthfully, Aria was trying to line up for specific biotic power she had developed, Grasping Heart. It targeted the individual’s heart and simply tore it out of his chest. She’d used it to defeat her predecessor, removing one of the krogan’s hearts and doing so much damage that his natural healing ability couldn’t keep up.

But it was a precise kind of power. Every time she tried to line it up on his chest, Herb had moved. Worse, two of her ribs were certainly broken from the blow she had taken when trying to take out Herb with her biotic storm. The pain of those ribs was dulling her ability to use her biotic power. *Fuck, I should have trained with that technique more before using it!* Now though, she was forced to use her powers in a way she didn’t like, up close and personal. She could, but Herb was taking her best shots and either avoiding or firing back just as hard.

Near the entrance, John took all this in at a glance, and quickly moved all around the edge of the strip club, ducking into cover and pulling out his rifle, as well as opening up the communications gear on his omni-tool. “Shepherd to all teams. Person of interest Herb has started a one-man war with Aria right in the center of her club as we suspected. Moving in support. Will advise.”

His companion slid into cover next to John, pushing lightly against him so that both of them were hiding behind the same overturned table, and were they not in the middle of a firefight, John might well have enjoyed the sensation. Although not very busty, the Asari Commandos all had enough curves for John’s tastes. “I’m looking for her second-in-command, and anyone else of...”

And out thrust finger interrupted Shepherd, as the Asari commando pointed to a Salarian who had just rushed into the club from another entrance with around fifty other

mercenaries. “That one, he’s a high ranking Eclipse member!” She reached forward with her biotic powers as the Salarian charged past their position, grabbing him in place for a second, and Shepherd didn’t hesitate. Rifle bullets took him in the side of the head, exploding his brain into so many fragments.

Then the pair were ducking back into cover, hoping that their little intervention had been noticed just yet.

It hadn’t. Usagi and the Ardat-Yakshi with her were drawing most of the other asari dancers onto them at the moment, as well as a good number of the less armed bouncers. While none of the others could match Usagi in deadliness or experience, they were all trained to a certain degree with their biotic powers, and training against Ranma and Herb had given them quite a bit of experience on how to use it. They weren’t taking down as many opponents as Usagi, but were tying up about a third of the surviving toughs in the strip club.

Infused with the Eclipse mercs, the rest organized themselves, and quickly began to bracket Herb’s position with fire, racking his back and flanks with shrapnel and explosions from grenades. This gave Aria an advantage for a few seconds, and a warp lashed him followed by a shockwave at the same point in Herb’s armor, not going for the human’s head as Herb’s other arm was up to protect it. The combination dented his armor for the first time in this fight, while his leg buckled under the impact of a grenade that went off on contact with the side of his knee.

The explosion from this caused Aria to back off for a second though, which let Herb recover, kicking off the ground with his other leg and then bringing around the leg that had taken the grenade in a roundhouse. Aria was stunned to note the woman’s greave wasn’t even dented, before the blow landed and shattered her shield again before doing the same to her jaw. “ARGGGG!!!”

Deciding that the time to hide had passed, Shepherd hopped to his feet, lining up and taking several of the bouncers in the flank with his rifle, mass kinetic rounds blasting out, impacting body armor shield and flesh. At the same time, Livia also reached out, a series of warps going off in the center of the group, flinging them away and tearing at their armor, making them more susceptible to Shephard’s follow on shots.

Many of the mercs turned, while the bouncers were slower, not used to being attacked. Two grenades and a singularity later most of them were down, and John made a mental note to remember to never bunch up his troops when facing a biotic. Then he and Livia were ducking or shielding as the remaining bouncers tried to take their revenge.

This shift in the dynamic of the battle was what finally cost Aria. Her jaw shattered along with her ribs Aria had tried to retreat via a jump back to her office. There, she had a secret escape hatch to the level below. Nevertheless, with no cover, Herb was on her before she could get there. Twisting around, Aria blocked the first strike, a desperate shockwave forming in her other hand only for the hand to be knocked off target before Herb’s other hand came up in front

of her face. A ki blast lashed into her head, and a second later, Herb stepped back, watching as Aria collapsed headless to the ground.

With her main opponent dealt with, Herb turned her attention to the rest of the fight. From the vantage point of Aria's office, she could see Usagi was almost finished putting the asari dancers down, though she doubted any were actually dead. She saw a human and asari pair working quite well together to kill the final few enforcers in the area, along with the last two patrons still in the club. Thinking about it, Herb sighed, her blood lust receding, and letting her think again. And as she did, Herb shouted, "Aria is dead! You fight for no one now! Throw down your weapons or die!"

The survivors, one turian, two elcor, several salarians and batarians, and the asari dancers, the few human dancers had all fled regardless of gender, looked at one another. The asari instantly held up their hands, and Usagi whooped, hopping up and moving to one of the bars. "Cool! That was fun, now, I want a drink and some music. Anyone have a preference? I know this amazing human drink called a mojito that I have been dying to make."

That seemed to take the wind out of any more resistance, and one of the salarians glanced up at Herb as she floated down to the ground. "So, what, are you the new queen or something?"

"While that term sounds quite powerful, call me a queen or princess and you will be looking for your spleen," Herb announced, scowling as she voiced her earlier thoughts on that score.

She might have gone on if not for a polite cough from the human she had spotted before. "Er, if you don't mind, I think if you don't want to set yourself up here, my team and I might have an alternative idea."

Looking at him now, Herb could only blink in surprise. *Good grief, he looks like an American marine so much so, he could have just stepped out of one of those action movies my retainers liked to watch.* Still, it wouldn't hurt to hear the man out. He was at least being respectful right now. "And what would that be?"

