

I don't own Mass Effect or Ranma. The romance would have been better if so.

It's baaaacccckkk... So as mentioned in the GDWHOM chapter, because I have finished Horse and ATP, I have brought back GDWHOM and this fic. FILFy Teacher as well, which will be updated sometime this merry month of August. I however can't tell you when, because for most of the month I will be with my family having family fun time LOL. So here is this chapter, and I hope you guys enjoy it!

Chapter 6: A Straightforward Plan

Unfortunately for Ranma, Herb and Samara's plans, O'taku wasn't the only one of the Ardat-Yakshi from the monastery on Crastus who had been allowed to remain behind to help Ranma and Herb man their ship once it was prepared. Six other sisters from the monastery, all young Maidens, had asked for and astonishingly been given permission by the abbess to stay around following the latest supply run. They hadn't been around for long, but their arrival had been what spurred Ranma to buy the small freighter he had found, in order to while away the time, before Ranma's skills would be needed for the next stage of their ship's construction. The group of young asari wanted to get out and explore the universe and the abbess had acquiesced, trusting their fascination with Ranma, Herb, and, although few of them would admit it aloud, Usagi to keep their... amorous leanings under control.

Unfortunately, this did not in any way prepare them for Ranma and Herb's newest companion. So when Samara followed the other two down from the shuttle, which carried them up to the freighter, the two Ardat-Yakshi waiting for them in the cargo area blinked, stared, and then began to, in their opinion, very understandably panic. "EEEEK! What is a Justiciar doing here?!"

Both young Ardat-Yakshi instantly ran away, leaping up over several of the nearby crates and hiding behind them, while biotics flared around their hands. One of them even had a presence of mind to race for the alarm by the door leading deeper into the small freighter. Normally on a freighter like this, those were meant for ship-threatening emergencies, but to the Ardat-Yakshi, a Justiciar being here **was** an emergency.

Before she could reach for it though, Ranma's voice reached her, a second before his hand clamped down on her wrist. "It's all right Inu, she's tame."

That was so strange a statement that it froze the Ardat-Yakshi more than the hold on her arm, and Inu and the two already in hiding stared at Ranma. Inu's real name was Inu'ratah, but she had quickly gotten used to the two humans shortening it during their time at the abbey.

Samara also stared at Ranma, a frown on her stern face making it even more stern than normal. "I am sorry, tamed?" Her frown shifted to Usagi who had begun to chuckle, looking

away very ostentatiously when the others looked at her. "And I do not know why that word has caused you such hilarity."

That only made a Usagi laugh harder, while O'taku pinched the bridge of her nose, shaking her head from side to side before moving forward and smiling at her fellow Ardat-Yakshi. "This is Samara, and yes, she is a Justiciar. But she's coming with us not to watch us, but because we're helping her go after her target. A rogue Ardat-Yakshi named Morinth. None of us are in danger from her."

"Specifically, you are never in danger of a Justiciar like me unless you have willingly given in to your urges and fed on the souls of another," Samara said didactically, although her frown did disappear as she said it, looking over these three new Ardat-Yakshi.

At that, all of the Ardat-Yakshi inside relaxed, which caused Samara some surprise. However, when she looked at them more closely, Samara realized their eyes were not on her any longer but Ranma and Herb. *They seem to believe that these two would be able to protect them from me, and are taking courage from their presence. Such an odd dynamic for Ardat-Yakshi to have towards anyone beyond their own kind.*

Despite calming down, and coming out of hiding, the three Ardat-Yakshi were still leery of the Justiciar's presence. That order was considered something like bogeyman to them. And Samara's name in particular was well known, one of the most highly experienced and dangerous Justiciars in the Republics.

But, none of them had ever fed. Oh, several of them had been tempted, especially since Ranma and Herb had come to the monastery. Which meant that they should, technically, be safe from judgement. Moreover, as Samara had noticed, they also trusted Ranma and Herb.

They now looked at Ranma and Herb, and the prince simply nodded his head, waving one hand airily. "We agreed to help her because it seemed interesting, and will give us an excuse to head into the most interestingly lawless space station in this galaxy, where my own goals will hopefully start to coalesce. And as for Ranma's reasons..."

"It seems like fun, and if Samara causes trouble with any of you, I can take her," Ranma answered with a shrug of his shoulders.

When Samara simply looked at him in amusement, he scowled a bit, and then snorted, the meaning that Usagi had seen in his earlier use of the word 'tame' finally coming to him. *Huh, it isn't my normal method of taunting, but I wonder if more of that sort might push Samara over the edge.* The fight against the Spectre had been grossly disappointing to him, and Ranma was still raring for a fight. It was a downside to the Vulcan School of Martial Arts Ranma hadn't noticed before coming to this planet and having his sparring sessions with Herb curtailed. He really liked to fight and push himself.

With that in mind, he chose his words carefully, feeling out this method of taunting his enemy. "What, you don't believe me? Let's go right now, I bet I could make you submit..."

That is was as far as he got, which was probably a good thing, because he hadn't actually worked out the rest of the innuendo he wanted to use, before Usagi cracked up again, cackling now and shaking her head wildly from side to side.

Samara stared down at the younger asari, slowly backing away. She hadn't interacted with Usagi much before this, since her initial concerns had been about O'taku. Asari who were Ardat-Yakshi had certain noticeable tells for those trained to look for them, and Samara had picked her out easily. Usagi didn't have those. She was simply... Well Samara had heard the euphemism 'touched in the head' before this, which certainly seemed to fit the Matron-aged commando. "I fail to see what is so funny in that statement, and you're laughing like this is quite unbecoming, Usagi."

Still snickering, Usagi turned to the three Ardat-Yakshi, grinning and pointing at Samara. "Don't worry about her, like Herb said, we're just helping her, she's not here for any of you. No matter how scary or mean Samara seems... or pent-up, or judgmental... she's not here for you."

This caused Samara's eyes to narrow into another stare, and this time, Usagi pretended to be scared. She quickly hid behind Ranma, hugging him from behind and pressing her chest against his back, which causing him to blush. "Oh no, Ranma, the Justicar's staring at me now!" She then ruined her acting, such as it was, by kissing him on the side of the neck, and whispering huskily, "I might need some courage-building mating, and now that we've got our own ship, we'll have our own rooms too. And most rooms on ships are soundproof..."

Blushing, Ranma reached back and tickled her until she leaped away with a laugh. "None of that!"

Samara blinked her eyes slowly, staring at the younger commando, then looking over to the three Ardat-Yakshi, who are just all shaking their heads at Usagi's antics. Herb had already left, heading deeper into the freighter along with O'taku. "I have to ask..."

Inu had gotten over her initial terror of seeing a Justiciar by this point, and sighed, waving a hand airily. "That's just Usagi. She's well, a law on to herself I suppose. She might seem strange, but Usagi's a really good fighter, she's the only one of us who can hold a candle to Ranma or Herb, and Usagi's learned some of their techniques too. So we've kind of welcomed her among us just as much as we have them."

"That, and she's **really** good in bed," One of the other Ardat-Yakshi said with a deep purple blush. That caused Samara to start, and she stared at them, not noticing that Ranma and Usagi had also left heading after Herb.

The Ardat-Yakshi, which had spoken realized who she had said that line in front of, and backed away, quickly waving her arms frantically. "No! It's not like that. Most of us don't even think about Embracing Eternity with her, but I know at least three times back on the monastery, where one or two of the other Ardat-Yakshi did. But they couldn't, uh, she just, um--"

"Usagi spotted what they were doing, stopped them and then fucked them into mush," the third Ardat-Yakshi in the room cut in bluntly, hoping to help her companion out of the verbal hole she'd dug for herself. She moved over to her fellow Ardat-Yakshi, putting in arm around her, and gently guiding her towards the door as she said to Samara, "Usagi's so good at it, that when she sleeps with us, none of us can even think about embracing eternity with her. Her stamina is honestly kind of scary."

"...I am completely uncertain how to respond to all this. But I suppose if none of your fellow Ardat-Yakshi succeeded, then the code does not come into effect," Samara said, trailing after the other two Ardat-Yakshi with the one called Inu. She introduced herself as the chief engineer, and explained the reason why so many Ardat-Yakshi had been allowed to leave the abbey, although she warned, "Our Abbess can't be reached via coms, you'd have to actually go there in person. We and most of the other abbeys on Crastus pride ourselves on our lack of technology."

"While it is highly unusual, I have heard of similar journeys taking place, back when there was more of my Order around. Two Justiciars would watch over a small flock of Ardat-Yakshi, with strict rules and regulations to how they could act. This method seems to be far freer than such but as there is nothing in the Code against it, I will reserve judgement until there is." *And I will watch over all of you until I can find a way to verify your story.*"

Soon, they joined the others on the bridge of the freighter. The freighter was a regular tramp freighter, tiny, with about a two hundred cubic area for cargo, and very run down. Just the kind of thing a small group of not so well off citizens would make use of. Ranma bought it outright when he realized there'd be three month wait time before he was needed in the shipyard again. Vasir's arrival and attempt to capture them had simply spurred them on faster.

This served them well, but the ship wasn't exactly full of amenities or any of the things that Ranma and Herb had thought their ship needed. Still, it had enough rooms for all the crew and the engines were quite good, having recently been upgraded before Ranma had bought it.

On the bridge, Ranma and the rest found Herb already taking the position of commander, something that drew jaundiced eyes from O'taku and several of the others already there. As they entered, Herb was saying "And as a prince, I believe it only natural that I take the captain's position."

"Yayy..." O'taku drawled.

Samara looked at her and over at two more Ardat-Yakshi who were manning the navigational and communication consoles in the room. Both of them seemed equally unenthused by the human male's statement, but it was also obvious that Herb or O'taku had warned them of her presence.

She allowed her lips to twitch for a moment, pleased by how alive and at home the Ardat-Yakshi seems to be around these two humans. It was highly unusual to be sure, but she was happy to see it.

Unlike what most Ardat-Yakshi thought, Justiciars like Samara did not hate their quarry. In fact, most Justiciars pitied them. For Ardat-Yakshi, like for most asari, feeding was almost an automatic, instinctual response to sexual stimuli. Not something they had any control over but after that, for the Ardat-Yakshi it was like a drug addict getting their first hit. One time, and they were addicted. Thus the Ardat-Yakshi were forced to live in isolation, away from anyone but one another, who were immune to their touch. Such lives did not lend themselves to fun for most asari.

To see young Ardat-Yakshi interact with outsiders like this, to see them so natural about it and quite happy, it was a sight that pleased her immensely. *I might wish to send my daughters to the monastery this group is from. The abbess there Joldrea'as? She certainly seems to be doing something right. Although how much of that is because of these two humans I cannot say as yet.*

Herb seems to notice how unenthused the asari were with his assumption of command and he looked at them coolly. "Do I hear any objections?"

"Have you ever actually been in a space fight?" O'taku asked bluntly.

"No, of course not. But I have commanded vessels before, and been in numerous battles in midair. And I am a master of aerial combat. I cannot imagine that battles in space or any different, and for everything else, I will learn along the way," Herb answered haughtily.

What Herb did not say was that most of those vessels were river craft, which ranged from his royal father's yacht to a small fast sloop that they used to patrol the large river that was the main source of water for the land of the Musk Dynasty. A sloop moreover that only had five crewmen and while fast, was certainly not technologically advanced. Four of those five crewmembers were also oarsmen.

Both Usagi and Ranma snorted at that, with Ranma muttering about how Herb was a cheater under his breath, as Usagi said, "Hate to break it to you Herbie but fighting in space is a lot different than in the air. For one thing, it's at a way wider range most of the time. For another, this ship isn't actually built to dodge, you know? And we've got no weapons either. Being a master of fighting in the air on your own is a big difference from commanding a ship like this."

Herb scowled a bit, leaning back in his chair, and O'taku went on more soothingly than Usagi. "Your command presence is really good, and no one's saying you shouldn't be in command, you just... kind of lack a lot of the information you would need to do the job well."

