

I can't draw or code. Hence, I don't own either of the originals.

Howdy! This story won the Ranma poll for July thanks to the carryover effect. I wanted to give Hiryo time to look it over for me, even if I have Grammarlied a portion of it, but not the entirety. Enjoy!

Chapter 14: A Horse Goes Stomping, Part 3: Snowy Travels

Leaving the hotel, Ranma and Garrus fell behind Tali as she looked down at her omni-tool. "The video recorder's moving this way," Tali muttered, her voice barely registering to her suit's pickup enough to carry to her two companions as she pointed through the promenade after her little helper. "I've got Chatika vas Paus tracking it from above. Unfortunately, the recorder doesn't have any kind of tracking technology on it, so Chatika needs to stay within line of sight."

"And you're able to keep Cheeky Cheeks out of sight of the drone? And anyone else that might be looking out for it?" Ranma asked. He had heard the name of Tali's drone several times since they become friends, but since he hadn't ever actually seen the TV show or whatever it was from, it hadn't stuck in his mind. Plus, making fun of the name never ceased to get a rise out of his friend.

Right now, this earned him an absent-minded kick to his lower leg. A very light one though, considering both the power of the leg doing the kicking, and the fact that Tali knew that if she kicked too hard, she might break something in her foot rather than on Ranma. "How many times do I have to tell you, his name is Chatika not Cheeky, Cheeks or any derivative thereof! That makes him sound like he's a part of a comedy act, or... or maybe something dirty, I'm not sure which."

Tali harrumphed, turning back to her work. "Also yes, I can keep my little friend from being spotted. There's a free-floating zone between the rock and the lights, so anyone who is trying to spot him will blind themselves."

"Is there any way you can tell if we are being observed by any other drones?" Garrus asked, his mandibles switching into his race's version of a smirk at the little interaction. *Even if they are doomed to never be, these two are remarkably amusing to watch interact sometimes. Certainly nothing like being back home or in the military.*

Blinking inside her helmet, a move that even Ranma could barely make out given the opaque nature of the glass covering her face, Tali quickly switched from one program to another on her omni-tool. As he watched her work, Garrus had to shake his head in bemused wonder. *I've heard that quarians were insanely good engineers and programmers, but to see someone so young as Tali acting like both a combat engineer and an infiltrator all in one is something else altogether. She's what, six, seven years my junior? I think Ranma mentioned that she's younger than him and Ranma's younger than me.*

Two minutes later, Tali flashed them a thumb up in one of those human idioms that had rapidly spread across the galaxy. To all species who had opposable thumbs anyway. Thankfully, one of the three fingers on Tali's hands was indeed an opposable thumb. "There was a security camera in the hotel but it had already been turned off by the mercs and hasn't been turned back on yet. There doesn't seem to be any public security cameras around here, although a few of the doorways leading off the promenade have some."

Nodding at that, Garrus gestured for Tali to start moving again. "Thank you. And if there isn't any other drones around here, I think we can safely assume that the powers that be here on Noveria aren't behind trying to smoke you out."

Ranma nodded, frowning thoughtfully. "Yea, it's pretty clear you were right about why we were attacked. Those mercs didn't have a chance against me, and anyone who realized who I was under my assumed identity would know that."

This wasn't hyperbole or arrogance, it was simply fact. The mercenaries had attacked with a good plan but they didn't bring in enough troops or enough firepower to bother Ranma much. Even Garrus acknowledged that Ranma could just as easily have seen off the entire group, hence, why Tali had wondered about the real reason behind it.

Now Garrus wondered about the why of it. "Maybe someone wanted to grab your attention? Maybe we're heading into a trap, or they didn't know precisely, and wanted to make sure. Ex-Blue Sun mercenaries are probably an incredibly cheap option for such work these days," he mused. "I don't think the geth would think of such a thing, and I'd imagine they would be able to tell who you were without needing you to break cover."

"I don't think so either on the whole geth thing but—" Tali's voice broke off into a hiss and she held up a hand as they made their way around one of the bulked up areas of the promenade made to make this as if it was separated into different smaller rooms inside of the larger cavern. "The video drone just dropped onto the shoulder of a man, who quickly turned it off. I'm not getting anything from it any longer, but Chatika is still invisible above him. That stealth coating I gave him is getting a workout though, despite my earlier words about the light blinding anyone searching for my little friend."

"Did the man spot something moving or something?"

"Male, human um... kind of fat, but not like spacers I've seen, this man doesn't have any muscles, just fat. But no, I don't think he has any idea about our following his floating recorder back to here. He was looking up at the video recorder as it arrived, and I didn't expect the video recorder's owner to be so close."

"This is Port Hanshan, I don't know exactly how many public areas there are, but I'm pretty positive most of the space beyond the entry-level bazaar and the promenade is owned by various companies," Garrus mused. "He might've been forced to be that close to reclaim the

video recorder. Now that he's got it back, though, if he examines the programming of the recorder, will he detect that you hacked it?"

Tali turned to stare up at Garrus, her head slightly cocked to one side. She just stared at him, saying nothing but somehow conveying her opinion of that question, causing Garrus to realize that quarians did deadpan expressions somehow better than anyone else he had ever met, despite the fact he couldn't even see her face. "Sorry! I'm just asking!"

"Well, so long as you're not actively trying to be insulting." Tali snorted, then snickered, the sound somewhat odd coming from behind her helmet, but making Ranma grin as he heard it. "No, he won't be able to figure out the fact that I've hacked his video recorder. Don't worry about that, this is..." She seemed to blink, the twin white lights of her eyes going dark for a second before she looked over at Ranma. "This is my rice and fish?"

"Yep, that's the phrase in my country anyway. Most other societies have the phrase bread-and-butter," Ranma explained, nodding his head at the euphemism.

"Ah, human idioms." Garrus shook his head. "That leaves me none the wiser for what that actually means, though."

"Er, from the way it was explained to me it means that it's something I'm really good at that I do every day," Tali explained. "I just think of it as being 'your daily Nutra' I suppose." Nutra was the name of a paste that quarians in the Migrant Fleet ate to get all their nutritional needs in one go. This did not mean it was tasty, of course, quite the opposite, really.

"Yeah, but that doesn't roll off the tongue." Ranma snickered.

Soon the trio was on the trail of their quarry once more, moving through the large promenade area, leaving behind the majority of the people who were still up at this hour. There are a surprising number of those, in Ranma's opinion. Apparently, business never slept here in Port Hanshan, even if the lights dimmed automatically to inform everyone that it was mandatory nighttime.

As they went, Tali had them pause several times, Chatika having had to do the same. "Good grief, but I am grateful that I splurged for a new camera on Omega for my little buddy. This guy looks into shadows, over his shoulder, and all around and he's really subtle about it! Thankfully, he doesn't look up as often as he should in a place with such high ceilings, but he still does that more often than most!"

"So he's likely a spy?" Ranma guessed.

"Five credits on terrorist or some kind," Garrus disagreed. "Being so quick to send mercs to flush you out, that's got to be someone looking to cause some carnage."

Ranma waved his hand. "Eh, I do like some carnage, but I'd think a terrorist would want to try and point me in the direction of their goal or whatever."

"If we're putting money on it... I'd say corporate spy. Huh..." Tali paused. "Um... Ranma, you've always told me you're a master of moving your body, right? Do you think you could say if someone's, um, wearing a fake suit or something? This guy's really light on his feet."

"A lot of overweight people are 'light on their feet' like that, Tali. If he's not, then that'd be a sign. Or if portions of his body move in odd ways, like his fat going one way and the rest of his body in another." Leaning over, Ranma watched a bit on Tali's screen as they waited behind a carved pillar, a stalagmite having merged with a stalactite and left there. "Yeah, sorry. I can't tell anything from this. I'd need a much closer image to tell ya anything."

Moments later, the group shifted into a second open cavern off the promenade that was very obviously part of it, but not as well-acquainted. Unlike the sides and the floor of the massive cavern, significant portions of the roof of this one hadn't been terraformed. Perhaps the person who had done the work had thought that the stalactites added to the ambience? Regardless of the why, though, there were many of them up there, and away from the entrance and the area leading up to the second and third story zones of the promenade, there was only a latticework of lights rather than a full ceiling.

As they paused again when Tali warned them, the man was looking around him, Garrus asked, "By the way, how are you with the weather of this world, Ranma? I mean not the actual temperature, but will snow or melting snow trigger your change?"

"Snow itself doesn't do anything. I've been buried in snow in both my male and female foreman dozens of times," Ranma waved that off. "It has to be cold water, and it has to go over my head or cover half of my body. Dripping water doesn't do anything, nor does pushing my arms into water or something like that. I've stood in cold water up to my knees without it triggering the change, but then I got hit in the back by a small bucket of cold water and the combination was enough. The head's more important. I get hit in the face by a water gun, that's enough to trigger the change, even if there isn't enough water in the spray to soak my upper body."

He shrugged. "As for the temperature, I can't remember a time when I was actually cold, and since my training with Master Vulcan, I've actually run a lot hotter than I did before that. Which was already way above the norm for humans."

He turned to Tali, looking at her quizzically. "What about you? How well does that suit insulate you against the cold? I mean I've seen you work out in space, so I'm assuming it does pretty well against the cold, but what about wet cold?"

"I don't think there's going to be that much of a difference. I mean, if I'm buried in something, and that something starts to get wet and soak my suit, that's a different story. But I

think you're severely underestimating how good my suit has to be," Tali stated, both prideful of the suits are people had created and as always annoyed at the necessity. "It's got a temperature regulator inside, and I can add an extra heater unit to it pretty quickly if I need to. Oh, ew!"

Tali hadn't looked away from her omni-tool as she spoke, but did so now, wincing. "The guy just entered what I have to assume is some kind of public refresher station, and is changing clothing. Ew! I accept that humans come in all different shapes and sizes just like every other race, but that doesn't mean I wanted to look at acres of fat, ew!!"

Ranma and Garrus both snickered at that, but Tali glared at them and remained looking away from her tool for a few moments. Ranma however examined the guy closely, humming. "Huh. Yeah, that's kind of fake. His stomach's really good mold or whatever. Kind of makes me think about Santa Claus."

"Definitely a spy then, a long-term implant of some kind. Now, for the Alliance, or for some other corporation doing some corporate espionage." Garrus' mandibles twitched thoughtfully, as he looked at the image. "Those kinds of long-term body mods are expensive, especially the type that are supposed to be reversed eventually."

"Wait, I don't have ta explain Santa Claus?" Ranma blinked, staring at both aliens.

"You mean the jolly spirit of a holiday made up as an excuse to give presents to one another? Nope, even I heard of him in the Migrant Fleet. I actually really liked some of the movies with him in it we could download off the extranet occasionally," Tali admitted, letting loose a giggle that as always caused Ranma to grin the sound sending a pleasant shiver through him. "I had to look up a lot of the terms being used in the first few such movies, but I always enjoyed the whole 'good kids get treats' thing, even if my Auntie Raan would tease me and say I was going onto the naughty list way more than I was on the good list."