**OOOOOO**

Ranma kicked a vorch away as he wrenched a marlinspike he'd made out of a bit of debris from the face of a now very dead krogan who had just ordered his troops to fire at one of the few still-standing buildings near the edge of the district. A few Blue Suns members had retreated into it, and to the krogan's way of thinking, that meant the building was fair game.

As they held many of the civilians who had run away from the fight, Ranma had taken this decision personally. The fact the krogan in question had a darker shade of red to his armor didn't bother him at all, although he had put up a better fight than the others, being the first

battlemaster who had access to biotics to use something other than charge and shield. His warp-powered fist had even rung Ranma's bell a bit inside his helmet. But in the end, Ranma's Short Style variant of Amaguriken got through his defenses, and after that, it was all over.

The message delivered, Ranma kicked another charging krogan's legs out from under him, grabbing the big alien by his shoulders as he passed, tossing him into a group of Blue Sun mercs. The fact they were two dozen feet away barely registered to him, although he did pause for a moment as a turian seemingly lined up a shot on another Blue Sun taking the four-eyed alien down with a bullet to the side of the head. "What the hell? Now they're turning on one another?"

Since he hadn't operated his external speakers when he spoke, no one heard those words, but Ranma was surprised a moment later as his intercom blared to life. He didn't think Herb would deign to put on her helmet at all against someone like Aria, unless they were dealing with some place that had lost air, so getting a call like that was seriously surprising.

"Hello human, Am I on the right frequency?"

"What the heck? Who are you?" Ranma grunted, ducking under a blow from a krogan from behind. He grabbed the krogan, wrenched his arm around, and then kicked out, shattering the aliens kneecap, before piledriving a fist into the creature's face, which shattered his nose dumping his unconscious body to the ground.

Seeing that, Garrus gulped a little. He really didn't want to see what kind of damage that blow would've done to his far squishier body. "My name is Garrus! I'm here with a joint turian/Alliance combat op, we were to basically either bribe or force the mercenaries to stop taking part in the Batarian-Human war. Don't mind me, I'll just be sticking to the edge of this carnage, and shooting people whose faces appear on a very specific list."

Just then, the reinforcements from Eclipse and Aria, the same reinforcements that had pulled a significant chunk of her ready force away, arrived. Five hundred grunts and more than a thousand mercs. At the sight of them coming in from multiple angles, Garrus rolled into cover underneath a metallic lip that might once have been a wall, while Ranma grunted as bullets and a rocket hit him from the side, staggering him.

"Oh well, I suppose I was running out of krogan," Ranma muttered. He leaped upward, bouncing off the ceiling and back down towards one group of the newcomers. "C'mon, at least let's see if you assholes can dent my armor!"

Garrus slowly shook his head, although he was grinning as he lined up another shot. "It's been said before, but I will say it again. These humans are crazy!"

**OOOOOO**



While Aria was facing her off in the center of her strip club, one other individual was arriving on Omega, although this individual didn't pay for the privilege as both other, far more violent, arrivals had. Instead, Tela used a backdoor account that she had set up here on Omega decades ago to hack into the loading dock for one specific dockyard, which the system of Omega read as being unusable, overrun with varren and open to space occasionally.

It wasn't, although it was not exactly pristine. Still, Tela's ship was able to sit down inside, and, wearing a spacesuit, she was able to get over to the interior airlock. That at least worked fine, and soon her spacesuit was left behind as she made her way deeper into the sprawling space station.

Five minutes later, she stared at the various images her omni-tools showed her. Another backdoor route subroutine she had left in Omega's operating system allowed her to have the same level of permissions as Aria would when she died, letting her see even more of the security cameras than the hackers the humans had brought along. A lot of Omega's security was tied down by a biometric reader connected to Aria's heart. With her dead, and good riddance in Tela's opinion, Tela's program was unstoppable by the remaining firewalls.

She watched as the battle in Kenzo exploded once more, the battle in the strip club died down, and the humans, which had just taken over the power station, began to dig in. *Complete with a lot of mechs too. Fuck. Military-grade ones as well.* Another flick and she saw another group of humans taking over the communications center. *Fucking Aria never had enough security there, believing anyone would go for her and her override first. Stupid cunt.*

That image she stared at for a long time, then she shook her head. "No, I am not that asshole Saren, I am not going to let my hatred of humans create conspiracies where there are none. They've got turians and asari with them anyway, so that looks like a joint operation to me that is just making use of whatever the hell my two targets are doing here. Although I have to wonder how the hell they came up with a group of locals to help them out like those girls are doing."

Given the narrowness of her search for the two superpowered individuals, Tela hadn't figured out that they still had asari with them, or the nature of that aid. Nor did she remember Usagi much.

"Dammit. If only I had arrived as the battles were still going on, I could have used that chaos. Now it all looks as if it's dying down. Still..." When another person attacking the red and black-armored warrior, who had to be the one who made a fool of her, fell, Tela growled, then shook herself. "Oblique approach. I can't take them on in a straight fight, that's a fool's game, I knew that before I arrived here."

Looking over the information around Omega, figuring out which ship Ranma and Herb had come in on, where it was docked, and, more importantly for her, what air circulation system ran into that particular dock. Tela could not access their controls from here, though. No air

circulation system was on the regular background operating system of the space station, they each had to be operated manually in place as a security feature. Given the fractious nature of the people here, that made a hell of a lot of sense most of the time, although it was annoying now.

With a plan in place, Tela hopped to her feet, disconnected her omni-tool from the computer she'd plugged it into, and made her way deeper into the station. *Let's see how well they fight with no air, and a few gases mixed in besides. They have to leave sometime. When they do, knock them out, truss them up and get out of here without anyone the wiser. And with me as far away from them as possible right up until they're both knocked the fuck out! Then I can decide which to hand over to the Council, and which to give to the Shadow Broker.*

**End Chapter**