"He just wants to sit in the comfy chair," Ranma said in a whisper to Usagi, who giggled, causing Herb to roll his eyes.

"I fully acknowledge that when it comes to space warfare and ships I have a lot to learn, but Ranma and I made a study of spaceships, while we were designing our own. And I looked up the specifications of this ship, so I know getting into a fight is the last thing we want. I might not have the credentials, but I do have the knowledge. Do any of you want to captain the vessel?"

At that, none of the Ardat-Yakshi raised their hands, and Samara hummed in thought. "I have been trained as a pilot, so I could take over as helmsman. As a captain, no."

"Furthermore, besides stroking my own ego," and here, Herb allowed himself a small smile, telling Ranma and O'taku, the only ones who really knew him well enough to understand his sense of humor that most of the preceding argument had been a joke in his mind, "There is another reason behind my wanting to be captain, and that is acting. While Ranma can act somewhat well, that is only in a limited setting, and he is not the best when it comes to thinking on his feet. Which I can do very well."

He looked over at Ranma who nodded somewhat against his will before Herb went on. "He also needs to see someone to be able to figure out if they are lying or whatever. I do not, since I can tell if someone is bluffing, lying or anything else easily just by their voice."

Ranma's eyes narrowed at that. *It reallllly sounds like a justification to me, but whatever. I don't want the job, so if Herbie wants it, he can take it.*

Seeing no one was going to argue further, Herb smirked. "And for now, Samara, tell us more of your quarry."

Samara grimaced, but nodded, and moved to stand so that the two asari working at their consoles could also see her. "My name is Justiciar Samara, as Herb has no doubt told those of you who did not greet us in the hanger bay. For the last hundred and fifty years, I have been on the trail of one particular Ardat-Yakshi. One who might well be the most powerful rogue Ardat-Yakshi in the galaxy. Her name is Morinth and she has killed over 200 people in that time."

That won several gasps from the other asari, while Rana and Herb simply listened grimly. "Most of them were asari, but she branched out into humans soon after the humans joined the Council races. At one point, I nearly caught her on a small human colony, where she had convinced a small village to worship her as a goddess, to which they had to sacrifice their young. Male or female it made no difference. I forced her to flee, but the mental manipulation Dominate was too strong for her absence to break it. They all attacked me, and it took me too

long to subdue them without killing any I didn't have to. She was long gone by the time I was able to call in the locals for some help."

"How was that not in the news?" Herb demanded sharply. "Surely the news an Asari was able to take over a full town of humans would somehow get out."

"I cannot tell you why it has remained out of the news, although there would be few details. After the Dominate technique wears off, it leaves those under it with no memory of what they did while under its influence. The locals would have been left with several missing persons cases, a lot of mentally addled people, and bitterness," Samara explained before sighing. "Bitterness over the lost young and the fact they had welcomed a stranger into their lives."

"A cult, then. Someone in the Alliance thought it was just some kind of drug-based cult," Ranma grunted, not sounding surprised. "And that kind of thing, in this day and age, it ain't big news. Not with aliens, slavers and everything else."

Herb looked annoyed, but nodded. "It would be news on the planet, but beyond, no."

"That was only one time I nearly caught Morinth. I have almost caught her several times, but Morinth has always managed to slip away from me. Here on Mostromos the trail went completely cold once more, and I was resigned to waiting until some clue came to point me in the right direction when I accidentally ran into O'taku and your two companions. At that point, I do not doubt they will regale you with my mishap in judgement."

She looked at Ranma and Herb for a moment who both snorted, then she went on. "Besides myself, there are perhaps only two other Justiciars who would be as strong as Morinth in terms of biotics thanks to how often she has subsumed another's life force. She is also incredibly skilled with her powers. But her most dangerous aspect is the fact that Morinth discovered a means to transform her body in many ways, thus obscuring her identity."

Everyone there gasped, even the two martial artists, and Samara nodded grimly. "So you see how hard it would be to track Morinth down. If you do not know what to look for, she can simply change shape within moments, enter one building in one form and come out the other side in another. But there are a few tells, small scars that refuse the Transformation power. She is also vain. Whatever form she takes, it will be a beautiful one."

Ranma whistled, and he frowned, leaned forward thoughtfully. "Do you know if she can change her... I suppose you would call it biotics signature as well?"

"Biotics signature? I am afraid I don't follow." Samara was confused, and narrowed her eyes as she looked at Ranma and Herb.

“Every living person has a different kind of ki signature to them, in terms of their life force. Our benefactor, Matriarch Beverly, called it Bera'van'tuwan,” Herb explained.

Samara’s eyes widened at that. She knew the term, indeed, the order of Justiciars could trace their order back to the time where the Eternal Fire was still prevalent among asari. Before biotics and mass effect technology began to take over, pushing the original asari martial arts techniques into the background on their homeworld. Some whispered this was a time even before the Goddess Athame, but that was seen as blasphemy.

“That explains much of your abilities. I had thought them simply strange human biotics, I’m sorry but I have not ever interacted with humans much before this. Are you saying you might be able to follow Morinth?”

“We’d have to know what her signature is like first,” Herb said looking over to Ranma who shook his head. He had ki sense sure, but picking one person’s individual signature out of a crowd was beyond him. Seeing that, Herb amended his statement, sneering lightly at his friend. “Or rather, I can. It seems that in many ways, I am still Ranma’s better.”

This time at least, his joke landed, and Ranma snorted at him, giving Herb the finger, which Herb replied to as if he was going to grab the finger and break it. But Samara shook her head. “I can help pick her out of the crowd if I can get a good side view of Morinth. Will that visual cue help you discern her signature enough to find her later?”

“With enough time, yes. And if Morinth is indeed a murderer, one who particularly acts like a black widow spider, I have little qualm in helping you hunt her down before I go about my own business and Omega,” Herb answered.

“Which will be? If it is something unlawful, I may be obliged by my oath to stop you and cease interacting with you now,” Samara said sternly showing no sign of the fact that she was surrounded by possible enemies as she spoke like that.

Ranma had to admit she had a lot of courage to act like that. It was kind of admirable. Not that she needed to worry.

“Two things interest me at the moment. One, most of these Ardat-Yakshi you see before you are on loan from the Abbey where Ranma and I spent some time. Only O’taku and Usagi will be staying with us once our ship is completed.”

“That’s right,” Inu interjected with some sadness. She wasn’t as close to Herb or Ranma as O’taku was let alone Usagi, but it would be sad to part ways with them and return to the Abbey and its normal humdrum existence, even with the training and information about Bera'van'tuwan that the two humans had shared to continue cultivating. “The abbess was very clear on that. We were allowed to stay here from the crew of the normal supply freighter for

now, but none of us were given leave to actually join Ranma and Herbs crew permanently like O'taku was once their ship was finished."

Since that matched with what Inu had told her before, Samara smiled slightly. "So you will be looking among the dregs of Omega for a crew?"

"I realize that it isn't exactly a good place to go looking for law-abiding sorts, but Ranma and I are not exactly normal ourselves," Herb answered dryly. "I think finding misfits and rogues, not lawbreakers so much as those who prefer to go their own way would be a good idea in the long-term."

"And people who don't mind some action," Ranma interjected. "We're no doubt going to be attracting trouble, and maybe going to look for it a lot."

While that disturbed Samara a bit, she simply nodded and looked over to Herb once more.

The prince took this as a cue to continue. "I also wish to see if I can find out more about certain individuals that have irritated me."

Specifically, Herb wanted to try to see if he could somehow suborn a previously existing spy network, or connect to one that already existed in some fashion without perjuring his own honor. This would allow him to discover more about the universe at large and the Illusive Man in particular. That individual and his group, Cerberus, had earned Herb's ire from the start, and the fact that they had come after them again here on this planet only meant that the feeling was mutual. Herb had learned from his father how to deal with enemies that tried to hide in the shadows. Seek them out, root them out and burn them in fire.

Metaphorically speaking, of course. At no point had Herb ever dreamed of being a true dragon and calling upon actual fire to burn his enemies, no matter what his caretaker when he was young or his father might say.

Samara frowned, then shrugged her shoulders, indicating that she wasn't certain how to respond to that. *I suppose that I will need to decide on a case-by-case basis as it happens. And if Herb can truly help me hunt down Morinth once we are close enough, he will have greatly earned my respect and trust.*

"There is a problem though," O'taku spoke up, raising her hand. "While there's no real law or anything on Omega, there is one rule in place, set by the Queen of Omega."

Usagi spoke up then, nodding her head, "Her name is Aria, and she's really quite... Bossy. She thinks she's really powerful too." Usagi snickered, looking at Herb and Ranma. "I think I could take her now, let alone the two of you or the Justiciar."

“Right well, that’s what I’m talking about. Aria’s in charge of Omega, everyone and everything there eventually answers to her in some fashion. And there’s no way that she will learn of a Justiciar arriving almost as soon as you’re spotted by the dockworkers. And it won’t matter who you are here. The moment you arrive, she’ll know your presence is trouble, and will move against you.”

“I will not relinquish my marks. To hide my connection to the order is to leave the order, and I will not do so,” Samara said sternly. “If this Aria attempts to fight me or get in the way of my pursuit of my duties, then she will be dealt with as all lawbreakers should.”

While Ranma disliked the idea of painting all lawbreakers as evil as Samara seem to be doing, he did like her forthright attitude with someone like Aria, who sounded like a mob boss. And most of those heat interacted with on the road with his old man had not been worth the price you take him to lay them out. However, he did have a suggestion. “That just means will need to create another distraction somewhere. Start a fight someplace else on Omega, draw her attention there. Or, simply go straight to her and take her out. They might see us coming but that doesn’t mean they’ll have enough time to react.”

“Both of those ideas are viable. In fact, Ranma, didn’t you say you wanted to fight some krogan?”

“Heck yes. From all we’ve heard of them, it sounds almost as if krogan somehow have large ki reserves thanks to their race, rather than any kind of training like we have. It’d be really interesting to see what fighting one of them is like,” Ranma answered enthusiastically. “Hey, that’s the point, maybe there will be krogan on this Omega place.”

“That’s an understatement and a half,” O’taku said, while Usagi laughed aloud. “The three biggest mercenary groups in the galaxy base themselves out of Omega, and one of them, the Blood Pack, is built entirely out of krogan.”

Ranma smiled beatifically. “And how exactly would they respond to someone walking in to their, I don’t know, the recruiting office or whatever you want to call it and starting some shit?”

“They would react violently, and overwhelmingly. And almost undoubtedly that violence would spread. Knowing you Ranma, that takes the certainty from seventy-five percent to ninety-nine point nine-nine-nine,” O’taku answered dryly.

“In that case, I believe we have as much a plan as we can make at the moment. And we might wish to be away from this planet by the time that Specter wakes up. O’taku, signal the local space control. Let us get moving,” Herb ordered as Ranma just kept grinning and Samara sighed, wondering what she had signed up for with this group of misfits.

OOOOOO

Asari Spectre Tela Vasir groaned, holding her head and then moving one hand down to her side where a massive bruise was already forming. "What happened?" she looked down at her body, and the Spectre's eyes widened. "And why by the Goddess's blue ass, am I naked?"

She wasn't actually, she still had her bra and panties, but everything else, including of course Tela's weapons and most importantly, her ID and omni-tool, were gone, along with her armor and clothing.

After a second, the memory of the fight against one of her targets came back to Vasir, and she leaped to her feet, staring around her a snarl on her face. "Where did that..." Her ire disappeared momentarily, as she found herself not on the rooftop where she had been fighting her target, but in an asari style jail cell. "What, what am I doing here?!"

Modern asari jail cells were nothing like they were in either asari or human historical and fantasy novels. Instead of solid bars, energy bars flowed from the ceiling down into the ground in front of her. There was a small refresher station behind the curtain to one side, complete with a mirror, and even some makeup for asari. Nothing that could be used to short-circuit the energy bars, or anything else really, but it was hardly the worst place Vasir had woken up in as a Spectre or half-naked, even.