Okay, that's so wholesome and cute it hurts my teeth, Ranma thought with a laugh, even as another part of mind tried to grab his attention about the way Tali had said the word 'naughty.' Movement on the screen of Tali's omni-tool distracted him, and he looked down. "Huh, the guy's changed into what I guess is a nice suit of some kind, I've seen similar on some extranet programs."

With that, Tali took over again, and soon, the group was on the move once more, staying well away from their quarry but within striking distance, as Ranma put it. After a few seconds, she frowned. "He's heading up to the second floor, where the bars are. Not back towards the main promenade and the bar that's called the Mezzanine, I don't think, although I will say again that name's so sadly lacking in imagination it just make me feel sad for whoever came up with it."

Ranma laughed Tali continued to watch their target. "... Yeah, he's just sat down at a bar overlooking the lower levels of the promenade in one of those little personal cubicles. The

supposed spy's just opened up his omni-tool and seems to be using it to communicate with someone... I don't think there's any way to sneak up on him..."

Ranma smirked that, nudging his shoulder against Tali's. "Is that a challenge?"

"No, I know about your tricks, I'm just saying I wouldn't be able to sneak up on him, thank you." Tali nudged him back, and Ranma could hear the little grin in her voice as she did. "Besides, you have manifestly proven that you're the sort to look at challenges and shout 'witness me' as you charge towards them."

"Hah, you know me so well," Ranma teased, before he shrugged fighting the urge to put in arm around Tali's shoulders. For one thing, they were in public, and for another, while they were friends and... Okay, there were a lot of signs that both of them were feeling a little bit more than friendship at this point, he still wasn't all that comfortable with such displays. Shaking that thought away, he continued. "Blame my upbringing in Anything Goes. Part of the tenants of my school is that we take on any challenge no matter how ridiculous."

"If there's no way for us to get close to him, could your drone close enough to hear?" Garrus pondered.

Once more, Tali turned to look at the taller turian, cocking her head in the same manner she had before, her arms crossed over her chest as she once more gave him a deadpan look. He looked away quicker this time, shaking his head and backing off a few steps. "Spirits, stop that! It hurts my soul for some reason!"

"Stop second-guessing my skills then," Tali quipped, shaking her head even as she turned to her omni-tool and began to order Chatika closer. "I will say that while my visual recorder on Chatika is top-of-the-line, my audio receptor isn't."

As Garrus nodded and tried to soothe Tali's injured professionalism, Ranma reflected, *Huh, could some of my own personality have rubbed off on Tali? She wasn't that confrontational with anyone but that one asari Matron before.* As he pondered that, a part of Ranma's brain, appearing to his conscious mind like a small miniature Ranma labeled libido hopped into existence, a lascivious smirk on its face as it held up a sign quickly, eager to get the words out before Ranma could stuff it back into its box. *Yeah, that's not how you'd like to rub off on her, is it?*

That was as far as it got before the rest of Ranma's scattered thoughts, each of them appearing like little Ranmas all labeled different things, jumped on Libido, ganging up on him like in a cartoon and stuffing it back into the box, kicking it out into a large pool of water. A moment later, the other little Ranmas dissolved into Ranma's mind and he blinked. *OKAY, where the fuck did that come from? I am never watching old American cartoons ever again. Stupid Usagi and her love of all things slapstick.*

Looking around for something to take his mind off of his mind possibly having a psychotic breakdown caused by his libido deciding to suddenly rear its head, Ranma looked around, then gently took Tali's elbow. "Come on, let's head over to one of those sitting areas. There's still more than enough people around here that just the three of us crowding around one another looking down at your omni-tool might grab too much attention."

Garrus agreed with that, and led the way over to a nearby circular sofa that was set into an indent in the floor of the first level of the cavern containing this segment of the promenade. Unlike in the bars above, there was no computer set up to order drinks or anything. This was simply a small waiting area, much like many others scattered around this level of the promenade, where low-level functionaries could wait their turn to head into other areas of Port Hanshan or for a table at the various restaurants. Most of those restaurants, unlike the bars on the second and third floors of the promenade were closed this late at night, but there were still a few open, low-level restaurants that catered to the common workers, be they engineers, machinists or office drones around the clock.

There, Garrus and Ranma both also powered up their omni-tools as the group spread out. Garrus started a conversation about what kind of weapons were available for sale here on Noveria, and if maybe purchasing some of them might be a good idea going forward, or if they should concentrate first on finding a job, or if not that, getting off planet. Meanwhile, Tali continued to direct her little helper closer to their target.

A moment later, she smacked Ranma lightly in the side, twisting around and moving across the open seat between them pressing into his side for just a second as she held out the arm on which her omni-tool's screen was being projected. "Look at this! That man put up a cone of silence around his booth and then started to use a program to create white noise, but my Chatika's so close we can see his omni-tool's screen. It looks like he's just reading various news articles and advertisements, but each time he moves from one to another, there's a word that pops out and is added to this writing document that's open on this second screen."

"Okay, that kind of setup makes me think more terrorist than anything else. Corporate espionage isn't legal in Citadel Space, obviously, but going to those lengths isn't something most people would be willing to do," Garrus murmured. "I wonder what the cipher is?"

Ranma frowned a bit, trying to push through the feeling of Tali pressing into him as she was to look at the image on her omni-tool. Her suit wasn't skintight, something his mind kept on needing to repeat every time moments like this occurred, and there were bits of armor over her chest and stomach that made it a far harder material than it first looked, but it was still distracting. "C, can we figure out what he's actually being told?"

"I think so... It's some kind of order, I think, although embedded this way, I doubt it's occurring real-time," Tali muttered, putting together a hasty program that would gather the words linked to the various news articles and start putting them in a manner that made sense.

Garrus quickly began to help, removing a few words as gibberish and sending her a program that helped with sentence structure among spoken English.

“---Use him as a distraction. This Ranma fellow is a known white knight on a charger. Wait until he makes some kind of big splash and take advantage of it. Your position on Noveria is no longer as important as the information that you could take from them for our own research. I will have an extraction group on planet within twelve hours.”

That was the end of the hidden communication. The last sentence had barely a moment to flash up to one side of Tali’s main screen before it was replaced for a brief instant with an image of a dog. That image was then superimposed by two more images of the same dog, tilted in such a way it looked like it had grown two extra heads dog. Tali recognized the symbol from her time talking to Ranma about groups he’d run into in the past, while Garrus frowned a little.

“Cerberus? This guy’s working for Cerberus?” Ranma questioned, suddenly all business. “And they mean to use my presence on planet as a distraction? Is there any way to figure out what they’re after? I don’t like the idea of those asshats being able to achieve any kind of objective, no matter what the hell it is.”

While Ranma didn’t have as big a problem with the Illusive Man as Herb, he did have a major problem with Cerberus’s past actions. Selling out human colonies to make the others build up their defenses as he and Herb had learned on Torfan had definitely soured his opinion of their so-called pro-human stance. That didn’t include some of the things he’d seen about Cerberus from the Shadow Broker’s files, which made it even worse.

“Well, I’ve been running a clandestine scan of that man’s face through my omni-tool. His name’s Brad Klein. Middle manager of the local Synthetic Insights office. That’s one of the bigger corporations on the planet or galaxy wide. The merchant I talked to out in the bazaar mentioned them. Synthetic Insights lost a bid for one of the labs elsewhere on Noveria to Binary Helix. Which I remember is the company that you and Tali are interested in,” Garrus supplied.

“Huh, Synthetic Insights, that’s the same company as that Lorax guy who’s apparently locked in some kind of power struggle with one of Noveria Corp’s administrators, right?” Ranma answered, humming thoughtfully, while Garrus blinked, wondering if Ranma had really forgotten Loirk’s name or if that was a joke. “I wonder what Cerberus wants with that company. It sounds as if they’re trying to steal data or something I guess, although I can’t imagine that guy as a sneak thief or being involved in a smash and grab. Not unless he’s muscled under that gel suit or whatever it is that’s making him look like a rolly polly.”

Tali nodded, the fingers of her free hand tapping thoughtfully against her thigh. “Wouldn’t it also be ridiculously hard to get away with something like that on Noveria? Most of the research all the corporations do here are proprietary and secret. Noveria Corp could also just shut down the hangar, and then shoot anything that tries to get into the air, right? They would need an extremely good exit strategy.”

Garrus agreed with that assessment, and the three of them looked at one another, wondering if they should or could do anything about this other than simply walk up to the guy and knock him out or something similar. Ranma even voiced that idea, which Garrus shot down, saying that they weren't here to get involved in whatever Cerberus was up to.

"If we go around trying to stop all manner of corporate espionage, we won't get anything else done. This isn't even within Citadel jurisdiction remember. We would get the locals on our rear quickly, and that would mean your cover, Ranma, would be well and truly blown. Which would be bad if the geth are here as you two suppose. If this Cerberus man is the only one who has cottoned on to who you really are, let's keep it that way."

Ranma frowned, not liking the idea of leaving an enemy to go and do something else, even if that something else wasn't aimed his way right now.

Before he could say anything, an asari slid into the open seat between him and Garrus. "Hello~~, you're new around here. Humans are so exotic anyway, but you look even better than most, certainly around here. Most of the humans here are as obsessed with money and profit as a volus, and all of Elanus' folk are so brash and loud. You don't seem to be that type. I don't suppose you'd be willing to help a poor girl unwind would you?"

Before Ranma could do more than blush at this sudden intrusion into his personal space, Tali lifted an arm, the hand of which was suddenly holding her shotgun. Pressing the barrel of it up into the asari's face, Tali turned away from her omni-tool for the first time since they'd set down, glaring across at the asari who had suddenly invaded their sitting area. "Blue Kiyet (bitch) with a death wish say what?"

"EEEP!!" The asari flinched away so hard she almost landed into Garrus' lap, holding up her hands and waving them wildly. "I didn't mean to step on your toes, don't shoot, I..." She then blinked, staring at Tali, registering the fact she had just been threatened by a quarian, the shock of that helping to banish her sudden bout of fear. "Wait, why is a suit rat getting so defensive about me flirting with a human?"

"None of your damn business, just like R, Renzo isn't someone you can just walk up to and flirt with!" Tali growled, stumbling a little as she used Ranma's assumed name. *Skank! Ugh, I, I wish I could do that kind of thing! Not so openly, not so suddenly, ugh, no, but just, just to feel his cheek on my fingers...*

Trying and failing to keep a smile off his face, Ranma reflected internally that yes, his personality was definitely starting to affect Tali's in terms of her reaction to irritation and other people. While Tali had been more than ready to defend herself before they met, seeing violence as a means of dealing with other people simply irritating her in some fashion went well beyond that point. Despite that, Ranma gently pushed the gun down, while Garrus was slowly shaking his head, and gently pushing the asari off of his lap onto the sofa between the two men. He had never been the type to be attracted to asari, although he didn't look down on turians who were.