Nevertheless, the fact that she was behind bars that infuriated Tela no end.

She trooped over to the energy bars, and began to shout through them. "Hey! Why am I locked up in here?"

"You're seriously asking that? Were you drunk last night or something?"

Alcohol had much the effect on asari as it did on every other race, although humans had the most in common with asari in that the methods and tastes were similar.

Striding into view of the cell came a young asari Maiden. She was dressed in the local police uniform, and there was a wide smirk on her face, which began to twitch at the edges as if she was having trouble to stop himself from laughing.

Given her age, Vasir knew that the woman probably held no rank within the local police structure so before the woman had a chance to open her mouth again, Vasir barked out, "I demand to see your supervisor!"

"Really? You demand? We responded to a call that said there was some kind of fight going on, with quite a bit of property damage done to several of the city's roofs, and an unknown assailant attacking two human males who were known and registered with the local government. When we finally arrive on the scene, we find you unconscious, half-naked, and without anything on you to identify you. Why in the world should I just not let you sit there for a few days and stew while a lawyer is assigned to you to go over your case?"

“My omni-tool and identity cards were stolen by my target but my name is Spectre Tela Vasir. If you get me into contact with any one of your systems, I can prove my identity.”

That brought the younger asari up short. The penalty for masquerading as a Spectre was **incredibly** severe across Council Space: instant deportation to the Citadel itself, and eventual life imprisonment. If you performed terrorist or unlawful acts while posing as one, death. Furthermore, Spectre IDs were the single most impossible to hack or copy pieces of code in the known galaxy, paired on a DNA level to their users. If someone killed a Spectre, they couldn't then turn around and use his or her ID, for example. The Spectres were serious business, and the Citadel Council did not want anyone attempting to use their name in vain or gain access to their contacts.

No mere drunk would even think of trying to act as if he or she was a Spectre, knowing that would just make their problems far worse than they already were.

That meant the asari had to think this woman was either crazy or had a chance of proving her statement. *Although given how we found her unconscious and everything else, if she really is a Spectre, I have to wonder if they really are all the steely eyed, super intelligent, super deadly secret agents that they are supposed to be.*

“Fine, I'll go get you an omni-tool, if you can prove your identity, then I'll let you out to speak to my supervisor. Although...” The Asari couldn't help herself, and gestured to her face, snickering a bit. “You might want to take a few minutes to see if you could get those markings and doodles off you before you see anyone important.”

Confused, Vasir turned and headed for the refresher station, wondering what the woman talking about. There, Vasir discovered that her face was liberally marked with doodles and messages in what looked like different colors of marker. The largest of which was written across her forehead, and was in the common language of the Citadel races. The same could also be said for a message down each of her cheeks. “‘Better luck next time’... ‘So weak’... ‘How you got your Spectre license I'll never know’... ‘You're so slow you couldn't hit the broadside of a dreadnaught’...Some people have beauty, brains and skill. How'd you get zero out of three?’ ...”

With each progressive message, Vasir's ire grew, until she lashed out with a biotic push at the wall, only for her powers to fizzle out. Like most jail cells in Asari Space, this one was made with biotic dampeners in the walls, which drained her powers before they could even activate. “Dammit! Those two humans, the ones with the strange ability to change their sexes, they beat me! And then they did this! I am going to hunt them down if it's the last thing...”

“Hey, not to interrupt your villain monologue or anything, but here's the omni-tool you wanted,” came the all too cheerful voice of the young policewoman.

Moments later, Vasir was being let out of this jail cell, but the younger policewoman's attitude towards her wasn't all that much more respectful than it had been before. Instead, the

younger asari pointed out that Vasir really should stop in at a refresher to get rid of the marks on her face if she could.

The emphasis on the last three words worried Vasir, and it did prove to be quite difficult to remove some of the marks on her face. Whatever kind of marker the humans had used, it was almost permanent on her skin, and she was forced to ask the young policewoman to send away for a series of specific cleaners in order to get rid of them. Specific cleaners, which left her skin feeling bruised and raw by the time the last doodle had been removed.

Tela was feeling a little bit better though because she was once more clothed by the time she was speaking to someone important and demanding information on her quarry.

Unfortunately, here she ran into trouble. “So let me get this straight. You come to my planet, not even contacting the authorities, simply acting in your normal Spectre manner of trying to get in and get out without informing anyone you were here in the first place. You start a fight **in public**, which causes several hundred thousand credits worth of damage. And now, after your so-called quarry, defeated you in that fight, you **demand** my help for locating them?”

To say that Matriarch Donal was annoyed was an understatement. Not that she was alone in this. While she didn't have any idea, what it was like for other races, she knew that many asari did not really like the Council, their representative on it, or the Spectres. All asari enjoyed being part of the Citadel as a whole. The other species were fascinating, and humans in particular had come into the galaxy like a gift from the Goddess to the asari, a race so much like them and so different too.

But the Spectre program? Well while many a mid tier matriarch, and Donal was anything but mid-tier, understood the need for such agents. How they were chosen, and how they were allowed to act was another matter entirely. The arrogance of the Spectres in particular, which was fully on display now, was a sore point for a lot of matriarchs. The fact that Vasir was herself an asari did not make it any better, as if she had asked for local help... Well, in this case, Donal wouldn't have let her police forces be used without slowing the apprehension down. Still, if Donal didn't have her own plans for the human twosome, she would have been more than willing to help Vasir and the Spectre wouldn't have been beaten so humiliatingly.

Tela hissed, seeing the scorn in the older Asari's gaze and even that of her daughter, also taking part in the communication. Still, Vasir knew she'd put her foot in it here. “I, I realize I miscalculated. I had thought my ambush in their hotel room would come at them in a direction they couldn't deal with. I... I neglected to realize how mobile they were, and then when I gave chase, the bastards got the drop on me.”

That wasn't exactly how it went, but Tela wasn't about to share exactly how badly she had miscalculated, or how easily Ranma had overcome her in a physical contest, despite her skill with pistol, hand-to-hand and biotic combat. “But regardless, those two are wanted for questioning by the Council. I need to get after them as fast as I can before the trail goes cold.”

“What crime have they broken? I’m curious,” the Matriarch asked. “It has to be something tremendous to have you sent all the way out here after all.” While a major shipbuilding center within the Asari Republics, Mostromos wasn’t all that well known beyond their borders. Not like the major shipbuilding areas of Thessia, Nodram and Athame’s Chalice.

“That’s classified,” Vasir answered instantly. The two human super soldiers weren’t wanted for any crime, they were simply wanted because they had such unusual (most would say impossible) abilities, and the Citadel Council frowned on those with unusual abilities being outside of their own control. The fact that they were human as well was also a problem. Especially since their actions had led to the current state of war between the humans and the batarians. A war that the turians were quickly joining in more and more significant ways.

“All you need to know is that Council wants them brought in for questioning. That’s my job, and I am going to do it. And as Spectre, I can requisition and demand any help necessary.”

“True, but you should have done that before you ran into such trouble,” the Matriarch answered, a sneer still visible on her elderly face. “If you had, perhaps you would not have been so badly humiliated.” She glared down at the younger asari, who glared right back, secure in her position as Spectre even against a matriarch, even one of the 29.

Eventually however, The Matriarch sighed and looked away. “Very well. It will take me a few moments to gather information on the young humans’ whereabouts. And if they are on planet, I suppose that with the Council permit in your hand once more, you may requisition what aid you think you need to apprehend them.” Then the Matriarch’s manner turned a little sly. “But before that, you might wish to contact your employers. I already have done so protesting your presence here and how you went about this business. Mostromos is a law-abiding world, not a corporate or criminal hotbed. I do not think they will be very happy with how you put them in a position to be humiliated in proxy as you did.”

Vasir snarled at that, but if the matriarch had already sent in a formal protest, she knew that a call would be coming her way from the Council or at least Tevos if not all three. Particularly, if the matriarch mentioned in her complaint that Vasir had also been defeated by her quarry. Which, Vasir realized with a sinking feeling as she stared at the Matriarch’s expression this old page did!

Without any preamble or polite farewells, Vasir ended the call, and instantly began to call the submittal Council, becoming quite chagrined when it wasn’t just Tevos who answered, but Tevos, Valern, and Sparatus. *FUCK. Goddess’s blessed tits, this is not going to be fun.*

“Spectre, so good of you to call. Perhaps you can explain why the governing matriarch of Mostromos called me to specifically complain about you? In her words, she wondered if you were drunk on duty, or simply so used to dealing with the dregs of society that you had forgotten how to act on a properly run planet. I am not pleased,” Tevos stated, as if her tone had not already made that abundantly clear.

“Counselor Tevos, much of that has to do with the manner in which the local police found me. I am afraid the entire scene was staged by my quarry to make me look bad, and it’s succeeded,” Vasir answered, deciding to try to come off as apologetic and humiliated in the hopes that it would be enough to satisfy.

“I feel as if we should take this from the top. You were able to discover your quarry, the two aberrations, the two super soldiers?” Valern asked in his people’s typical speedy fashion. “Interesting, no longer with the so-called Ardat-Yakshi I presume.”

“I don’t know. They were traveling with two other asari, but I couldn’t pick Ardat-Yakshi out from a crowd. Neither of them helped the two humans anyway when they fought me.” What she didn’t say was that only one of the humans fought her at the time. It would’ve made her simply look even worse than she already was looking in the eyes of the Council. “I attempted to set up an ambush in this hotel room, a simple nerve agent to knock them out. Nothing I’ve seen indicated they should be immune to that or simple knockout gas. But I also initially tried to choose convince them to come in peacefully as my orders dictated,” she emphasized, “and that backfired badly by making them aware of my presence.”

Tevos and Valern both had the decency of looking away from Sparatus, who stared hard at them before turning back to Vasir who took that as a cue to go on. “I hate to report that both of the super soldiers are intensely antiauthoritarian. One of them gave me some made-up reasons about why he wouldn’t respect the Council, while the other one just flatly told me he wasn’t a fan of authority. So I am afraid Councilors that any attempt to work with these two humans is doomed to fail. Which should at least let me take them on without any warning in the future...”

“True, yet the fact that they were able to defeat you and then stay around long enough to stage such a scene from the locals to find is disturbing. How would you rate their combat potential?” Valern asked, taking the lead in questioning simply because of how quick he could get the questions out in comparison to the other two. “Firsthand data, always better than second hand videos.”

“I would rate their combat potential as extreme in close range. I can’t think of anyone off the top of my head that could fight either of those humans one on one. Beyond that, they’re smart, adaptable and highly mobile. They can move over rooftops as easily as I could on a road. They’re tough too, though I don’t know how much yet personally. I saw enough though to conclude the videos of the fights this Ranma and Herb characters were a part of were not faked or modified.”

She thought for a moment, then recalled how easy it had been to discover the twosome once on Mostromos, and how low tech the trap they’d made for her had been. “I... I would say they don’t seem to be at home with modern technology and I was able to track them pretty easily once I was on planet. I can almost guarantee I’ll be able to pick up the trail, but I might need help to bring them in.”

That galled Vasir to say. Of all of the Spectres, she was the one who most prided herself on working alone. But Tela got the distinct impression that Ranma had dealt with her with kid's gloves, and had still beaten her with almost contemptuous ease. *I can't take either of them on in a straight fight. Even in a situation where I determine the range and the terrain, I'd have trouble. No, it's ambush or nothing against these two.*

"I wonder if Saren would have a better chance of it," Sparatus mused, causing Tevos and Vasir to both stiffen in anger. He didn't seem to notice, although a small twitch of his mandibles gave it away.

"No. So long as they are within Asari Space, Vasir will be able to track them down far better than any of our other agents," Tevos answered coldly. "We will add an addendum to the orders that any locals you wish to bring in to help you take down your targets are obligated by Council law to help. Further, I presume that you will not be humiliated again like this, Vasir. If you are, we may wish to look into some measure of... Repercussions for you."

This was usual, while acting as Spectre. As Spectre, you either achieved results, or you were lambasted by the Council. If you screwed up badly enough, the council would not hesitate to turn on you, to whatever degree they found necessary. A lot of authority and a lot of expectation came with the Spectre name, and if the expectation were not met, the authority, the power, would quickly dry up.

"Heard and understood counselor," Vasir said, keeping a rein on her temper for now. It would do her no good to blow up in front of her so-called employers after all.

Valern and Sparatus both questioned her about the abilities she had seen during her brief fight, which seemed to whet their appetite for more information about the two super soldiers, and which corroborated a lot of the previous evidence she had already turned in about their abilities. The fact that they were indeed so durable that they could shrug off biotics, gunshots and explosions alike was now verified, much to Vasir's chagrin. But she still didn't know anything about what their overall goals are what they wanted to do in this wide galaxy. Their thoughts about the Council had come through clearly, and both Valern and Sparatus were quite annoyed by it, while Tevos was annoyed by the entire thing.

Eventually they let her go, and Vasir sat there in the office she had commandeered in the local police district, working her hands on the armrests of her chair for a moment as she tried to regain control of herself, hatred for her targets dueling with feelings of humiliation in her mind. Finally, she was once more clearheaded and she allowed herself a faint sneer of amusement. *All that talk about allowing me to requisition local people, and once more emphasizing the necessity of bringing these two in alive by any means necessary, and none of the Councilors brought up the idea of paying me more for the service. As if being a Spectre should be doing her job out of loyalty to the cause.*

Tela Vasir had no such loyalty. That was why she had reached out to the Shadow Broker decades ago, when she first realized why Spectres routinely took a side mission while not following up on a Council assignment.

With that in mind, Tela connected her new omni-tool into the local communications system again, sending out a brief message on a very specific highly encrypted wavelength.

A message came back almost instantly. "If you cannot bring them into the Council dead, I will pay three times the agreed upon price previously spoken of for even one of them dead and the body delivered to me. However, priorities have changed. Cerberus is moving against many of my agents in Asari Space as well as in Turian for some reason. Unless you can find a trail of where the human super soldiers have gone in the next hour, you will help in turning the tables on the pro-human group. A freighter is already in orbit waiting for you, and will be under your service until such time as you are not under my direct employ."

Now that is the way to ensure loyalty, Vasir thought, smiling for the first time since she had woken up in the jail cell. And thankfully, for her own inner anger, Vasir was very, very good at her job. She was quickly able to discover the tramp freighter that had been licensed out to the two humans for their use, as well as where the gate had sent them. With that, she had a trail, and thanks to the Shadow Broker, she also had a ship. And this time, I won't make the mistake of rushing in. No, I'll observe them from afar, gather people and resources and then hammer these ass holes! Gas and poison is still the way to go. I'll figure out what weaknesses you have fuckers, and, well, one turned over to the Council alive and one to the Shadow Broker dead sounds like a great idea to me.

OOOOOO

I wonder if I will ever get used to the sight of turians walking the halls of one of our vessels like this, John Shepard thought to himself as he saw two more of the Birdies walk past him, arguing something about range finders from what he could overhear. It isn't as if I am a xenophobe but still.

He shook that thought off though. While humans and turians were a far cry away from burying the hatchet entirely from the disaster that had been the First Contact War, through the current conflict against the batarians it had become clear that the two races had quite a lot in common.

The turians were too stiff, too prone to following orders they shouldn't in comparison to most humans. However, that wasn't exactly unknown in human history. Nazism, any color of Communism, and even further back for example. The turians put order, law and being a constructive member of society foremost. Humans put justice, individual freedom and knowledge foremost, but there was still a lot of things both people had in common: their definition of courage, their desire for order (for the most part) their senses of humor had some

amusing parallels, like the asari. But more importantly, both were much more proactive than the asari or the salarians.

To the humans, the fact their people had been taken and enslaved at all had infuriated the public and the government, and the batarians were going to pay for it. To the turians, their military organization and the laws they had sworn to uphold were even more important. Indeed, John often wondered if the bird people had latched on to the idea of being the police force for the Council races so hard because they knew they needed some kind of outlet for their militarism. Just like in human society, a militaristic society like the turians could not survive without some kind of exterior element.

The batarians had been attacking Council Space on and off for several hundred years. Throughout that time, their defense against any allegations sent their way about slaving had been to deny, deny, deny. Aided by the lawlessness of the Skyllian Verge and the Attican Traverse, it had worked. Now, with the evidence before them, that not only had the batarians been flaunting Council law, but getting away with it for so long - the ship John was currently on was floating over a planet whose entire infrastructure had been based on slave labor in the millions, the turians military was stepping forward in a big way.

By this point, John knew that they were providing the majority of the ground troops necessary on the two Hegemony planets that had been attacked so far, and more and more of their fleet was coming forward to join the war.

But humanity was still also at the pointy end. Which this ship, Admiral Hackett's flagship, the carrier *Athena*, showed. As his shuttle had come in for a landing moments ago, John seen battle damage on the exterior of the carrier, and inside, he also saw several patches on nearby walls and men and women still working to repair battle damage.

John and his marine platoon had been involved in several nasty fights down on the planet below in the past few weeks.

Frankly, he was grateful to get some downtime. He and his team had been pulled out of the front lines last night. However, while the rest were getting some rest and recuperation time on the R&R ships brought in just for that purpose, John had been surprised that morning when a message told him the Admiral was expecting him.

As John took the elevator up two floors, the war below kept his thoughts on why that might be busy. Stepping out he paused, seeing not just two human guards, but two turians guards standing on either side of the corridor.

After a second, his feet carried him forward, and he paused at the precisely correct distance, and saluted saying simply, "Lieutenant Shepard reporting as ordered to the admiral."

“One moment Lieutenant.” One of the two human guards held up his hand to his helmet, and spoke into it. After a moment, both of the guards relaxed, moving to the side as the turians did the same. “Head in.”

“Why the security?” John asked as he stepped forward.

To his surprise one of the turians answered. “We had two infiltrators somehow able to board the ship yesterday, and we’ve been dealing with several of them on the planet attempting to decapitate our command structure.”

That was news to John, but he decided it made sense. The batarians had learned the hard way early on that facing the humans in space or the turians once they were able to get situated on the ground was a Bad Idea. Since then, they had taken to what the pundits in the news continued to call asymmetric warfare. What John called it was terrorist warfare, and war built on being as bloody-minded as possible.

Using the bodies of their slaves and shields. Using slaves with bombs strapped to their bodies to catch the attackers by surprise. Hell, even setting suicide charges on their own troops. Disabling or destroying their own infrastructure was small change in comparison to that, although on a strategic level it mattered more. All of it told of a fanaticism and an appalling lack of empathy towards their own race in the batarians high command, let alone their slaves.

The idea of them using infiltrators was pretty obvious when John thought about it in that light, and he nodded at the guards, before coming to attention once more as the hatch in front of him slid open. “Sir, Lieutenant Shepard reporting as ordered sir!”

“Come in Lieutenant.”

John walked forward into the room, keeping his eyes locked on the opposite bulkhead above where the Admiral and a Turian sat, the alien’s back to John, so John couldn’t see what rank he was. *Still, he’s got to be pretty high ranked to have his own guards.* To one side of the sitting Turian were two more turians. One of them looked like he’d recently come from the front lines on the planet below, his armor scuffed and soot blackened, and he left as soon as John entered, exchanging a nod with the human, a movement that both races had in common.

The other standing Turian was young, possibly around John’s own age or a little younger for his race. Although he wore the uniform that signified that he was in the turians militia not one of their standing armies, he also had the mark of a sniper on one shoulder. That was impressive, since John knew that the training for the turians sniper specialist was actually even higher than the normal marine specialist for the same rating.

“At ease Lieutenant, I’m just finishing up a report here. You made better time than expected,” Hackett said, looking up briefly from his screen, before he looked back down, typed for a few more seconds, then turned the screen around so that the sitting Turian could see it.

That worthy began to read as Hackett turned his attention to John. "Lieutenant Shepard, yesterday you and your team faced a force of mixed batarian and asari Biotic Commandoes, correct?" The Admiral allowed himself a small, wintry smile. "And unlike the last time, this time your luck did not go so well? My condolences for the losses your platoon accrued, and for the loss of Captain Roberts."

"Yes sir we did. We saw the ambush coming sir and were already pulling back, but the enemy decided not to let us go, and they were too damn fast, pincering us from three directions," John answered bluntly. "Roberts was too far forward, and he and several of our men were caught in close range by the batarians. We were able to break contact, but not before the platoon lost so many, we're down to half strength."

Roberts had been the third replacement for the captain's slot since Shepard and his men had gone in.

In the past, a platoon would have been led by first or second Lieutenant such as Shepard. However, since humanity had gone to the stars, the marine platoon organization, much like the rest of the military, had changed. Each platoon now consisted of a fifth squad to handle UAV, or unmanned aerial vehicles, and ECM/ECCM needs. Those UAVs varied from floating hunter killer balls to aerial drones, while Electronic counter measures had changed vastly in the years since it was first introduced.

So it had been decided that a captain was needed. But frankly, Shepard had not been as impressed by Roberts as he had with his previous officer. Roberts had a chip on his shoulder and hadn't listened to advice, a most damning thing in any officer.

"You're not the only one to run into biotic users," the sitting Turian said still not turning to look at John even as he spoke not taking his eyes off the screen in front of him. "The report you submitted said they weren't integrated into the batarians force at all? Rather they acted on their own."

"That is correct sir," John decided to simply address the Turian as if he was an officer who had a right to be there. "None of the asari worked with the batarians, only on their own, and most only used biotics. In fact, they didn't seem to even have weapons. They had barriers, but many. I think we caught them just as they were heading towards one of the secret weapons caches the batarians have all over their cities down there."

"True, weapons could be one of the ways they're paying for it. Even Eclipse can always use more of that." The Turian looked up from the console, made a few changes, then used the stylus to sign it, before he turned it back to Hackett, who smiled grimly, cited himself, and then shut down his computer.

"Eclipse sir? They weren't loan operators?" John asked, surprised.

“We were able to recover enough of their kit for us to be certain of that, yes. Don’t worry about not spotting the difference. Eclipse Commandos are trained to act on their own even when they aren’t. Just like General Fedorian’s Guards were able to recover enough last night to discover that the infiltrators came from the Black Sun mercenary gang.” Hackett gestured to his guest, and then indicated John should step forward. “Shepard, this is General Fedorian. He’s in charge of the turians land forces in this campaign. And those two aren’t the only mercenary band we’ve seen beginning to trickle into the front lines recently.”

“Just the most worrisome. Asari Commandos are no joke, and if they start fielding their commandos against us rather than simple infiltrators, we’re going to have a much harder time of it. To say nothing of their space assets.” The turians’ flanges moved into a configuration that John knew indicated a scowl and his shoulder sagged. Indeed, Shepard thought he looked the most tired he had ever seen a Turian look. “We’ve also run into more krogan. Twenty of them appeared near the front lines on the eastern continent, where we had been pushing forward to one of the batarians agri-cities. Worse, they were led by a Battle Master and fought smart. They mauled two companies of my troops before pulling back, like you they were caught in close range. Afterward their survivors went to ground in that city.”

“Where scout drones have seen several dozen more krogan. It seems as if that city is the center of their presence on this planet,” Hackett added.

“I can understand the concern sir, but all the information about our run-in with the asari biotics was in my report.” The ‘why am I here’ rang loud and clear, causing both officers to smile in there species’ equivalent of amusement.

“You submitted a transfer request to the ICT Program, correct?”

“Yes sir. I believe my combat record speaks for itself sir,” John said, stiffening. The Interplanetary Combat Training Program was the best of the best in terms of infantry, space or air combat. Training there took a regular marine and molded him into something even the old special forces or Navy SEALs would envy.