“Give her a break, Milla. Our guest was probably flirting with Renzo to cover her approaching us, anyway,” Garrus said, using Ranma and Tali’s cover identities before going on in a slightly louder voice, “Well I’m sorry to say that my human companion might not be interested in some companionship, that doesn’t mean I’m equally uninterested. The night is getting on after all, and I can certainly appreciate the idea of a warm bed.”

“Wait, she wasn’t actually flirting with Renzo?” Tali spoke in a low voice, looking suspiciously (and, Garrus knew, jealously,) between the asari and Garrus, as the woman smirked, snuggling up against Garrus’ side.

“Port Hanshan certainly isn’t the kind of place where even Maidens, let alone actual sex workers walk around looking for their next night of fun. Plus, our asari companion’s a little old for a Maiden,” Garrus observed to which Ranma instantly reached over the asari to smack him lightly upside the head, which, despite his head being armored, Garrus certainly felt. “OWW, what was that for?”

“Come on, man. Regardless of species, no woman likes it when someone brings up their age, especially like that.”

“Ehh, among asari, that stereotype doesn’t actually hold as true as you might think. Some of us might take offense, most of us don’t,” the asari spoke up, although she was still looking at Tali a little warily, with a healthy livening of simple confusion. “Age doesn’t matter much to my people, considering our natural lifespans. In fact, looking older eventually becomes seen as a badge of honor while it doesn’t automatically mean less sexy.”

She smirked just a little bit as she crossed her arms lightly under her chest, pushing them up and out, although the target of that move, Ranma was not looking at her, looking around instead to see if the woman had been followed, while thoughts of Samara went through his mind for some reason. *I can definitely agree that age certainly didn’t make her any less sexy*, he thought, before the memory of the quarian woman Benezia had shown him and Tali superimposed itself over the previous image. *Damn, my thoughts are all over the place today for some reason!* Ranma nearly shook his head at that, but stopped himself at the last minute, although he still couldn’t quite stop himself from wondering how much Tali could resemble that image. *I think all the, um, the semi-romantic stuff with Tali’s getting to me.*

Actually, Ranma’s thoughts, the brief sex-related imaginings that flashed through his mind, wasn’t at all perverted, not for a typical human male, anyway. For Ranma, who had spent so much of his life devoted to the point of obsessiveness to the martial arts, they were, though. Indeed, these brief moments of ‘confusion’ had only ever happened to Ranma once before: in the few days where he’d begun to have feelings towards Kasumi before he’d decided to give them up because of his friendship with Dr. Tofu.

His interest in Kasumi was literally the only time when romance and attraction had ever impacted Ranma’s thoughts in his life on Earth, given how many so-called honor debts his father

had hung around Ranma's neck like a noose. Ranma had tried his best to distance himself from Akane, although not always successfully, and had never been interested in any of the other girls who tried to become her rivals or chase after him like Ukyo. Even his relationship with Shampoo had been more that of a friend than anything else as Ranma hadn't really let himself think in terms of romance or even simple attraction.

Since then, his time with Usagi and the orgy he'd reluctantly had with the former asari slaves on Sijou's Eye had woken up his libido. Even more telling, perhaps, Ranma had known since arriving here that he might be able to get a girlfriend in this new universe without any of the hang-ups from his past life coming home to roost. Yet despite knowing that he'd not acted on that urge very often since and never going more than looking despite Usagi's urging and numerous other asari flirting with him during his time at the monastery. He hadn't even taken care of matters on his own, so to speak. In other words, certain thoughts and... physical needs were getting tired of being ignored, even by someone who had as much body control as Ranma.

Regardless of the reasons behind his moments of inattention, though, Ranma still could keep his mind on more important things easily. "You weren't being followed if that's what ya were worried about miss."

At that, Tali quickly turned her attention to her omni-tool. After a moment, she nodded. "We're also not being recorded or watched via technological means. And, and the other issue hasn't changed," she said, fumbling a bit when it came to explaining how they were trailing a man without just blurting it out.

"In that case, perhaps our new acquaintance explain the real reason why she approached us," Garrus nearly ordered, musing, *And if she did so because she recognized Ranma somehow. I know he's had a lot more interaction with various asari than any other race. If some random asari is able to see through his disguise I'm afraid we're going to have to give up this whole espionage thing in the future. A Cerberus spy recognizing him, I could understand. Someone in Binary Helix as well given how he was kept in one of their labs after the Shadow Broker handed him over to them. But some random asari agent on a corporate world half the known galaxy away from Omega and his 'normal' haunts? That would be bad.*

"I approached you because the three of you are newcomers, and word has gotten around that you're looking for small time jobs, correct?" the woman answered, her tone almost sultry, not matching the words at all.

"Keelah, seriously, drop the act woman, I told you we're not being observed," Tali grumbled, shaking her helmeted head. She looked over at Garrus and Ranma, visibly wondering if they should continue to speak to this woman or sent her away. The man that they had trailed was still sitting where he had been sitting, but who knew how long that would be for and where he would go from here. *Especially this late in the local night cycle.*

"Forgive me for being less than certain in a complete stranger's skill with technological espionage," the asari snorted, but shrugged. "But very well."

With that, the asari's attitude changed, going from sultry and sexual to professional as her tone changed accordingly. "Let me be blunt. You three need a job, and I need someone to get close to another individual. Close enough to upload into their omni-tool a special program I have. Unfortunately, the individual in question knows my face, and is incredibly good at discerning people's intentions. He's also hiring, hence why he might not be as suspicious of you three as he would someone else who has been on planet for a longer period of time."

"That sounds like industrial espionage, or is it corporate espionage?" Tali asked, looking over to Garrus.

"It's corporate espionage if she's looking to steal some information and industrial espionage if she's looking to sabotage something," Garrus explained, looking down at the asari woman with scant favor. "And what kind of information are you actually likely after, and for whom?"

"Does that really matter to three mercenaries?" the woman wondered a little mockingly. "If you must know, I am interested in acquiring some biological engineering data file from Binary Helix. Specifically, their agricultural department. Lately, Binary Helix has been making inroads into my own company's most profitable sector, and we need to find the reason how they have been able to do so."

Ranma and Tali both twitched at the mention of Binary Helix, but Garrus breathed a faint sigh of relief. The asari woman's words proved to Garrus that Ranma's cover, and perforce his and Tali's had not been entirely blown. Then he frowned a little as the rest of her words registered. "Are you looking for evidence of wrongdoing? Here on Noveria, where there are no rules or laws stopping any kind of experimentation that in Citadel Space would be outlawed? Or are you looking to steal it for yourself?"

"Again, does that matter to you? Your mercenaries looking for a job, although given your questions, I'm wondering if that is in fact the case."

Deciding that Garrus had a little bit too much of the good cop in him, Ranma shook his head. "You're not understanding my friend's concerns. We're not so hard up on money that we want to get on the bad side of a powerful corporation. If your program can in any way be traced back to us, that'd be bad. Although, we are interested in Binary Helix for our own reasons. They may have been behind a deal that went sour for us a while ago. Specifically, we'd like access to any secret or heavily guarded research lab they've got on planet."

"Hmmm... well, the research I'm interested in isn't happening at their newest and most isolated lab, Peak 15. It's happening in the hydroponics gardens Binary Helix has around the

equator, although which of their labs there is part of what I need to determine. If you wish to exchange information, though I think we could come to some agreement,” the asari hinted.

She made no move whatsoever to actually give them her name. These kinds of one-time deals were much safer that way. She also might have thought that her own anonymity put her in a position of power over the three mercs. “I do have some means of gleaning information about Peak 15, contacts that you as newcomers might not have.

“If we’re going to exchange information instead of credits, what all does the program you want us to transfer to his omni-tool do? And what range are we talking about here? A lot of omni-tools have specialized software that will spot any outer intrusion, and if you’re asking me to overcome that kind of thing, that’s going to be extra,” Tali said, getting into the swing of being mercenaries for a moment.

“The program I have will track the individual and copy out any passwords along with other important information into a cloud system through a series of cutouts in timed bursts. It will also let me listen into any conversation the man has about specific topics, such as what research is going on where. As I told you, I need to discover which lab is in charge of specific experiments.”

While Garrus remembered that Peak 15 was the laboratory that Synthetic Insights had bid for, and which had been handed over to Binary Helix for far less than it should have been, Tali looked interested at something else the woman had mentioned. “Is the tracking system separate from the other one? Is it proprietary, and if not could you share that program with me as part of the payment?”

That caused both Garrus and Ranma to blink, staring at one another in some confusion.

“I can do so. So, is it agreed? Any and all information I can glean about Peak 15 and that portion of my program for your help? Realize you’ll need to figure out a way to upload to the man’s omni-tool without him catching you. I don’t have a program that can completely mask the fact his omni-tool’s being hacked,” the asari warned.

“You’re still thinking we’re going to take the job.” Garrus argued, ignoring that Tali and Ranma had both basically said they would be willing to. “I’m not certain that this is something we should be involved in.”

Before the asari could do more than frown, Ranma reached behind her to smack Garrus upside the head again. “OY! Just because you don’t like thieving on general principle, is no reason for us to turn our noses up to work, Garrick. Or do I need to remind you about of all the times when we were part of Blue Sun that we were on such operations?” Ranma said, knowing that Tali had a point, that tracking program would be very useful to have. *Right now for preference. That way we can find that Cerberus agent after we’re done with what brought us here originally.*

“Excellent. In that case, we have an agreement. I can transfer both that and the program you’ll be installing as well as the image of the man who you need to approach to your systems now, along with an itinerary of where the target is,” the asari stated firmly.

“Now, hold on.” Tali shook her head again. “Give me the tracking program now, and the itinerary. But keep the other until tomorrow. We’ll meet up in the morning, you can give us any information about Peak 15 you’ve got and then we’ll perform this little job for you.”

“No. You do the job, and then I’ll give you the information I’ll have gathered,” the asari shot back.

“How about a compromise,” Garrus suggested, still looking a little annoyed by all this, but setting his annoyance aside for now. “Send the information you gather to our omni-tools, but as a password protected package. After we perform this job to the best of our abilities, then you can give us the password. The fact you’ve sent us something at all can tell us you actually researched something. Remember, this is a deal between two parties that have no prior knowledge of one another. It behooves all of us to be wary of betrayal.”

“Hmmm... an elegant solution.” For a moment, her omni-tool appeared around her wrist, and she linked to Tali’s. “I will trust you all to come up with a plan to approach Rafael Vargas on your own.”

When the download finished, the asari corporate spy, stood up, letting her hand move over Ranma’s face in a caress. When she spoke, it was clear she was speaking for a group of locals, who were walking behind the seated trio close enough to overhear. “Well, if you’re not interested in a fun time, pretty one, I’ll head to my bed, all alone I suppose. No offense, but scaries don’t do it for me, and you’ve no silver tongue to make me think otherwise.”

Tali watched her go, grumbling a little. “Ugh. I don’t like her.”

“Eh, well, hopefully we’ll only need to see her tomorrow and then you won’t have to deal with little miss secretive again.” Ranma shrugged. “As for right now can you... you’re already doing it, aren’t you,” Ranma deadpanned, shaking his head as Tali’s fingers zipped over the screen of her omni-tool.