“It does, as does your ability to think outside the box. Not everyone could have thought of a way to bring down the side of the building to your left flank to kill five of your attackers in one. Or hacking the enemy’s own gun turret as you did when you pulled back into the batarians defensive fire line. That was risky, but it saved your platoon when those guns turned on the asari assailing you.”

Shepard grimaced, but said nothing. Those had been some seriously harrowing moments, but his trio of hack ‘n’ cracks were as good as their word. And better, the heavy company hitting the batarians line was able to roll up their flank when the gun turrets defending it targeted the asari.

Hackett saw the grimace but paid it no mind. He understood. "But as you know, the N-School only takes only so many people per year, and only within a set timeframe. You have two more months to go before that. And I believe you are the correct choice to help us with a little problem."

John thought about it for a moment, then said slowly, "A problem to do with the mercenaries, sir?"

The General looked surprised at that, while Hackett simply nodded. "Exactly, to put it bluntly Lieutenant, we have seen evidence of nearly every mercenary group there is in the known galaxy in this war so far. And we want it to stop. We want to know how much the batarians are paying them, if their inclusion in this war means that the Terminus Systems are taking sides. And if so, how much money we have to pay them to return to their neutral stance."

"The batarians can't match us in a straight up fight, and they made a big mistake early on trying to. We've tied down a lot of their regular ground based forces on Anhur and Erszbat. What they have left is busy keeping the peace throughout the hegemony, or forting up on their homeworld and can't be pulled away. But if they're able to pay the mercenary groups to get involved, we could see a lot of trouble behind our lines eventually. That's how they could hurt us the most," Fedorian stated bluntly. "And it will be your civilians who pay the penalty."

That made John nod, understanding the point. While the asteroid space station of Torfan gave the humans and their allies a great forward base, the battle against the Hegemony had already begun to push them away from it. It had also pulled a lot of the Alliance military away from their colonies in the Skyllian Verge. That meant several of their planets were now vulnerable to attack. The turians were doing what they could to help there without further weakening their patrols elsewhere. But if Eclipse, the Black Suns or the Blood Pack came into the war in force and began to hit those planets, the results would be catastrophic.

"Your mission John, is to lead your squad and some additions to Omega. It's the center of the merc business. We'll provide you with a freighter, a Q-ship actually, to get you there."

Q-ships were merchant vessels that had been outfitted with military grade weapons and hardware, cleverly hidden within its normal appearance. They were designed to act as a counter pirate ship, and the concept had been around since Grecian times back on Earth.

Hackett held up his hand, and his omni-tool flared into existence before he held his hand out towards John. John did the same, and a set of orders appeared on his omni-tool's screen. "You are not to engage in hostilities unless someone else does first, but you are allowed to protect yourself with extreme prejudice. You will have several credit chips to allow you to broker a meeting with the so-called Queen of Omega. Get T'loak on our side, and have her help you convince the mercenaries that they do not want to be a part of this war."

John cocked his head, reading his orders thoughtfully, and noting that there were several things that Hackett was not saying aloud. That, for example, if the peaceful option failed, he was to look into other... more creative solutions. The objective was the most important thing. How he achieved the various mercenaries deciding to blacklist the ongoing conflict between the Hegemony and the human/turian coalition was up to him. "These orders are very open-ended sir. I'd like a little more detail if you don't mind."

"Then I will do so. Beyond outright assassinating Aria, or damaging Omega in some permanent fashion as to make it unlivable, you are free to do whatever you need in order to make certain that the mercenaries stop sending troops into this war before they wise up and realize they shouldn't be fighting us like regular troops," Hackett answered bluntly. "I don't want innocents killed, but on a place like Omega, innocence in general will be in short supply, let alone actual innocents."

John blinked at that, and was about to open his mouth, when the heretofore silent standing Turian held up his hand. "I'm all for us trying to clear out Omega sir, but a single understrength platoon of mixed human humans and turians soldiers is just not going to cut it."

"That is why you will be going with the Q-ship. That ship will be carrying a full company of Ymir mechs to back you up. If you think you need them, that's your call Lieutenant. You're in command of this mission. Consider it the final test before I give your request for N7 training my official endorsement."

"It sounds like a real chance to excel sir." John slowly nodded, looking over to the young Turian. "And this is?"

"Garrus Vakarian, sniper specialist. He's one of the best shots I've honestly ever seen, although another part of me is very thankful that he isn't thinking of moving from his time in the militia to fulltime service," Fedorian joked lightly with the younger Turian who looked about as sheepish as his species could get. "I understand that your team lost your sniper, and your demolitions expert. You also need some more biotics on your team. I have two Asari Commandos who came forward to volunteer to help in this war. Working with you will be a trial run to see how they do on the sharp end. And Morros Vedarus, who just left, will be your demolitions expert if you need one. On top of that you'll have a Salarian code cracker to add to your existing trio, and three more turians riflemen."

The asari had also begun to come forward to volunteer to help this war, but unlike the turians, they didn't do so in an organized manner. Rather, it was their individuals who came forward, thousands of them in comparison to entire Turian armies. Now, asari could be found anywhere from the R&R ships to the hospitals and the repair teams. This was the first time he had heard of them volunteering for a combat mission, but it wasn't entirely unusual.

"And they will all follow my orders sir?" John asked. While the turians respect for authority was practically ingrained, he had never worked with them or asari before.

“They will/I will,” the two turians answered as one, and John smiled internally, seeing why Garrus would probably not fit in so well with the regular turians military. He was too forthright and too individualistic for them. No normal turians would think of speaking up for himself at a moment like that when a senior officer was present. But on a mission like this, he would probably prove to be very useful.

“In that case sir, I’d like some time to introduce everyone to everyone and work up my team before we are set to leave. With your permission?”

“You’re to leave in two days. You have enough time to work up your team and requisition anything you need from stores,” Hackett answered.

John saluted, then twitched his head towards the door, doing it several times before Garrus got the hint, and began to walk beside him out of the room. “So Garrus, you’re a sniper. But how are you in close quarters?”

“Good enough to be assigned on a strange mission like this one,” Garrus answered quickly. “I’d be willing to head down to the firing range and show you how good I am at any range if you want to be humiliated.”

John snorted at that, and was already opening up his omni-tool to send a message to the remnants of his platoon. “Get your fellow Bird Boys down there if he’s not already asleep, let’s see if we can rustle up the three Asari Commandos. Biotics or no, I’ll make them certain they know their way around a weapon before we ship off. And let’s hope you are as good as you say you are. I don’t think humble pie tastes good whatever species you are.”

“I hope you’re prepared to taste some yourself Lieutenant,” Garrus answered.

The two turians guards looked shocked and appalled at that, but John simply grinned, realizing for the second time that day that yes, humans and turians were at times quite a bit alike underneath the extremely different exoskeletons. “Game on Bird Boy. Don’t suppose you’d like to wager something?”

OOOOOO

Ranma and Samara danced around one another in the hanger bay, their hands and feet flickering. Around Samara’s body, her biotic power glowed a deep blue color, it was so dense, almost like a solid shield, the power of her biotics stronger than even Matriarch Benezia’s had been when she left Ranma and Herb. However, to her astonishment, the rebounds from her biotic shield didn’t slow Ranma down at all. And indeed, it was her shield that was beginning to show signs of wearing away, portions of it flickering around her hands and feet.

Even better in Ranma’s mind, she was easily the best fighter he’d faced outside Herb in this strange dimension. She was fast, blindingly so, using a low-key biotic power to enhance her

speed and strength. Her style was a well-designed mix of subtle usage like that and large-scale type and it was frankly amazingly fun to finally fight.

A Biotic Pull shifted Ranma off balance and into the air, but then Ranma's ki flickered out and he turned the next blow to come his way into a flip up into the ceiling. He somehow bounced off of the ceiling, dodging a Shockwave, his leg flicking out and smashing towards Samara's head. She brought up an arm, blocking the blow and bringing up her other arm to hammer Ranma hard in the knee, causing Ranma to wince but he still brought around his other leg in a sweep kick that forced Samara to flip backwards and away. A Biotic Throw caught him in midair even as she did so and hurled him against the far wall, where Ranma landed lightly.

"Gonna have to do better than that!" Ranma charged forward again, this time running along the wall like he was a spider.

Seeing this, Samara raced to the opposite wall and did the same, before both of them leaped off, charging forward. Then Samara used a gravity pull to put her feet back on the ground, leaping from that straight into a Biotic Charge up into the air. The strike from her fist landed in Ranma's stomach. Yet even as her blow landed, Samara found her arm grabbed, and then she was flung aside.

The next second, Samara's guard was battered to either side, her Reave attack going wide, smashing into the ceiling and wall all behind Ranma as she lashed out with a kick that caught her directly in the center of the chest. Samara grunted as she hit the inner bulkhead, but softened her landing with her Biotic Shield, and then charged forward again only for her to be forced to block an energy blast from Ranma. Catching her between one step in the next, it nearly caused her to tumble backwards. And then Ranma was on her, pummeling her into the ground, but Samara grabbed his arms before he could pull back, twisted and slammed him down in turn into the ground.

A kick forced her to let go, and then Ranma was flipping himself to his feet, only to eat a Shockwave to the center of the chest. "FUCK that hurts!" Ranma growled as his shirt was shredded and he felt a few ribs break before his ki healing instantly began to knit them back together.

His return ki blast caught Samara in the head causing her head to flinch back as her Shield popped like a balloon. "Well, this does not bode well..."

Then Ranma was on her, and she had no more time to think.

Later, the two of them slumped against the wall of the cargo bay. It was the only place for the tramp freighters that was big enough for them to spar like this, and even then, most of the fake cargo containers had to be pushed out into the hallway beyond.

Stretching as he leaned his back against the wall, Ranma looked up at the ceiling of the hangar bay above them, trying hard not to stare at Samara who had just dumped one of the water bottles all over herself, making her already skintight combat suit even tighter, and reminding him of a similar moment with Benezia. And indeed, just like with Benezia, Ranma was finding himself strangely attracted to the older woman.

By this point, Ranma knew it wasn't the motherly body that attracted him so much. Well... okay, so Ranma knew he kind of liked bigger chests and full lips. But he had been attracted physically to several of the Asari Maiden and Matrons at the Abbey. Not that he had ever acted on it of course. No, it was their strength that most interested him. *It turns out that I like fighty girls. Who knew?* Ranma thought, snickering internally.

"So, still think I couldn't take you?" he said aloud, his tone teasing.

Samara winced, shaking her head from side to side very slowly as her neck and shoulders were quite a bit bruised and she had pulled something in her shoulder. "I suppose that your confidence was not misplaced. While neither of us were using lethal techniques on one another, you won fair and square two out of three times. And I will admit that the third time I only won because you stumbled into that hole in the deck I made in the first match. Although given how quickly you healed, if we were fighting to the death, I would've lost that match as well."

Now it was Ranma's time to wince, looking over at the hole in question, which Samara's Nova attack had burned the floor in their first match. In their third, Ranma had accidentally set down on top of it, blinded by a technique from Samara. He had wrenched his knee something fierce a second later when a Biotic Push had tagged him, and had been on the back foot for the next few seconds before Samara had finished him off with a blow to the neck, her hands coated with Biotic Power. "Remind me to repair that before we leave. Still, it's nice to know that you're not all talk, and you're not taking your defeat personally. The last thing I'd want to do is to make you become some kind of loony rival or something."

Looking at her young sparring partner and companion, Samara wondered why he was not looking at her at the moment, and then saw the blush on his face. That amused and startled her, pausing the words that she had been about to say on her lips.

Is Ranma... somehow attracted to me? With all these other young asari girls here. Admittedly, most are Ardat-Yakshi, but then there is Usagi to consider. Although despite herself, Samara actually felt a little flattered. It had been quite some time since she had captured the eyes of a younger anyone and she had never been with a human before. *Although of course I would never consider being with one so young. Still, it is nice to be reminded that I am a woman.*

After a second, she came back to herself, and said, "You sound as if you have some experience with that for some reason."