“I already had a backdoor into the man’s video recording drone. Sending the tracking program to it is easy enough. Mind you, if he passes through any security at any point, though detect the signal, so I set it up to send out a tracking beacon this time every night. It’s not working hours whatever his cover is, so we should be good.” Tali shrugged. “So long as the guy doesn’t just junk or get rid of the video recorder.”

“In that case, let’s find a hotel for the night. I don’t think going back to the one where we had booked our rooms before is a good idea, even if the mercenaries we dealt with have moved on,” Garrus said, still looking a little annoyed at the fact that they were doing some corporate

spy's dirty work for her, but realizing that was a means to an end. "And hopefully that woman will have more information on Peak 15 for us tomorrow. I think our instincts are right that there's something going on there with the geth.

That, or maybe it's where they're testing on sentient beings. Either way, it definitely looks like a place we need to check out, Garrus mused, as the trio stood up.

OOOOOOO

The group had been able to find another hotel easily, and even had, strangely enough, been able to transfer the credits they'd already used in the first hotel to the second one. Evidently, so long as they didn't actually log into their rooms inside the hotel, they had yet to fully check in, and money could be exchanged from one hotel to another. Garrus found the reason out over breakfast at a nearby restaurant: nearly all of the hotels in Port Hanshan were owned by the same hospitality company. The company in question didn't care where you were sleeping, so long as they had your money.

During breakfast, the trio went over the information that their asari contact from the night before had given them making up a plan for how to approach the target, whose name was Rafael Vargas. His daily movements were easy enough to figure out, as was the proper place to meet with the mark in question. How to keep his attention was still being debated when Garrus left to scout out the promenade area, wanting to see how much traffic there was and how much clientele the second floors various bars got.

He came back when it was time for them to meet the asari only to find that Ranma had bowed out for a moment, heading back to their hotel room. Hearing this, Garrus blinked. "Did he forget something? I thought he had that ki pocket thing."

"He does, and no. We were wondering about how to keep Vargas's attention, and he sighed, then said that he would take one for the team." Tali shrugged her shoulders. "I've no idea what that meant."

"Well, let's go to the meeting place. Ranma knows where it is." Garrus gestured and the two of them moved off.

Soon after, their contact spotted them and moved towards where the young quarian and turian were sitting. This was another of one of the ubiquitous little sitting areas that dotted the first floor of the promenade, in this case in the main cavern of the promenade area set against one of the cavern's inner walls, facing towards the massive entryway connecting it to the outer bazaar area.

As she approached them, Tali couldn't stop herself from staring behind her faceplate. The asari woman had changed her outfit from the dark crimson and dark blue outfit she'd worn before to a lighter color, and she walked differently. Even her face looked different, sterner and

more aloof, rather than seductive and laid-back, as it had been the night before. Okay, I still don't like her but that's kind of impressive.

The woman was fiddling with her omni-tool even as she approached, and slid into a chair across from the pair, keeping her voice down to a bare whisper. At this point, the promenade was at the busiest either Garrus or Tali had seen it so far, with hundreds of people moving around the area, heading in every direction or stopping and chatting in place. Right now, being overheard was a distinct possibility. "I have the next segment of your payment."

Both Tali and Garrus' army tools blinked at the sound of an incoming message, and Tali quickly looked at hers, okaying the incoming message. A moment later, she clicked on a file that was probably around ten pages long going by the size, which was locked behind a password. Garrus did the same, albeit much slower. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to give us any hints about what's on here, would you?"

"No. Although, while I am not interested in what is going on in Peak 15, I will say there are several anomalies about it, even when compared to other so-called secret labs here on Noveria. I thought it was simply sour grapes from Synthetic Insights being outbid for it that made Peak 15 seems special, but there are a few small irregularities about how Binary Helix is running the place. If not for the fact that it had to do very obviously with livestock and computer technologies, I would be looking into this laboratory, but that is not my area of interest. Now, where is your other companion, and get close to your target without arousing suspicion?"

Garrus floundered for a moment, but a dulcet voice from behind him spoke up before he could answer. Across from him, Tali goggled inside her facemask, nearly recoiling in her seat. "There you two are. With so many people around, it's actually kind of hard to pick out you out of the crowd. Luckily, there aren't that many quarians around here."

The asari and Garrus both turned to stare where Tali was looking at and found Ranma standing there. Not in his male body though. For some reason, he had changed into his female form and besides had altered her looks. Garrus had seen Ranma and his female form before, and knew her hair was normally red. Now though, it was black, and instead of being tied up in Ranma's normal ponytail, it fell loosely down past her shoulders, as if she'd somehow found hair extensions somewhere.

Besides that, Ranma had actually applied a little bit of makeup, making her face seem a little sharper, a little more severe than it normally would. Garrus had seen Ranma in his female form before this a few times on Omega and would've thought of him, her, rather, as innocent and young looking, with a face that, despite how incredibly athletic Ranma was, still had a hint of baby fat to it. Now however, Garrus would be hard-pressed to guess Ranma's age.

Moreover, Ranma had even changed his (now her) outfit. Before, he had worn the regular coveralls and shirt of a spacer, now she wore a skintight version, which hugged her skin

far more than any suit a quarian would be willing to use in even the most dire of circumstances. Moreover, there was no armor on it, although she carried a pistol at her side. All in all, Ranma now reminded Garrus of a character he'd seen in a human movie once after joining up with John. *What did John call her, a femme fatale?*

"Oh..." he said aloud that memory sparking why Ranma was dressed like this, and why Ranma had told Tali (s)he would take one for the team. "The information you gave us on Rafael mentioned he was a fan of skintight clothing on women didn't it and liked to look a lot," Garrus went on, trying hard not to sound stunned.

"It's his only known vice, yes," the asari murmured, staring at Ranma who stalked around the small sitting area to the opening, sliding in to sit next to Tali. And it was **stalking**. The asari was a spy and knew full well how to change the way she walked and moved and could acknowledge a master when she saw one. "Where did you pick this one up? I don't have any data on you having a fourth member."

"I stayed in the ship last night, then switched out with Renzo this morning," the disguised Ranma said, smirking a little. "Someone needed to watch the ship, if only so we don't fall into bad habits while we're here. We all decided that I'd be better used on this mission than him. Name's Ranko."

"Looking at you, I can't disagree. When I receive the signal that the tracker on Rafael's omni-tool is going off, I will send you all the passwords to unlock that file. I wish you good luck on this and your future endeavors but don't try to find me. I will find you if I need you again while you're on planet."

With that, the woman walked away and was soon lost in the crowd.

For a moment, Tali and Garrus just stared at Ranma, who began to squirm a little under their attention. "Look, that file she gave us told us that Vargas is known to make ladies uncomfortable with the way he looks at them right? I figured, give him something to look at, okay? I don't like using this kind of thing, but I have been able to use my female form on more than a few occasions even in the middle of a fight. Doing the same thing to a middle-aged manager with looks like Rafael has, it'll be easy."

"I completely understand, it's just not the plan I thought you would go for," Garrus muttered, reaching up to touch one of his mandibles in amusement. "I figured you were more the type to want to start a brawl or something that coincidentally rolls over Rafael."

"I thought about it, but I figured that on a planet like this, barroom brawls weren't all that common and we didn't want to get on the bad side of the local security force. Not for something that's basically a side quest anyway."

Snickering at the way Ranma labeled this operation, Garrus stood up, shaking his head. "Of all the things for you and my species to have in common, who would've thought that role-playing games would've been one of them back when our races first met."

Turian role-playing games and, moreover, first-person shooters sold massively well among the human populace, while things like aerial combat simulators, virtual reality games and so forth sold equally well in the opposite direction. Garrus was fond of a series called Virtua-Doom, where you played the role of a human spaceman battling his way through an inordinately large horde of strange creatures. The overall plot had gone straight over his head, as turians didn't have anything equivalent to Hell in their religion still greatly enjoyed the number of different weapons and the overall nature of the game.

Tali followed, but her mind was certainly not on what Ranma had said, nor on interesting parallels between species. Or at least, not the same ones anyway. "Please, please tell me my suits not that tight!? I think I'd toss myself out an airlock."

Ranma shook his head, not looking at her, a faint flush appearing on her features that didn't match her current look at all. "Nope, you're suits nowhere near as tight. Um, not around most areas, anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Tali yelped, wondering if she should cover her chest or her rear or somewhere else. *Ugh, I know I can't do anything about it but still!*

Ranma didn't reply, but very pointedly wasn't looking in Tali's direction either, causing her to grumble a little. "I'll follow after you guys. If anything goes wrong here, having this new alter ego be seen as separate from the two of you is probably a good idea."

Moments later, the group ascended to the second story of the promenade, heading into one of the bars there, the prominent, if rather sadly named Mezzanine. The original bar of the promenade, it encompassed about a third of the second story of the promenade's main cavern, and was separated into different sitting areas, each of them color-coded in a way to indicate the status of individuals sitting there.

Garrus immediately noticed that one such individual was a turian like himself, dressed in a blue body suit, with the badge of Synthetic Insights on one shoulder. *Is that Lorik? Interesting.*

While Garrus was looking around the area, Ranma was surreptitiously checking out the target of this little side quest. *Damn, the pictures our contact gave us about him were seriously on point!*

The man Rafael Vargas, in Ranma's opinion, looked like a monkey. He had a kind of sloped face, a high forehead and slightly bigger-than-normal ears to go with a stubble that, for some reason, simply made him look more like a monkey. Maybe it had something to do with his thick lips? Ranma wasn't certain. *Beyond his looks though, the files told us this guy was a senior*

lab analyst for Binary Helix, whatever that meant. Judging by what else he's in charge of here on Noveria, that's a mix of scientist and gofer.

"Milla, get ready to send that program over. Garrick, take a seat somewhere and watch our back. I don't think you'll need to step in for this one," Ranma whispered as he passed them by.

"Wait, you're just going to walk up to him?" Garrus asked, keeping his own voice low.

"Not quite. I'm going to stand very close by and let Vargas watch me. After that, keeping his attention on me is going to be easy," Ranma said, trying to fight back the full-body shudder that had gone through him at that thought. *I know I'm the one that came up with this plan, and it made a lot of sense when I first came up with it, but now I am seriously having second thoughts!*

Regardless, Ranma wanted to get a move on with their little operation here in Noveria and this was a way forward. *The sooner we finish up here, the sooner me and Tali can head back to Mostromos and the ship, heh, and keep training to boot.*

With that idea uppermost in her mind, Ranma marched forward, only to pause and turn away when she realized that Rafael was sitting with someone already and having a conversation with him. This was a salarian, who looked a little grayer around the edges than any other salarian Ranma had seen so far.

"-- Note that the higher ups have given Doctor Fuaig his head, on whatever he wants to do it Peak 15. With all that the higher ups have allowed him to get away with, there is no way any kind of failure on his end can ever come back to haunt you or me, so why are you allowing it to bother you so much, Rafael?"

"There are too many strange things about how that hack is running things, that's why! Why did the higher ups authorize such a large kickback to Administrator Anoleis just for that one peak? Yes, it's isolated, but it isn't the only laboratory that's so isolated. Why that laboratory in particular and not either of the ones you and I have worked in over the past few years?" Rafael demanded, his voice deep and almost growling.

"Because of all of the equipment that came with it?" The salarian asked. He then smirked. "Come on, you just don't like Fuaig because he decided to go to a secondary company instead of in-house for their foodstuffs."

"That is weird and also highly unusual, and yes it does bother me! What are they doing there that they need so much protein and **real** protein rather than vat-grown protein? That stuff is immensely expensive, to say nothing of all of the special livestock-containment type equipment they've moved in. It makes no sense. To say nothing about their security being so automated and coming from a company I've never heard of before!"

Ranma's ears definitely twitched at those words but set it aside as the salarian shook his head. "You're being paranoid. Just keep your thoughts to your own labs. You've made a lot of inroads into selling foodstuffs the galaxy over, don't let something close to home bother you so much you forget your own accomplishments. If they can come up with something to sell besides our new rice products, that's all to the good. Yet it was your work has paved Binary Helix's path into that sector already."

Ranma froze at that, and instead of moving to stand nearby where Rafael could see her, she twisted around, almost glaring at the two men as she moved in their direction, listening intently. Neither man looked up though, intent on their own conversation as Rafael waved his hand airily. "I know that, and I know the rice myself and the other scientists came up with is selling across the galaxy even to asari, let alone humans and batarians, but I would say that being aware of issues closer to home is actually a good thing, rather than a problem. Especially since I'm trying to get out of the lab and make some real money."

By that point, Ranma had reached the table, and Tali had realized that the subtle plan was about to go out the window. "Oh, vot (shit), get ready for trouble," she whispered so to poach a two Garrus. "Ranko's about to throw out the script."

"Wait, why?"

"Let's just say that Ranko takes her food seriously, especially food from her home nation." Tali shrugged her shoulders with all the ignorance of someone whose meals had, since birth, come in tubes for fear of contamination.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" Ranma asked, standing beside the table where the two men were seated across from one another.

Both men looked up, at first annoyed at the interruption, and then staring at who had precisely interrupted them. The salarian recovered quickly, his brows furrowing in confusion, while Rafael smirked slightly, letting his eyes rove over Ranma's body.

"Could I repeat what, miss?" he asked, not wondering for a moment why someone would be interested in the conversation. It wasn't as if he and his companion had been sharing secrets or anything, but it was highly unusual for someone to interrupt someone else in conversation in the Mezzanine at all.

"You were saying something about food," Ranma said, leaning down towards the two sitting men.

This gave both the frog and the human a look at her cleavage, and the human stared before puffing himself up a little. The salarian in contrast just blinked. While many humans, krogan, batarians and even turians found asari attractive, only a rare salarian did the same, and the number of them that found humans attractive was much, much smaller.

“Oh, you want to know about the rice? Yes, I’m quite proud of it. It was myself and a team of our scientists who figured out a way to keep the flavor of rice good regardless of how long it’s been dried out or frozen.”

“Keep... the... taste... the same...?” Ranma muttered, and something in her words made the salarian slowly start to edge towards the entrance into the booth on the other side from where Ranma was sitting.

Ranma slowly nodded, as if she was in complete control, but when she smiled, it was the most manic and disturbed smile that either man had ever seen, causing both of them to flinch away. “Greetings. I am Japanese. You have dishonored the rice. Prepare to die.”

That caused Rafael to blink, before a little fist slammed into his face, hurling him across the way and almost over the safety railing to the first floor of the promenade below. Oddly, the blow itself didn’t do much damage despite that, but the shiner and the sudden feeling of weightlessness meant Rafael had no idea of what had just happened.

The other man leapt to his feet, but Ranma grabbed him by his shoulder, tossing him after Rafael before anyone else could try to interfere. “You have dishonored the rice! Prepare to die!”

With that, Ranma leapt up over the table, howling as she reached for them, beginning to shout imprecations in Japanese. This caused many of the watchers to reach for their omni-tools, either to call for security or to order them to translate the unusual language, which hadn’t been uploaded into any of their translation chips before this.

Tali used this to cover her own work. The program she had come up with to turn off the notification of incoming software hit first, and then she sent the package of programs the asari had given her over to Rafael’s omni-tool.

Garrus simply stared, watching as Ranma lifted up the man, shaking him like a ragdoll, before slamming him down onto the ground, fighting the urge to slam his own head against the nearest hard object in order to send himself into unconsciousness. “Ranma does know we’re supposed to be incognito right now, right? No short woman with Ranma’s apparent build should be able to lift up a grown man like that,” he hissed in a low tone.

“I don’t think Ranma particularly cares right now,” Tali said distractedly, typing away at her omni-tool as she continued the download. She glanced over to where Rafael had just landed and was pleased to see that his own omni-tool hadn’t reacted at all, the initial program having done its job. “Five minutes, Ranma just needs to keep their concentration on him for five minutes. Then the asari’s programs will be transferred, any log of that transfer deleted, and the program self-installed.”

"I still have a problem with this. The very idea of such malware is irritating. But..." With a sigh, Garrus got to his feet, moving over towards Ranma as Rafael shouted for help. "I don't know what caused this, but if you pay me, I'll help you get her away from you," He shouted.

"Y, yes, yes! Just get her off me!" Rafael shouted as he found himself lifted off the ground by Ranma's hands around her throat.

That, more than anything else, proved to Tali that Ranma was in fact still in control of her faculties despite her apparent anger. If she hadn't been, that first punch would've probably liquefied Rafael's skull, let alone the rest of her face. Instead, Ranma seemed intent on simply beating Rafael up rather than kill him. *Or maybe scaring him enough to have a heart attack? Tali wasn't certain.*

A few moments later, several Elanus Risk Control Services (ERCS) guards ran towards them. At the same time, Garrus finally succeeded in grabbing at Ranma's arm, pulling her away from Rafael. Garrus ducked under a wild swing from Ranma, the move telegraphed so much that Garrus began to understand the same thing that Tali had a second ago. *If Ranma was really trying here, he wouldn't have used a roundhouse punch like that let alone be telegraphing every move.*

"Got you!" Garrus quickly grabbed the offending arm, pulling Ranma into an arm bar, while Lorik and two other turians got to Ranma, trying to hold her still. One of them went down to a kick to the lower leg, but Lorik grabbed onto Ranma's other arm, and the two of them pulled the surprisingly strong Ranma away from Rafael.

"Security! Capture that woman! I mean to press charges!" Rafael shrieked, holding a badly bruised jaw.

At that, Ranma broke off, reaching Rafael again and grabbing him, twisting around and, ignoring the turian 'civilians' she tossed Rafael into the incoming squad of security personnel. "GRAAHHH!"

All five of them went down in a heap, on top of which Ranma landed a second later. She leaned down, grabbing Rafael by the face, shouting something again in Japanese, before leaping away. As she jumped off the side of the second story down to the first story, Ranma hurled a small smoke grenade down. It hit and filled this area with smoke and fog, causing many people around the entire promenade to stare.

So many eyes should've made it impossible for Ranma to escape the smoke. However, when the smoke cleared, not only had she made no effort to escape the smoke before it started clearing up, but there was no sign of Ranma either.

That startled even Garrus, who had not seen this trick on display before. "What the heck? Where'd she go?"

"I don't know, but I hope it was far away from here. While the human woman was pleasant on the eyes, her general attitude certainly wasn't. Whatever was she shouting? I didn't have my omni-tool activated," Lorik grumbled, shaking his head. "I also certainly have never seen her around here." He looked closely at Garrus, his eyes narrowing a little. "Nor have I seen you around before this."

"I have no idea where she came from, but my companions and I are mercenaries, here looking for a job," Garrus shrugged. "I helped the person she was attacking for money to, although frankly, I don't think I did enough to earn more than a few credits."

"Well at least you're honest about it." Lorik chuckled in the typical turian flange-clacking manner. "Mercenaries, that's interesting, although companions? I only saw you sitting down with the young looking quarian."

"Our other companion headed back to the hotel to go to the bathroom with a headache. Apparently he's got sensitive hearing, and the lights here buzz to his ears," Garrus answered glibly, still wondering internally how the hell Ranma had done that disappearing act. "Which is a pity considering how well he would've been able to help us deal with that crazy woman."

The security officers moved towards the two turians with one of them scowling as he looked at Lorik. "Lorik. I'd have thought someone already being investigated for corruption would steer clear of something like this. Or did you cause it for some reason?"

"I'm trying to think of a reason why I would cause a random woman to attack Vargas. Admittedly, Vargas works for Binary Helix, but I don't have a problem with them as much as your administrator," Lorik drawled, shaking his head. "I was just trying to be a good Samaritan and interrupt what I saw as the slow beating of a man who had done nothing to deserve it."

"He's right," Garrus said helpfully. "I was just about to sit down and order a drink when that woman approached those two men. She was shouting something about avenging the rice, whatever that means."

The sheer strangeness of that line caused both of the security officers who had been glaring at Lorik to blink, and also for several of the other people around them to speak up hurriedly, adding their own testimony to Garrus' words. Soon, the two were being inundated by people saying the same thing: that the woman had simply attacked, shouting out about something about the rice.

When Rafael was also questioned on that score, he shivered a little. "I, I don't know what she was shouting, but whatever it was that was terrifying! How could someone so short be so strong?!"

Garrus held his breath, but luckily, that phrase didn't seem to awaken any recognition in anyone listening, as one of the other witnesses, a human woman, snickered. "Hah, you've never

dealt with female fury then. It's a well-known fact that being angry gives us women superpowers."

That had everyone snickering or outright laughing, and many moved back to their chairs, staring at Rafael with thinly veiled contempt now. One of the watchers though held up her omni-tool, which flashed up several short sentences one after another. "I think that was quick enough to activate my omni-tool to catch most of what she was shouting. She was speaking in Japanese. It's a human dialect, which isn't used all that often by most spacers. In fact, they don't even teach it on colonies started by Japanese these days."

"Well, what was she shouting?" one of the security officers growled.

"She seemed to repeat what she had shouted previously us a few times, the whole 'you have dishonored the rice, prepare to die' thing, along with some things about rice not being glutinous, needing to be fluffy, and needing to have actual taste. I think the last thing she shouted about was how senior analyst Vargas needed to take responsibility and change the recipe of Binary Helix's rice-based dishes or else she'd be back."

That caused Rafael to whimper a little. While oddly, being hurled around it only given him a few bruises, being so easily manhandled like that had horrified and emasculated him. "I, I, will I will try I guess I..." he stammered, shivering a little.

His former companion moved over to him taking him by the elbow. "Come on, let's head back to the office. Putting a few locked and barred doors between where that woman could be and us seems like a good idea."

With no ID on the woman, and indeed, no idea how she had arrived on planet without going through security at any point, the ERCS officials were left with nothing to do but take statements and leave. This they began to do quickly, although one of the ones who had been glaring at Lorik made an 'I'm watching you motion' before moving off.