“You would never believe me. Seriously, from where Herb and I were from originally, I had arrivals after me for the silliest of reasons. Would you believe that I had a guy trying to hunt me down to kill me because I always was able to get the last soft bread at lunch at school?”

“I take it soft bread was some kind of delicacy. But even so, no, I would probably not believe that...” Samara paused, then allowed a smile on her face as she too stretched, a part of her secretly amused by the way that Ranma’s eyes flicked down to her for a second before resolutely returning to their ceiling stair. “If I had not begun to get to know you over the past few days. As it is, I honestly can see that happening with you.”

The Terminus Fringe did not have many massive perfect relays, and those that it did have were heavily interdicted by the Council military. Worse, to reach Omega without running into the Council military again, the tramp freighters had to travel well out of its way. Yet even so, thanks to the relays they had crossed... well, Ranma couldn’t really fathom how much space they crossed, from one end of the galaxy to another essentially, since Asari Space was, so to speak, on the right of known space from the Citadel, and the Terminus Fringe was to the left and out a ways on an angle. At least that was how Ranma thought of it anyway.

Regardless, they had come through the closest Mass Effect Relay to Omega before Ranma and Samara had started this spar. By this point, Ranma hoped that they were close to the station. He was kind of tired of being cooped up on the ship even if he had finally worn down Samara’s desire not to spar with him.

“Your curse alone would make me question first my sanity, and whether or not you had some strange special understanding with probability. To say nothing of your relationship to gravity, which is enough to make any avian of any’s species jealous,” Samara finished.

“Is that a sense of humor, I see?” Ranma said, suddenly turning to look down at Samara with a grin on his face that made him look even younger, yet also slightly more handsome, a revelation that Samara very carefully pushed to the very back of her mind. “Will wonders never cease.”

“We Justicars are not unfeeling robots. We are sentient beings just like the next asari. If we seem grim, it is because of our duty, nothing more.” Samara allowed herself a return smile. “Besides, I would’ve thought that my teasing you about not wanting to spar with you for the first few days of this journey would’ve proven that I did indeed have a sense of humor.”

“One that I actually like, I meant,” Ranma answered, with a snort. He then held out a hand, and helped Samara to her feet, once more glancing down at her chest as it jiggled most noticeably in her wet top, before turning away resolutely and heading over to the hole he’d made in the ground. “You might want to dry off a bit. I need to fix that hole. Hopefully by the time I’m done, we’ll be docking with Omega.”

Nodding, Samara left them there, and the next time they saw one another was on the bridge of the freighter. Like most civilian vessels, the freighter had a forward viewport made of glass, allowing the bridge crew to actually see out into natural space in a way that military vessels simply could not afford to as it created a weakness in their armor. But at the moment, that didn't matter, as they came into view of Omega.

While smaller than the Citadel by a wide margin, Omega station was easily larger than any of the single shipyards around Mostromos. But it did not have their uniformity of shape. Rather, it looked like a jumbled together mass, like someone had taken a regular space station, maybe of the same design as the asari ones Ranma had seen before, and then built on top of it in every direction with differently sized construction of some kind. Two looked as if they were smaller space stations that had been rammed into the larger one, while a larger portion looked like an asteroid. It looked very, very strange, and reminded Ranma nothing more than a large dump, which he said aloud.

"This is where the scum of the galaxy gather, Ranma. Why exactly would you think it would look modern and well kept?" Herb asked quizzically, causing everyone there to snort in laughter at Ranma who was making a face at the back of the other martial artists head right up until Herb me to turn around. Whereupon Ranma quickly shifted his expression back to normal.

Mock glaring at his friend, Herb snorted, and gestured ahead of them. "Well, at least we don't have to worry about docking space. Indeed, Omega seems to have seven or eight different docking areas, all of them with open spaces, if we can trust those landing lights"

"I still can't believe that no one has hailed us," O'taku muttered from where she sat in the navigator's seat. "I mean how are we supposed to get the dock open?"

It was only as they approached one of the hangers that they were finally hailed. "Unknown ship, you better be prepared to pay the firstcomer tax. If you're not, were going to impound your ship and you. The batarians are paying top dollar for any slaves these days."

While Ranma's cracking knuckles sounded like so many gunshots, Herb smiled thinly as he replied, his voice a drawling, but almost submissive tone none of the others had ever heard from him. "Ah, ah, that's a roger, we have enough credits."

"Solid credits or credit chips? We prefer solid credit upon setting down."

Herb looked around, one eyebrow rising and Samara sighed, and gestured to herself. "Many of the criminal elements I often have to speak with for information on Morinth deal in solid credit. Unless it is far too exorbitant, I can pay the fee."

"Or," Ranma said mock-cheerfully his blue eyes dark, "we can start a distraction right here when we land. Beating up her welcoming party is sure to get Aria's attention, right?"

“Let us wait on that for a bit,” Herb decided. “Given our run-ins with the criminal sort before this, our presence alone might already bring down some heat on us. Best to get away from the docking area before we go looking for more.” Before anyone else could say anything, he opened the coms again and agreed to pay solid credit.

“We have you on record to agreeing. Fail to pay and you answer to Aria. And the first rule of Omega, don’t mess with Aria!” said the voice on the other line.

The voice cut off then and the hangar bay doors ahead of them started to open letting their ship in to land next to several others. The doors closed, and instantly several dozen toughs were moving in the direction even before the doors began to close, the atmosphere kept at bay by the same kind of energy grid that Ranma had seen on other space stations before this. That energy grid seemed to fritz out right before the doors closed fully, pulling a man who was near the hangar bay doors off of his feet with a cry of alarm to much laughter from the other dockworkers around the area.

“Yeah, we’re not in a law-abiding zone any longer,” Ranma muttered, to the agreement of Herb who had seen the same thing. “You mentioned that we might be known here, does that mean we should change to or other forms?”

Herb grimaced, but he wasn’t totally against the idea of using his female form any longer. He looked around at the other Ardat-Yakshi, who looked back at them with shrugs. “In that case, I think that I at least will do so, and get a hat for my hair. Ranma, you shouldn’t bother for your part of this little operation.”

He looked over to Usagi, who was grinning and hopping in place, and sighed. “And yes Usagi that means that one of the darn things that you bought will actually be useful.”

Ranma and O’taku exited the ship first, heading over to the armed aliens who had made their way forward towards their ship quickly. The one in the lead was a Batarian, and Ranma’s fists began to itch at the mere sight of the guy, aided by the earlier talk about slaves. Still, he refrained. Who knew, he could just be a run-of-the-mill regular kind of criminal, rather than the slaving, raping sort.

“Stop and pay the toll,” he drawled out, holding out a hand.

The alien looked closely at Ranma, who grinned back cheerily at him. His eyes then trailed to Samara who had come down the ramp after O’taku and Ranma, but his eyes showed no recognition. The young asari gunwoman with him though, gasped, and actually took a step backward, looking as if she was ready to bolt.

The leader didn’t seem to notice, and simply continue to hold out his hand towards Ranma and O’taku waiting for payment.

O'taku asked how much, and quickly pulled out the amount from the credit bag that Samara had given to her before moments ago as Herb turned into his female form.

The Batarian took it, and reminded them of the first rule of Omega again, before turning and walking away. Ranma thought he went away a little too easily, and snorted to himself. "Looks as if I've been recognized."

"In that case," Herbs now feminine voice said from behind them, "Why don't you head out now Ranma?"

This time Ranma's smile was far more natural and less toothy as he nodded over his shoulder at his friend, then moved over to the nearest dockworker. "Hey, could you tell me where I could find the Blood Pack?"

The worker, a human of all things, blinked, stared at him, and said dryly, "Ya got death wish kid? If you do, wait until the next ship's coming through and toss your fool self out the dock. It will be faster and less work for the cleanup crew."

Ranma simply smirked at him. "Nah, none of that. I want to see if these lizards are all that."

"So you do have a death wish," the man muttered, shrugging his shoulders and very obviously not caring any longer. "They're down in the Kenzo District. Follow the red signs, then when they run out, the black and blue ones. Can't miss'em."

Ranma returned to the others, saying aloud, "Well, that was easy. I'll head down there now. What about the rest of you?"

"Samara and I will start to canvas Omega for any sign of Morinth's. The rest of you?"

O'taku and Inu said they would stay with the ship. They did after all still have to return it to Mostromos, and it wouldn't do for anyone to just come along and steal it. Usagi on the other hand and several of the other Ardat-Yakshi said they would probably just look around for some fun.

That caused Samara to frown, but with Usagi with them, she thought that perhaps the Ardat-Yakshi could be left to their own devices for now. If not, well, she knew where they were and what they looked like. Saying this aloud earned her both flinches and a light smack upside the head. "None of that, Samara. Still, let's get going. And if any of us run into actual trouble, remember ya can call for help, okay?"

With that, Ranma walked off, and the others, after a moment's hesitation, also split off, with Usagi eagerly leading the way, telling the other asari she had been here before, and what

to watch out for. “Rule one of Omega might be to never fuck with Aria, but rule two is if someone threatens you, break their kneecaps!”

Chuckling, Ranma wondered what kind of trouble Usagi and the immensely powerful, highly skilled but somewhat naïve Ardat-Yakshi would get up to. *Hopefully they won't cause more trouble than me! That's my job today.*

OOOOOO

Any normal government official, or indeed most gangsters, would assume that the ruler of Omega would have her center of operations in a large, opulent but out-of-the-way area. Perhaps set behind dozens of very obvious security points and a few hundred that weren't so obvious. On a busy, loud, and crowded place like Omega, space itself, being in an area that was quiet, could be seen as the ultimate display of power.

They would've been mistaken. Such a concept was far too subtle and hands off for the Asari Matriarch, Aria T'loak. Instead, Aria's living quarters were actually a part of a larger system of rooms and hallways devoted to the largest strip club on Omega, called the Afterlife. It was named thusly because if you entered and annoyed Aria, the Afterlife awaited you. It wasn't subtle, but then again, Aria understood the kind of people she dealt with didn't do subtle.

Several dozen asari and even a few human women moved around the place or danced on stages for the edification of the mass of guests watching. Few of those guests realized how many of the young Asari Maidens shaking their ass and tits for their viewing pleasure were commandos trained by Aria herself. Fewer still, although rumors abounded, knew of the massive wall overlooking the main area of the club was actually a one-way mirror, reinforced with plas-steel.

There, Aria could look out over the beating heart of her empire. Over there an Asari danced private show for someone, a third of her earnings going to Aria. Similarly the Maiden's client had fed an entry fee. Over there, a gun deal, over there, several batarians meeting with the representatives of mercenary groups, trying to come to an agreement to hire all of them at once after having already paid Aria her intermediary fee and an entry fee to use her club for the purpose. Just as the mercenaries and also paid her to be on Omega at all.

Drugs, weapons, medical supplies, slaves, information. Everything that flowed through Omega flowed through Aria's hands, and she took what she wished. And if you lived on Omega, you paid her tax. Aria **was** Omega, and she made certain that everyone living within the space station knew.

Which made the idea that a Justiciar would come here all the more troublesome. “First, it means that her quarry might be here. That is never a good sign. Ardat-Yakshi are trouble, young and inexperienced but desperate to keep feeding or old and powerful, controlled hiding and picking their targets like a fucking sniper. And there is rarely a middle ground.” Aria paused,

then snorted, moving back to her chair and flopping into it to look at her second in command, the Batarian Ahz. "And they're all **insane** in one fashion or another. Biotically powered drug-addled weapons of mass destruction. And the Justiciars are worse."

Ahz's eyes had widened as Aria explained. "Why haven't I never heard of them before, and why would a Justiciar be worse?"