As they were leaving, Ranma finally made an appearance, back in his original disguise. He blinked, pulling his hand away from his forehead which he had been holding with one hand, staring at the armed guards as they passed them by, then around at the Mezzanine, where workers, both droids and sentients, had begun to clear away some of the wreckage. "What the hell? I go back for a little nap to deal with a headache and I miss some action? How is that fair?!"

Without any idea as to the curse, Ranma's appearance and comments drew nothing but cursory glances and a few chuckles from Garrus and Tali, who waved him over to where they were sitting. "Seriously, what did I miss?" Ranma asked, his eyes twinkling in a way that caused Tali to blush inside her helmet.

"I didn't know you are that good of an actor," Garrus murmured in a low tone.

“Yeah, well I have had to act the part a few times in various ways, although I’m thankful I didn’t really have to go through with the original plan. I take it the impromptu distraction I caused was good enough?”

“You can act so well, yet you can’t keep your face from showing your emotions when we’re playing games of chance? Has anyone told you that you’re a little weird Renzo?” Tali teased gently, nudging against him, feeling a pleasant heat go through her as he smiled at her, adding to her earlier blush. “And yes, it worked. In fact, our ‘employer’ should learn about that any moment now.”

A few moments later, as Ranma ordered a drink to match the ones that Tali and Garrus had already ordered, Tali and Garrus’ omni-tools beeped. A small email had been sent to them both, composed of a single word. They quickly use that word to unlock the previously sent data package, which turned out to mostly be made of profiles of individuals who were probably working at Peak 15, along with a few small notations about minor mysteries about the place.

There was also a note at the end, which read: “The supply train that services Peak 15 is only sent out once a month, and it isn’t anywhere close to the time where he would be going out now. If you want to go out there, you’ll have to go via one of the snow buggies, and I cannot help you with that, nor would I.”

“Well, it looks as if we were able to perform that little job well enough, if not in the way I had thought we would,” Garrus said, snorting a little. He looked over the data for a few moments, then shook his head. “Nothing there screams out that Binary Helix is working with the gift to me. They may still be performing some kind of experiments out there, but especially here on Noveria.”

“Well, maybe we are barking up the wrong leaf. Still, look at this message about the security features. It says here that they’re all fully automated, and apparently was done by an off world company. Have you ever heard of GI Armature Security Services? And oh my, I thought the Mezzanine name was too much on the dot,” Tali murmured.

“That almost sounds like something a robot would come up with,” Ranma agreed. A second later, he and Tali both blinked at one another, then shook their heads as one. “Okay, the geth wouldn’t be that foolish right?”

“Geth aren’t exactly known for their imagination. They’re programs.” Tali hummed thoughtfully. “So maybe?”

“Or maybe you two are grasping at straws. Still, I won’t deny that this Peak 15 has a few mysteries about it. It’s enough to keep me invested for now, but I’m not going to join any kind of fight or anything else against whatever is going on there unless you can prove that it’s breaking Citadel law. And even then, it won’t actually be illegal as it’s happening here on a corporate world,” Garrus grumbled shaking his head. “Ugh, I hate that.”

“How is it you had never heard the phrase bread-and-butter before, but knew about the grasping at straws thing?” Ranma asked, his brows furrowing in confusion. As Garrus chuckled, Ranma looked back over the information. “Go by train, there’s none scheduled, and going out there on an unscheduled train would be way too obvious. It says here that the peak is subject to horrendous snowstorms, which means flying out there would be rude to carelessly difficult to. It looks as if that note about needing a snow buggy is probably spot on.”

“Which we’d need a pass of some kind for. Depending on the time of day we could access the garage where they’re stored, but to actually take them out is a different story,” Garrus reminded them. One of the people who the first merchant he’d spoken to in the bazaar had mentioned as someone who was willing to pass on rumors was a worker down on that level.

Ranma nodded thoughtfully, and then looked over at Garrus, while around them, the last of the furniture was removed and replaced. “Do you think that Lorik guy we were told to see if we could find work from could get us a pass like that?”

“Only one foot way to find out,” Garrus said, mandibles shifting into a smirk as he stood up. He gestured Tali and Ranma to fall into line with him as he moved over towards the turian who had helped Garrus try to stop Ranma from attacking Rafael. “Excuse me, but I forgot to ask during the commotion before, are you Lorik? We’re three mercenaries who recently arrived, and we were told that you might have need of some muscle that isn’t connected to the local security force.”

Lorik looked up from where he had been about to pick up a third glass of wine, frowning thoughtfully as he looked over the trio. “You’re the newcomer I talked to for a moment earlier. Might I ask who precisely told you I might be in need of your services?”

Garrus told him the name of the merchant in the bazaar, and Lorik nodded slowly. “Yes, he’s always been a good contact to have around here.” He gazed at the trio then shrugged his shoulders. “I suppose that it wouldn’t hurt to explain things.”

From there, Lorik gave them the same overview that Garrus had gotten the day before from the merchant. That he was in a power struggle with the local Noveria Corp administrator and had been putting together a case against him of gross corruption. “Mind you on a corporate world like this, it isn’t so much that the administrator is corrupt, in that he took his own cut of the take without sharing any with his employers. That, and...certain materials that he took as part of his kickback would be enough to have him removed from his current office of the very least. Unfortunately, Anoleis caught wind of my investigation, and hit me with a countersuit, as it were. He accused me of many of the same crimes. He then abused his position to send in men to take over my office.”

“So what you want us to do exactly?” Ranma spoke up, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “I don’t think you’re the kind to send us against the administrator personally. You want to nail him with the evidence you’ve already collected, right?”

“Indeed. But to do that, I need access to my computer files. And unfortunately, my computer is hard locked against exterior access. After kicking me out of my office, the ERCS toughs that the administrator sent in have retained at least four of their members there at all times. I’ve tried to convince a few of the security officers to countermand the administrator’s orders, but it hasn’t worked. Which means to even start the ball rolling, which again I need my computer for, I need to go to an exterior source of, well, muscle. I’m not particularly happy with that, but it is what it is,” Lorik shrugged. “I would be willing to pay good money for it, as I know that attacking security personnel or even just trying to get past them might well put you on their radar.”

“It might, but I’m inclined to help anyway,” Garrus murmured. *If only because helping Lorik oust this corrupt administrator will help deal with the bad taste in my mouth working with that asari spy put there.* Aloud, he said, “Call it fellow feeling. We turians sometimes need to help one another out.”

“While money is all well and good, I prefer to get something else in return. Are you high enough placed in Synthetic Insights to allow us to have access to one of the snow buggies?” Ranma asked.

Lorik blinked, then shrugged his shoulders. “I am. Myself, the administrator, and my counterparts in the other corporations who keep a presence here in Port Hanshan are the only ones who could.”

Ranma wondered idly why there was so much security to just take something out onto the snow, but in the end, decided it really didn’t matter. *Not when this job sounds even easier than the other one we already did today.* “In that case, we’ll take that access as some of our payment. Say about half of whatever you are going to offer instead?”

Any more than that, and Lorik might get suspicious, Ranma reasoned.

“I was going to offer you three thousand credits each. So four-thousand five-hundred credits in total?” Lorik asked.

The three exchanged a look, then nodded, with Tali going on to inquire, “Do you want us to simply take your computers from your office and return them to you here or someplace else? On the other hand, do you want us to log into your computers with your login information and copy it? Is there a way to turn off the anti-remote access defense?”

“The entire computer system is actually made so it cannot be remotely accessed, it isn’t a program or a Faraday Cage set up in the office around the computer. If you could remove the

entire computer that will be best. If you try to start copying to an external hard drive, you will cause the system to freeze and then start deleting itself,” Lorik explained. “I set that up the moment I started to investigate Administrator Anoleis. It’s partly why I know my system hasn’t actually been destroyed. I’m simply no longer able to get into the office to access it. You’ll have to take the entire computer.”

Instead of asking how much it weighed or anything similar, Ranma something nodded. “Where can we find your office?”

Lorik gave the trio a set of instructions, and with a handshake between the two turians, the three so-called mercenaries push themselves to their feet. Moments later, they were leaving the main promenade behind, entering a series of still somewhat large hallways dug out of the stone of the mountain, heading downward. “So how are we going to play this, just run in and take out the local security guards, or what?”

“Do you still have the program running where you can tell if there are any cameras around?” Ranma asked.

Tali nodded. “I’ve kept that running in the background on my omni-tool since Garrus first reminded me about us being observed when we were following that Cerberus spy.”

“In that case, make sure that there aren’t any around the office, and I can sneak in and do the rest. You both saw how I disappeared back then, right? When I dropped the smoke bomb?”

“I was wondering about that. Interesting skill, and one I am not going to share with anyone else after we split apart, Ranma. You’re already far scarier than any normal person should be, the Citadel Council really doesn’t need to know that you can turn invisible at need. Even the best infiltrators can’t do that with so many eyes searching for them,” Garrus said, his mandibles clicking together almost spasmodically in a nervous gesture.

“Heh. Well, it isn’t a trick I bring out all that often, but yeah, that’s what I’m going to do here.”

Moments later, the trio came to a side hallway that led to a series of offices. Most of those officers were quite large, and fronted not only by doorways, but also by windows. Looking around the corner, Ranma, Garrus and Tali could see five security guards lounging around the office that they were heading towards. Garrus and Tali backed away while Ranma disappeared between one second and the next, pulling the Umi-Sen-Ken around himself.

However, even the Umi-Sen-Ken didn’t cover the door to the office opening. By the time it finished sliding open, Ranma was already rolling forward, just in case someone inside was feeling trigger-happy.

The six mercenaries inside all glanced up, one of them actually reaching for a gun, before pausing as they noticed that there was no one in the doorway. "What the hell?"

"An infiltrator maybe with the latest in stealth tech? But even then, you'd still have to see some kind of shimmer, right?"

"Maybe not. Someone close the door. The rest of you spread out to the corners, if there is someone in here, he'll eventually have to move. Wherever they go, we'll have them in a crossfire."

"Just make sure you aim your fire, don't spray it," one of the other mercenaries grumbled, even as he, the closest to the door, stood up. He moved over to the door, and closed it with a hand on the controls, locking it a second later.

The second he did, Ranma came out of cloak along one of the inner corners of the office by one of the other toughs. A punch slammed into that man, a salarian with enough force to knock him completely out and send his body hurtling towards the human who was manning the corner directly opposite. He also went down in a heap and squawk. "Gah, the fuck!?"

Ranma leaped across the intervening distance, bouncing up off of the ceiling, as two of the other mercenaries opened fire. Landing next to one of them, an elbow blow caught that man in the side of the temple, sending him unconscious to the floor, before Ranma grabbed his gun and hurled it against the man near the doorway. The turian couldn't dodge and the gun smacked into his face, hammering his head back into the outer wall of the office, before Ranma was in the face of the last man who was still on his feet. The man fired but Ranma ducked low, and a hit to the knee sent the man to one knee on the ground, before a punch to the head knocked him unconscious to join the others.