"You haven't heard of them because Roque Ardat-Yakshi are one out of every thousand or so, and an Ardat-Yakshi is one out of every hundred thousand asari born between asari couples. They rarely are able to escape from their weird, backwater 'sanctums' in the first place, and have almost never gotten past the borders of the Asari Republics when they have." Aria snarled that, gesturing out once more towards the window she'd been standing by. "And as for the Justiciar being worse, what do you see out there?"

"Profit? Sex dulling people senses? Your Empire ticking over like the well-oiled machine it is."

"Exactly, a well organized, profitable criminal empire. For the Justiciar, the criminal part is the problem. Any lawbreaking to them is like breaking a council law in front of a Turian. We can only hope she is one of the sensible ones, or else we'll have to put her down when she starts putting her nose in our businesses." That Aria and her forces would be able to do so wasn't question. It just annoyed Aria that a Justiciar would think to come here at all. *Although if she starts to make waves, it has been a while since we've had to make an example of someone for breaking the first and only rule of Omega. Don't fuck with Aria.*

"Send Shifira some extra money this afternoon. Warning us about the Justiciar that quickly was a good idea. Assign some of our interceptors to watch her, but not in close. She'll sense them, and might take offense. While perfectly willing to kill the bitch, I see no reason to push things just yet. Not until we know what kind of Justiciar she is. Waiting is cheaper in this case."

With that, Aria waved the man off, and made to look out over the crowd once more, wondering if she should call up one of the girls below to pleasure her azure ass a bit. *Or maybe call up one of the human males down there. They tend to be extremely inventive, even if their size isn't much to write home about to someone who's had krogan before.*

However, before she could, her second-in-command held up a hand. "There's something else. I thought I recognized the face of the human male who arrived with the Justiciar and the other asari with them and when I got back and ran his face through our database, it came back with three bounties on him. One from the Council with a pittance for information. Another from the Shadow Broker and another from the Batarian Hegemony. The last one is the only one that wants them dead, the first wants this human alive only. The Shadow Broker is either or."

Brows furrowing in some surprise, or in gestured, and the man sent over the information to her omni-tool. She looked through it, her eyes widening in surprise. "So he's one of those super soldiers that the news was full of as the war with the Hegemony's paid slaver gangs began? No wonder they want him dead. But if he's here... Some kind of covert operation? Are the humans thinking they can pressure me somehow?"

Aria's famous anger began to rear its head in a way it hadn't earlier with the Justiciar information. For all that she had thrown off a lot of societal more as she had grown up with as a asari on Thessia, Aria had been surprised she still felt awe and even a bit fear knowing a Justiciar was nearby. But for this Human and his being here like this? Without bothering to inform Aria of why he was here? That angered her.

"Tell me he is at least coming here," she ground out. If he was coming to meet her in person, maybe explain his presence, Aria would be willing to let her anger slide after a little demonstration of her power and forcing this super soldier into showing his shit. But if not...

"Apparently he's looking for the Blood Pack. And when told of where they were based, he simply went in that direction."

Aria's anger grew at that dismissal, and she thumped her hands down on the side of her chair, biotic power rippling through her hand for a moment as the armrest shattered and the ground underneath Aria began to crack. "Such arrogance! Get some of our people after him, one to explain that he should be coming by, and the rest of to stomp him into a mud hole if he disagrees."

"Given all they are supposed to have done, even one of these so-called super soldiers might take a large band of our heavies to take down," her second-in-command warned.

"You do not fuck with Aria!" Aria roared, standing up and glaring at the man so hard that he quailed despite nearly a decade of service to the queen of Omega as her biotic power began to make everything around her shiver and quake. "I do not care who you are, what your powers are or anything else! This, this 'Ranma' is ignoring me and I will not stand for that insult!"

So furious was she that Aria didn't even bother to ask whether or not the second super soldier on the bounties had been spotted with Ranma and Samara. Not that it would have helped her. Unlike Ranma, whose email forms still looked mostly the same since those bounty posters taking, Herb had gone out of his way to change his hairstyle, and had even put his signature blue ponytail up underneath her as she laughed trailing after Samara.

OOOOOO

Omega was easily the strangest construct Ranma had ever moved through. Almost everything here seemed as if it had been built haphazardly, like an old-time shantytown that

had built up over itself over time in every freaking direction, up down, side to side. Not so much squishing down the older construction, as building up and over it in many areas. In that way it was much like its exterior experience prepared them for: a big ass jumble of stuff from multiple species.

That, Ranma had been somewhat prepared for after listening to O'taku and Usagi. What he had not been prepared for was how crowded it seemed and the fact that he couldn't take to the rooftops often. Here, houses and stuff were built up to the ceiling of the station, which were only about three stories above them. Each floor also had intervening catwalks, walkways, and even whole sections, which led up into different sections of the haphazard construction as bits appeared. If Ranma tried to make headway that way, he'd rapidly get lost.

And everywhere there were crowds. Crowds of humans, asari, the weak but hyper intelligent salarians, volus, turians, batarians and a few species he never even seen pictures of yet. Even a few furtive quarians, all of them armed and going around in groups of three or more. All of them were moving around rubbing elbows with one another, crowding in.

It was almost enough to give Ranma claustrophobia, who preferred to be around far fewer people at a time. But he persevered, pushing on towards his target by the simple expedient of asking directions, "To the largest group of angry overcompensating lizards."

The fact everyone looked at Ranma as if he was crazy didn't matter to Ranma at all. He was here to see if the krogan really didn't have access to their own ki, or if they were like everyone else in this weird dimension, with equally weirdly small starting ki reserves. The fact they were known to heal so quickly was pointing towards ki, but Ranma wanted to be certain.

Finally, he came to a road that was slightly less crowded leading to a large building of some kind in the distance. It looks like two warehouses almost stuck one on top of another and then leaned against a back wall at an angle. The back wall was one of the many dividers that filled Omega signifying where one section ended and another began.

And in front of the area were several krogan, all of them talking to one another. Some of them were shouting, while two were wrestling in place, the style almost looking like Pankration to Ranma, but with more headbutts. *Huh, that looks like it would hurt.*

Only a few were standing aloof from the activity, guarding the area. Two glared at Ranma as he pushed out away from the normal comings and goings around the area.

He walked up to them, his hands in his pockets in his head cocked to one side as he stared at the lizards. *They really do look like some kind of strange dinosaur people. That's kind of cool, although only coming in various shades of red and puke yellow is kind of meh... ugh, I been spending too much time around Usagi.*

More importantly, Ranma's ki senses were also telling him that they did have a decent amount of it. Not as much as Usagi did at this point, or Benezia had when she had left the Abbey, but more than he'd seen in anyone else in this weird galaxy.

One of the krogan stepped forward, growling, "Step off human! Blood Pack only from here on. Less you got business to discuss. Then ya go to our Chief over at Afterlife."

The other guard laughed harshly. "You might think you have some quads to come this close to the mighty krogan, but that's as far as it goes. I don't want to waste a bullet on you, but your blood would look good on my claws."

"He looks tasty! I've never tried human before!" one of the other krogan said, getting up from where he had been squatting doing some kind of maintenance on his gun.

Ranma saw this as an opening and took it, glancing past the two guards to smirk at the Krogan who had gotten to his feet. Ranma doubted his Smirk™ would have the same effect on other species as it did on his rivals back home, but that was what the Taunt Attack was for. "Ha! You might find me a bit too big for you to chew on, you little gecko!"

As Ranma had hoped, the Krogan's translation device was able to give him an immediate description of what a gecko was, and a second later, the insult hit the mark. The Krogan in question roared to his feet and started to charge forward towards Ranma. The others all laughed, got to their feet, waiting to watch the fun. Even the two guards stepped aside, laughing and waiting to see the mouthy human being turned into a fine paste.

Their laughter lasted until the charging Krogan reached Ranma. Then Ranma's hand flashed forward out of his pocket to grab the Krogan's outstretched hands. He held the Krogan still, straining a little, which surprised him. *Damn, this guy's about as strong as Ryoga was when he first showed up. Not near Lime's level though.* Even as the Krogan realized this human was overpowering him, a kick to the center of the Krogan's chest sent him hurling backward into the group. Two other Krogan went down a tumbled cursing, and Ranma tossed the gun aside and leaped to the side towards one of the guards, shouting out, "Let's see what you've got!"

Since there was in the battle master outside, none of the krogan there had enough intelligence to question what Ranma was up to. So challenged they simply roared charging in turn into melee range.

To Ranma, this was perfectly fine. This simply gave him more chaos to work with, and he dodged and hopped over several blows from the two krogan on guard. One went down to a kick to the back of the neck, then Ranma grabbed a third's arm used the arm as a bar to flip himself up into the air, where he punched out hard against the face of another krogan, sending him crying out in pain as his bony plate there shattered. Ranma then flipped back over his head, using his body as a shield for a second as his legs kicked out to either side, sending two other krogan flying.

As the crowd of pedestrians all stared and then began to run away, behind him, Ranma landed to one side of the victim he'd kicked in the face. Ranma grabbed him by the armor and lifted him into the air, ignoring his flailing limbs before turning and tossing him into the doors of the modified warehouse. The doors gave way, and the Krogan landed amidst its wreckage inside as Ranma shouted, "Is that the best you've got? I know old women who fight better than you lot."

Instantly, more krogan boiled out from inside, with some really impressively large members of their breed as well. Two of them had biotics, and one of them reached through the crowd to try and Biotic Grab Ranma, who just flared his ki to break the grip easily. The other charged forwards, snarling in fury as he battered other krogan out the way in an effort to get to the one who had apparently come here to pick a fight with them all. "I'm gonna stomp you into a puddle, pyjack!"

Ranma waited until right before the charging Krogan was going to be on, then leaped up over the Battle Master, landing feet first on one of the krogan that it been side by the older ones charge. "Ole and stomp, Combo hit!"

As he landed, Ranma finally noticed the first barrier he had felt among the krogan. It was very clear that their equipment was a bizarre mix of stuff. The barrier though felled to the first four stomps from Ranma, and the next two got through. *Time to switch to Amaguriken Short Style then, fewer blows, more strength behind each blow.*

The Krogan under Ranma gagged in agony as he felt his armor, both the armor he wore and his naturally heavy scales bend and the hardened ribs below break. Then Ranma was off, flipping up over him into the crowd of krogan once more, laughing until the first blow actually landed. A lucky shot from one of the shotguns that the krogan loved hit him in the side with a solid shell. It blew him sideways, and hurt like blazes, but already Ranma could feel his body healing from it.

Looking through the crowd of krogan as they charged forward to finish him off, Ranma also saw the first few krogan he'd hit getting back to their feet, their eyes now blood red with battle lust, looking no worse for wear. Indeed, the one who's face he had ruined seemed to be healing as he watched. The bones on his strange ridge didn't seemingly heal right, but the blood was stopping and the cuts closing as Ranma glanced in that direction. *Well, that tears it, they do have both ki and ki healing. Fun!*

"It's like facing a large number of punching bags that can heal themselves!" he said aloud, once more using his father's most famous technique, Make Them Mad, Make Them Stupid to good effect.

Only the two Battle Masters seemed to realize what Ranma was doing, and as even more krogan boiled out from the warehouse, Ranma laughed, charging into the middle of them once more.

At this point though, the rest of Omega decided to remind the combatants of their presence. "Fuckin' hell, you pyjacks! Shut this shit down! You lot know that Aria demands any fighting happeNNN!!"

That was as far as that enforcer, a human, got before a krogan turned and unloaded a shotgun into him. The Blood Pack's ire was up, and they weren't going to listen to anyone beyond their own ranks.

The team of forty enforcers behind the initial speaker took this poorly and opened fire. Heavy weapons, rockets, mass effect guns of all sorts from regular rifles up to the equivalent of saws opened fire from positions scattered along the street. The Krogan, those still armed, fired back. Not all of them were armed with the short-ranged shotguns. While others charged forward in the krogan's favored Biotic Charge. They slammed into Aria's enforcers, while still more krogan came out from the woodwork, joining in the action when they hadn't before. "Kill'em all! It's time for the Blood Pack to take back control of Omega!" shouted someone.