Looking around, Ranma walked over to the human who had been knocked over by the body of the salarian and a quick and very light heel stomp knocked him out as well.

With that it was done, all six were unconscious, and the small office didn't look all that much the worse for wear, although there were a few marks on the ceiling and walls, including the outer wall where the glass was. *Ha, so the glass is actually bulletproof. Good, that will mean less of a mess for other people to notice until it's too late.*

Quickly, Ranma moved around to the security officers, tying them all together and then to the leg of the sofa set across from the desk. With that, and destroying their weapons, Ranma felt that these idiots weren't going to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Removing the computer was similarly easy. It was a simple laptop set up in Ranma's opinion, although in this universe, it probably was a high-end computer of some kind. He picked it up, settling it under one arm, before heading to the door. Stepping out, he ducked back in to hit the lock mechanism, then was on his way.

Not ten minutes after he left his two companions, Ranma was walking back up to them, a smirk on his face. "See, easy."

Garrus slowly shook his head with a chuckle, while Tali just giggled. Moments later, the group was heading back up in the Mezzanine, where Lorik waited. He gaped at them, and then looked down at his omni-tool's chronometer, before shaking his head slowly. "If you three need any more jobs while you're on Noveria, look me up. You very clearly are far more capable than you appear to be. For now however, here is the pass to use the snow buggy."

Once more, Tali's omni-tool lit up, as did Garrus' and Ranma's, and a password was sent over to them, complete with an image. "Show that to the individuals down at the garage, and they'll let you access the snow buggies. The code will allow you to access the exterior doors to take one out."

With that, Lorik smirked, picked up his computer from Ranma and moved off. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a corrupt administrator to deal with."

The walk down through the various levels of Port Hanshan to where the snow buggies were kept on the bottommost floor was a quick one. There, Ranma gaped for a moment, staring. The snow buggies were not small Jeep-like cars as Ranma had thought they would be. Instead, they looked almost like SUVs coupled with monster trucks. They stood at least two stories tall, mainly because of their frankly huge tires, each of which was at least seventeen feet tall. Above them was the climate controlled and completely airtight buggy itself.

Garrus grinned just looking at them, his mandibles flashing widely across his face as he did. "That looks like a great deal of fun."

"I'm glad you think so 'cause I can't drive." Ranma snorted. "Tali?"

"I've never driven something with wheels no," Tali answered, shaking her head.

That just made Garrus' excitement even greater, and after a few moments talking to the garage personnel, they were assigned one of the snow buggies. Moments later, the unlikely trio was heading out into the snow beyond, the massive outer doorway shutting behind them.

OOOOOOO

When the hangar bay doors opened to allow the massive snow buggy out onto the snow, a hidden program activated.

It was not in fact a normal program. It was a geth. The geth were not sentient machines as many a human science fiction novel coined the term. Rather, they were program, system runtimes that, when enough were piled on one another, had achieved a kind of sentience. This

program was a simple, solitary geth set into the workings of Port Hanshan set to note if anything unusual was going on in terms of transportation.

Considering the network of trains heading out to the majority of the different laboratories scattered across the globe, and the fact that for those few that didn't have access to trains there were scheduled airdrops, the unscheduled opening of the hanger door and a snow buggy leaving Port Hanshan constituted an anomaly. The program sent off a warning, then went quiescent once more, its job done.

OOOOOOO

Ranma had seen snow before. He had spent time on Hokkaido, where creating things out of snow was a national pastime, and on the Mongolian steppes, where snow typically blanketed the ground for months in winter. Yet, Ranma had never seen as much snow as he did now as the snow buggy trundled along in real life before. Everywhere he looked, there was ice, snow and mountains. The snow buggy's massive wheels crunched along at a decent clip, the sheer size of the wheels allowing them to drive over terrain features that even Ranma would probably have felt was a bit too much, even if he could deal with the cold.

Port Hanshan was sent into one mountain in the center of the mountain range, whereas Peak 15 was set almost at the far end of that mountain range. The snow buggy's virtual intelligence thus had Garrus drive out of the mountain range, then follow along at its roots. With warning beeps, it helped them to avoid large crevices in the ice beneath, strange shifting snowdrifts large enough to bury cargo ships, and numerous other dangers that its dedicated system detected before Garrus ever could.

None of the dangers the VI warned them of came from an animal. It was simply too damn cold out there even for creatures specialized in cold weather conditions to live.

Rama found this in a rather startling fashion as he mentioned Antarctica idly to Garrus and Tali while Tali and Ranma staring out one of the viewport stepped into the side of the snow buggy. "It's the only place I can think of that looks anywhere near like this on Earth. And that's only a seriously small portion of our planet. I think it's the coldest place too, but it's certainly among the most inhospitable. I've seen pictures that look a lot like this place, only way less mountainous." He laughed then. "Although I doubt we'll be seeing any penguins around here."

"What are penguins?" Tali asked.

Ranma pulled up an image of them, and Tali blinked at the strange looking, well, she wasn't certain what they were. "Those are not merely aerodynamic enough to fly, do they swim? But if they swim, shouldn't they have scales? Like fish? Also, why do they look as if someone has come around and put one of those human-type pricy suits, a texado or something on them?"

“Tuxedo, and not everything that swims is a fish. Penguins are technically avians, although I can’t remember if they can fly or not,” Ranma’s voice trailed off as he tried to remember but shrugged his shoulders. “Anyway, they can swim really well and are one of the species that has specifically evolved to live in really cold places. There’s a few others, seals, a kind of dog called an Eskimo dog? They were named after people who lived in a cold place, although not like Antarctica. Oh, and polar bears. You know what a bear is, I’ve described them before when talkin’ about my Pops’ curse. Just think of one that’s all white and bigger.”

As Tali quickly looked through her omni-tool for pictures of the animals Rama had listed, Garrus shook his head. “Well, if you remember from the brief, Noveria doesn’t have any animals except in small pockets down by the equator. And even then, very rarely, with most animals coming in the form of scavengers. Although, I seem to recall an article stating that some of your human corporations had brought in animals. I think the humans were trying to populate the planet with them, see if they could survive. It never took. The environment here is even deadlier than your Antarctica apparently.”

“Wait, what? They just randomly grabbed animals and tried to bring them here? Then let them out and watched as they died?” Ranma exclaimed. *Fuck me, and I thought Herb was ruthless when he got going. I’m glad I never had to do with mad scientists or whatever back in my old dimension. Just idiotic rivals and my ass of a father.*

“That is one of numerous experiments that has happened on Noveria since it was colonized that would be highly frowned upon elsewhere,” Garrus answered drolly, twisting the controls as the course on the map set into a portion of the console in front of the driver turned left. Soon, they entered a valley, which would eventually take them to Peak 15, although apparently it would take them several hours.

He pointed this out to the others, and Tali shrugged, her omni-tool’s screen flaring into life as she looked over at Ranma. “Don’t suppose you’d be wanting to play a computer game to pass the time?”

Shrugging, Ranma agreed, although after Tali destroyed him in three first-person shooter games after another, he’d lost interest, and decided to sleep. Several hours later, after Tali had taken on some food via her horrible sounding emergency induction port thing and Garrus had eaten a sandwich, Ranma’s nap was interrupted, however, by all three of their omni-tools beeping the notification of an incoming message. With Garrus busy at the controls and Tali now playing some kind of puzzle game, Ranma read the message aloud for the others.

“It’s from Lorik. ‘I have moved against Anoleis and, with help from some of the Noveria Corporation’s Internal Revenue Service, removed him from his position. I cannot thank you enough for your help. Because of this, when something new came over my new desk as Administrator, I decided to pass it on to you immediately. Apparently, there is some kind of connection between a Spectre and Peak 15. He has access to and is connected to some of the experiments that are going on there, specifically experiments on something that he brought to

Noveria. The administrator didn't know anything else, nor did he have anything in his files about what it was, but I wished to warn you of the fact that you might be dealing with Citadel business out there."

If he could have turned away from the controls of the snow buggy, Garrus would be glaring at Ranma and Tali right now. "You told me we were here to hunt down the geth. Not to get your vengeance for being captured, Ranma. If we are here so you can punch Tela Vasir into the afterlife, I am going to turn this thing around and you can find someone else to do your driving and occasional shooting for you."

Ranma and Tali exchanged glances, and Ranma decided to speak up. If this came from Tali, Garrus would probably accuse them both of being paranoid, considering the whole quarian/geth thing but from Ranma, Garrus might believe it. "Actually, we've had some evidence that one of the Spectres, and not the one that captured me, is involved with the geth somehow. The data core we took from one of the geth had a memory of a Spectre giving other geth orders. That, and something about an Ancient Machine. We didn't mention it at first, because we have so little evidence almost be obligated to argue against it because of how much the Spectres are respected among you counsel Citadel types."

Ranma reached over and put a hand on Garrus' shoulder, squeezing briefly. It was about as close as he could get to a sincere look at the moment given how Garrus couldn't look away from the controls. "And you especially would probably object considering that the Spectre in question is Saren, a fellow turian."

Garrus blinked at that, his mandibles opening in consternation for second. "Saren! He's not just a fellow turian. He's one of the best-known Spectres, one of the most effective and long-serving Spectres alive! And you say he might be working with the geth? That's insane!"

"I'm not saying he is, I'm saying the geth memory bank we recovered had a recording of him," Ranma cautioned. "He was saying something about a Sacred Machine, and the geth working with a company here on Noveria. I... I will say that Matriarch Benezia also had some severe concerns about Saren and his loyalty to the Council."

"I... I'll need to see this recording and a whole lot more besides to believe someone like Saren is working with the geth. I don't like the Spectre program much, and maybe if you had said he was working with some anti-human faction I'd believe it. It's well-known Saren hates humanity. But working with the geth is something else entirely. That's working with a clear enemy of the Citadel Races, and AI at that."

Garrus' continued to grumble for a time, before sighing. "We've come about halfway as it is. I will continue to drive us to Peak 15, but if there's no evidence of geth there, I'm not going to let you just barrel in and cause trouble whatever kind of experiments they're running for this mysterious Spectre."

Ranma took umbrage at this and was about to reply with how he didn't need Garrus' help to break in once they reached the labs, but Tali got her response out before Ranma could. "That's fine. We understand and respect your choices. Although personally I think there isn't much debate that someone is working with the geth on this side of the Perseus Veil. This person might just have taken Saren's identity, but the recording is kind of conclusive about there being something odd going on here."

Garrus shrugged his shoulders, not quite dismissive, but certainly defensive. "I suppose we'll see when we get there."

About two hours later, Garrus learned two important things. One, he would not need to wait until they arrived at Peak 15 to discover that the geth were on Noveria. And two, that he really should stop tempting fate.

The snow buggy began to go uphill once more, heading towards the far end of the valley, the end of which they still couldn't see, including the Peak 15 laboratory that would be there, there was a loud thrumming noise in the distance, followed by something slamming into the snow buggy.