Others kept their attention on Ranma who was still the center of this spiraling firefight. He'd been able to dodge or just outright ignore most of the fire coming at him, which hadn't been all that much. Orders or not, most of the guards had prioritized taking on the known danger of the krogan.

Now he landed in among one of the largest group of enforcers. Punches and kicks lashed, joined now with one of the two trench knives Ranma had forged. His other hand glowed red, and the heat of being near it was enough to cause non-krogan to flinch away.

As the regular 'civilians' of Omega either joined in or ran away, Ranma finished that group of enforcers. He grabbed up a rocket launcher in one hand and a heavy machine gun type thing in his other, launching a rocket into a Krogan Battle Master's barrier, which held up astonishingly. Another group of enforcers could not say the same, their barriers overloaded. The next moment, a Krogan rushed Ranma, trying to bear him to the ground, succeeding in knocking his purloined weapons out of his hand.

Grunting, Ranma grabbed the Krogan by the shoulders, headbutting him so hard the Krogan's heavily reinforced forehead bone shattered, causing him to cry out in agony and fear. The next moment, Ranma hurled the Krogan through a nearby store entrance. Ranma then kicked a Turian enforcer who had foolishly tried to follow up on the Krogan's 'success' in getting Ranma onto his back up into a second story window.

Leaping away towards the nearest group of krogan, Ranma reflected, *Well, I had my questions answered. And if this isn't making a splash large enough to keep people's attention on me rather than the others, I don't know what will.*

OOOOOOO

For their part, Herb was somewhat surprised by how quickly she and Samara had made progress. They'd been on Omega for barely four hours, but it seemed as if they already had a lead in the form of a weeping human woman. Samara seemed able to get people to trust her, to tell her about rumors with ease. Was it her smile, a look in the eye, or something else? Herb had no idea, but it had worked for them all along. And now it had worked so well that a distraught mother was willing to talk to two strangers in hopes of getting some help.

That was how desperate she was. Despite living on Omega, this woman was willing to **beg** for help from complete strangers. That said quite a bit to Herb, who watched as Samara crouched down in front of the woman, gently pulling the human woman into her arms from where she had fallen to her knees crying out a moment ago for someone to help her find her son and 'that Asari whore.'

"Miss, can you tell me what you meant by that?" Samara smiled deprecatingly. "After all, that doesn't really narrow it down especially in a place like this. Is there some reason why you think that this one Asari woman had something to do with your boy's disappearance?"

Or is this a case of a mother not wanting to her little boy to run off to a strip club kind of thing. In a place like this, I can easily see that occurring, Samara thought, fighting back the urge to purge the evil from this place. Evil, not the downtrodden or guilty. There was a difference in the eyes of the Code. A Justiciar struck down those who enjoyed causing pain to others, who willingly broke the law to better themselves. Not those who had simply fallen on hard times like this woman in front of her. Nor those born into a place like this.

"I, I she's one of those young Maidens, normally I wouldn't object, but my boy, he changed after she came into his life. And my Adam was so bright, so intelligent. Driven to get us out of here, he studied all the time, so bright he was, a master technician, and even a biotic! But, but after that woman took him under her wing, he changed. Adam became harder, more driven to be stronger in biotics and physically than anything else."

The tale continued for a while, telling the tale of a young man with a true knack for technology doing an about face, changing his personality as he built up muscles and his biotic power over his mind after meeting a nice, slightly richer seeming Asari Maiden. Over time, Adam's whole attitude had changed, becoming almost cold to his mother, and then, suddenly, he had stopped coming home. Had stopped working. Had stopped being seen in public at all. No body had been found, but here on Omega that didn't matter. There were so many varren around getting rid of a body was only a matter of time.

Walking away, Herb looked over at Samara, who had not made the woman any promises, simply saying they would look into it, and if nothing else, she would have closure.

"Do you think this matches your quarry's way of hunting?" Herb asked.

“It does. Morinth likes to ‘cultivate’ her victims, and the woman said her son was a biotic. That would’ve made him even more attractive to her. She will teach him, help him grow, allow him to grow strong, and then will drain him dry. By this point, I do not doubt he is already dead. But I did not wish to simply outright tell the woman that,” Samara said sadly.

Herb nodded grimly, shivering internally. That sounded terrifying to her. Having a teacher turn on you like that, especially since it would be during a moment of passion, after having done the same thing before several times? That was beyond horrifying. “Let me guess. The shock, fear and horror at the betrayal makes her victim’s ki tastier.”

“Morinth certainly seems to think so,” Samara agreed in a bitter tone, not commenting on the use of the word ki. She had heard both Ranma and Herb use it before and it actually matched what the Ardat-Yakshi could drain from their victims.

The two of them made their way deeper into the Doru District, an area Herb would call upper-middle class, where there was actually some order and cleanliness around them. Not a lot, but even that bit was enough to make it stand out in comparison to the slums they had been investigating.

Here, both of them made a point to listen in to conversations nearby. Most of those had nothing to do with their quarry or anything else important, but a few of them were mentioning a fight going on in the Blood Pack territory.

“They say a human just walked up and punched one of them in the mouth! And now he’s taking them all on! I don’t believe that last, but if he’s even taking on one Krogan in hand-to-hand that’s crazy!”

“I heard that all the krogan are trying to pile in, or are rebelling against Aria. And that she’s had to send in troops to quell the riots,” another person opined.

“Please! The Blood Pack presence here on Omega isn’t strong enough for that kind of thing. No matter how riled they might be.”

“Shows what you know! I bet if they wanted to the Blood Pack could move against Aria.”

“Shut up! Are you trying to get us all into trouble” growled a nearby older Turian, reaching over to the first and slamming his head against the wall of the shop he had been leaning against. “No one fucks with Aria, not and live to tell the tale.”

Herb was about to comment that Ranma seems to have done his part, fully pulling away Aria’s attention from them, when Samara hissed, then pointed forward slightly, the movement of her finger barely visible as her hand shifted at her side as she pointed down the street. “That Asari, the one who just entered that alleyway down there. That is Morinth.”

“How can you tell?” Herb demanded, staring in that direction.

“My eyes are better than most, and regardless of shape, there are some things that a sister who has been able to use that ability cannot change. Scar tissue is one of them. She has a distinctive scar on her shoulder, a wound up to her collarbone from where she removed the tattoo of the Ardat-Yakshi.”

“Do you think she saw you?”

“No,” came the reply as Herb concentrated on her ki sense, looking through the crowd of normal people between them and their target, grimacing as his ki sense rolled over the woman. She had more ki within her than anyone else he had seen in this galaxy, but it was... it was wrong. There were two colors to her ki, a nearly diseased seeming greenish color, with striations of black and purple through it, showing the woman’s dark passions, her hunger. Then completely surrounded by that color was a small ball of light green. As Herb watched, the light green color faded slightly, shrinking.

“That, that is vile,” Herb muttered. *The ki of her victim, I suppose, not yet fully converted into her own.* “I have her.”

Wordlessly the two hunters moved on with Herb in the lead now. But he paused, moving across the street and into an alleyway facing the building that they were here for, ignoring the scuttling of something large behind them. Samara turned, her hand flaring with biotic energy as a varren was revealed, whimpering and retreating quickly.

“The more things change, the more they stay the same. Despite being on a space station, this area looks like a rundown city anywhere, complete with wild dogs,” Herb muttered, her attention remaining locked on the alleyway where their quarry had disappeared. She could still feel her power there, having entered the side building of some kind, a small entrance way into what was possibly a basement apartment perhaps?

Herb didn’t know and wasn’t willing to come closer lest they somehow give the game away. But she was able to feel Morinth’s ki through the intervening material, and pointed it out to Samara. I have her, and I definitely believe that is indeed our quarry.”

“How can you tell?” Samara asked.

Herb explained what he was seeing with his ki sight, and Samara slowly nodded, frowning angrily. “If there is a connection between Bera'van'tuwan and the life force that an Ardat-Yakshi can drain from someone, that makes quite a bit of sense.”

“Should we be charging now then?”

“No. I made that mistake early on as a Justiciar. We will move around the area, make certain that there is no hidden hideaway or tunnel of any kind. Only then, when we know that she is no way of escaping, should we strike. Morinth will have also set up some kind of automated defenses to help as well.”

Herb blinked, not canceling her ki sensing technique just yet, but turning to look at Samara, her face twisted into a jaundiced glare. “And how exactly are we supposed to do that here? That building abuts another building, and there are two buildings built up on top of it leading up to the next floor. Which isn’t even considering those small shanty areas that seem to be at the back of every alleyway here. Indeed, Morinth could have a panel down to the next floor below us, couldn’t she?”

Samara scowled at that, and then said slowly “Would the authority, such as they are, here have some measure of information about that kind of thing?”

“Perhaps, although it will no doubt cost. Still,” the multicolored haired woman went on, staring down at the map they had been given of this area of Omega on his omni-tool for an exorbitant sum early on in their investigation, “if it is at all better than the one we were given to download, it will help at least a little. It is either that, or wait for her to leave an ambush or on the streets. Or simply smash in through the outer wall, uncaring of the rest of the structure to get in close quickly.”

“That would be a bad idea. A third voice interjected, causing both Samara and Herb to turn quickly. The Martial artist whirled in place, her fist already punching out hard towards where the voice it comes from, while Samara turned slower. Not because she had been startled, and was slow to react, but because the voice came from someone who could not possibly be a threat to her. Indeed, she quickly reached out and stopped Herb’s punch, grabbing his arm.

Even the wind of Herb’s punch was enough to knock the Salarian infiltrator back several steps, his chameleon cloak deactivating as he did. He stared eyes wide at Herb.

“Do not ever sneak up on me again, or else Samara will not stop me from slaying you!” Herb ground out, trying to get her beating heart under control. She had been focused on their quarry, so hadn’t picked the man up with her ki sense either. *That will teach you to not get tunnel vision, oh great prince,* Herb thought in self-condemnation.

“I, I will keep that in mind. B, but I was sent to make certain that the two of you didn’t start any public trouble. Fight all you want to in the hovels around here, but keep it off the streets, and particularly keep the public damage to a minimum. We don’t care about the body count, but the station can’t be damaged, especially this close to one of the reclamation centers,” the Salarian answered, his tone becoming firmer and more dispassionate as he went on. “Damage that, you’ll answer to Aria. But she wants to speak to you Justiciar.”

“Do the lives of the people your Aria is supposed to lead matter so little to you?” Samara made to reach forward to snap the man’s neck, but this time, it was Herb who restrained her.

“Do not worry. Even if Morinth leaves, I would be able to pick out her ki signature. And we know where she is hiding now, unless the arrival of this one somehow warned her.”

“There are no windows up there, and I do not see any cameras. Hopefully she will remain ignorant of us.” As Samara nodded, Herb turned to the group of enforcers and decided to have fun, smiling faintly as she spoke. “Very well, take us to your leader.” She and Herb exchanged a glance, and found they shared the same thought now: *And perhaps this conversation will not go in the way Aria believes it will...*

OOOOOOO

“Roger that, Omega, hangar bay 25 D23,” the pilot of the Q-ship answered, nodding over to where Shepard and several of his team members waited. “We’re cleared to land. The background Intelligence made up for the ship and setting up a local bank account worked. Everything else about this mission is up to you lot.”

“Hah, about time Intelligence got something right,” Shepard and the naval man smiled at that and then Shepard gestured his team towards the doorway. “We’ll be back Captain. Keep the engines warm for us because if this goes south, we might be getting out of here in a hurry. But one way or another, the mercs aren’t going to be an ongoing issue in the war any longer.”

End Chapter

From here on, Shepard and Garrus will meet Ranma and co. How will that go, I wonder, when a kind-of representative of the Alliance meets the so-called human super soldiers? Hmm... and Aria, be very careful what you wish for...