Tali cried out, as she was nearly flung out of her seat despite the safety restraints, Garrus slammed his head into the controls. Having been eating, Ranma chomped down on his sandwich, holding it with his jaw as he gripped his chair so hard his fingers left in dents as the snow buggy was flung backwards and to the side with such force that one of the tires exploded.

The next second, the snow buggy was rolling on its side. This continued for a while as Tali and Garrus cursed. "What the hell hit us?!"

"Artillery of some kind, this snow buggy doesn't have any kind of defenses, damn it! No sensors I can use to pick out enemies either."

"Doesn't matter. Everybody out of the buggy!" Ranma mouthed around his sandwich. Finishing it off in two bites, he lifted a fist, melting a circle into the already warped side of the snow buggy. Two more shots landed in the snow all around them, showing that whatever the attacker was, it was having trouble at this range thanks to the weather, which had turned into a snowstorm in the time since they had entered the valley.

This allowed Ranma to finish opening up a makeshift hole in the side of the buggy, which Garrus and Ranma dropped through a second later. Tali followed them, her drone latched to her back.

"Let me guess, that thing can handle the wind around here?" Garrus said as he landed in the snow. "Also, we should switch to our comms, this wind's going to make it impossible to talk to one another further away than a yard."

Luckily, around here most of the snow had hardened, so Garrus' heavy feet didn't sink in past his knees. That was enough to make him uncomfortable given the nature of a turian's legs, but he was able to move at least.

A second later he gaped as Ranma somehow spread his weight around enough that his feet only sank in a little bit when he landed. *How does Ranma do that?! That and the heat trick are almost stranger than how tough he is generally.* The snow gave way a little second later as Tali followed them, and Ranma caught her, but it was still impressive.

"Yeah," Tali grumbled. "Does that at all surprise you? I've never had to deal with weather at all before this, let alone whatever this is, so why would Chatika be rated for such?"

"White out conditions along with incoming artillery rounds, just great," Ranma grumbled, before his eyes widened. Warned by the movement of the air in front of the incoming round, he dove forward with Tali still in his arms. Splashing down into a bit of somewhat softer snow behind a larger snowdrift, this saved the pair, and Garrus who had followed him, when a blast from whatever long-range gun was attacking them hit home at last in the snow buggy.

The buggy exploded, sending shrapnel every which way, causing Ranma to grunt as one of them slammed into his armored side and the other into his shoulder. The one that hit his shoulder impacted with enough momentum to actually hurt but not enough to penetrate his skin. Similarly, Garrus was thankful for his turian exoskeleton as he too got pummeled a little bit by the shrapnel.

Thankfully for Tali, Ranma's body shielded her from the majority of the shrapnel coming their way as he twisted them around to place his back between Tali and where the snow buggy had been a second ago. One of them nicked her lower leg, but thankfully it didn't tear her suit, but another other bit of shrapnel tore through Chatika vas Paus turning her little drone into so much wreckage. "ACK, no, Chiki!"

Out of the snow and white out conditions all around them, a light appeared from further away up the valley, its light barely visible in the falling snow. This was followed by a loud crunching noise, as if something heavy was moving in the distance, loud enough to be heard over the snowstorm all around them, the sound reverberating around the valley.

"Okay Tali, as our resident geth expert, and yes, this is me admitting this is probably some kind of geth, what exactly are we dealing with here?" Garrus asked, grunting a little in pain as he pulled his rifle off of his back. The next second, he and Ranma both pulled up their headsets.

"I, I don't know." Tali's eyes shifted sideways in her helmet to look almost over her shoulder where her droid had taken a hit that would probably have punctured straight through

her suit. She gathered herself quickly though, shaking her head and indicating the Ranma could set her down.

Getting her feet under her in the snow was a little weird, and the crunch of it underneath her clawed feet was extremely unusual and not all that pleasant, but she stood on her own after a few seconds as still more rounds hammered the area around the burning wreckage. "I think maybe a Colossus? Long-range artillery, a mobile fortress. It's got heavy shields, machine guns to go with its artillery, and is one of the largest land-based geth."

"Garrus, see if you can climb that cliff over there." Ranma pointed to the right where a large outcropping of rock grew up out of the snow, as yet unburied higher up the side of the valley. "I'd wager anything that it's not just a single colossus." *No military in the world would just stick a large artillery unit out here with nothing to back it up.*

"Hunters and troopers for certain," Tali agreed, her omni-tool lighting up for a moment although the young woman had taken the efforts to hide the glow from the direction the colossus was firing from, shifting to follow Garrus up toward the side of the valley. "I'm getting readings from at least seven other things moving out here that are quarian sized, maybe as many as twelve since my scanner doesn't have as much range as the guns on that thing. That won't count toward the hunters, though. They've got heatsinks that will beat my scanners."

"Then get your shotgun ready," Ranma ordered, before charging towards the light in the distance. Even over snow and broken winter terrain like this, Ranma was able to move far faster than Garrus or Tali would have been able to on level ground, and he closed with the colossus even as it fired again at his previous position.

By that point, even Tali had put some distance between where she had been a moment ago. As Garrus raced past her, Tali rounded a large snow mound, and came face-to-face with another geth unit, a regular geth trooper. Before it could raise its gun, Tali fired from the hip, her reflexes having been honed by numerous training exercises with Ranma to a degree that she would've thought impossible before running into him. The large caliber mass effect round slammed into the creature's upper chest and head, disintegrating its head, the body falling sideways into the snow in a welter of sparks and twisted metal.

A second later, she was ducking down into the snow herself, rapidly working on her omni-tool for second. "Need to get a stealth coating for my suit," she muttered, feeling the first bite of cold through the suit the second later. "Okay, and yes, wind and cold snow is different than dealing with the cold of space!"

The next second bullets smashed into the snow all around her, smashing the small heating unit that her omni-tool had just created out of her hand and cracking into the side of her helmet with enough force to rattle her. "**BOSH'TET!** I don't have that many nanite tubes on me, you ax'kahs (assholes)!"

While Tali was having her own personal issues for a second, Garrus, whose uniform contained a few heating devices around his chest area that was all he needed thanks to his carapace, spotted another geth trooper. This one was moving with what Garrus thought at first were a few drones around it, similar to Tali's, with lights marking its path. But when he fired at the one geth trooper he saw, his sniper shot going straight through its chest, those drones proved to be stealthy geth hunters. Their stealth failed as the snow thrown up by the body of their trooper hit their legs, and a moment later, they were racing towards his position, trying to get in range of their own guns.

However, the colossus had not done the smaller geth units a favor by opening fire at the range it had. Garrus' rifle, a Krysaer Sniper Rifle augmented with a longer barrel and a semi-automatic mode, let him shoot to almost 2000 yards away in good weather. In this kind of weather, it was about half that, but importantly, that was at least half again for the range of guns that these geth units seemed armed with. Two more of them went down, as Garrus grinned cheerily to himself before rolling off of his former hide just as the geth colossus fired in his direction, destroying the stone where he been a second before.

Diving into the snow and burying himself a bit even shielded him from the bits of rock and rubble. "Got to love how cold it is out here! I can fire my gun way faster here than I could in a normal environment!" As he fired and moved, Garrus hit four more hunters and troopers, forcing three into cover and killing one of them outright.

By this point, Ranma had reached the colossus or at least had entered the range of its machine guns. The machine guns flung out a significant amount of lead, forcing Ranma to dodge backwards, then he ducked underneath still more fire, while the main gun tried to target where Garrus was, failing a second later. Racing forward, Ranma allowed one of the machine guns to hammer him with more than a dozen bullets hitting his chest plate.

The armor, which was the chest plate he had spent time creating an Omega, not his full suit, held. Before the colossus, which looked almost like some kind of sauropod to Ranma's eyes, could realize that it should be aiming for his head rather than center of mass, Ranma had closed the intervening distance, and his fist flashed out, only to bounce off an energy shield that shimmered about a foot away from the colossus's form.

The colossus stood at least twenty feet tall at the withers on four large feet, which dug into the snow without apparent effort. Two machine guns stuck out from its forward most shoulders, while its head, which sat on a neck like a brontosaurus, swiveled this way and that, a light fixture like most of the geth seemed to have set center most of the head. Behind the head was a large artillery cannon, which seemed able to fire in the direction the geth was looking, or un-aimed over its head.

"Well, Tali was right, it's got shields," Ranma grumbled, as he dodged fire, which now was aiming for his head. He slammed his fist several times and the shielding, feeling the energy rebound from his fist, launching each blow faster and stronger. Soon he had the colossus

entirely turned around, facing away from the direction of his two companions, as still more geth appeared around him even as Ranma grunted a time or two and the pain.

One blow in particular took him in the side of the head, causing him to stumble, and go to one knee. Ranma moved with the motion, his ki healing already kicking in as he rolled forward, and then leapt not towards the colossus this time, but towards one of the troopers. A blast of heated ki crashed into the colossus's energy shield at the same time, but the shield seemed to deal with it even more easily than the solid matter hits of Ranma's fists.

The next second Ranma charged bodily into the geth hunter ahead of him. Smashing it into the ground, Ranma tore its arm off, hurling it towards another geth nearby. That one was sent flying by the impact, slamming back into the shield of the colossus, which sputtered into being for several seconds before the body fell away from the point of contact.

Ranma blinked, then grinned. "Hah, idea!" With that, he leaped forwards, taking several more shots, which caused him to grunt in pain but his healing was more than up to the task of keeping him moving even as one shot took him in the side of the elbow. Machine gun blasts from the colossus tried to follow him, but he was too quick, racing around the creature, causing it and the geth to fire more at each other and the colossus then at Ranma.

As one of them fell though, Ranma picked up the body of the trooper in question and hurled it towards the colossus. Two more slammed into its shielding, before the shielding popped out of existence, and Ranma quickly twisted around, launching himself towards the sauropod like a rocket. It tried to get up one of its forearms up to block him, but Rama twisted in midair, grabbing at the arm. His feet impacted its chest a second later, and with a wrenching roar, Ranma tore its arm clean off.

For the first time in the fight, one of the geth units emitted a noise. In this case, a squeal of electronic pain that rang out loud across the battlefield. This was quickly silenced as Ranma's impromptu club slammed into the colossus's head, shattering its light and at least half of its head in one blow sending the colossus collapsing onto its side.

Several of the nearby troopers were able to fire on Ranma at that point, but he still ignored the incoming fire, bringing his makeshift weapon down again and again on the colossus's head until it was so much paste.

Meanwhile, Garrus had pretty much cleared up the troopers that had been forward of the colossus, and now, Tali, who had only taken out two of them beyond the first one she ran into, came into range of her shotgun to several of the geth that Ranma had been fighting. Two of them went down, followed by a third as it twisted around to try to take her under fire in turn.

She held her ground for a second, her left her shotgun shells catching the creature in the side, then dove into cover before its return fire could find her. "I need one of their heads intact! Bring me one of their heads!"

"You know, even if we are fighting unfeeling, uncaring robotic constructs, that still strikes me as a little bloodthirsty," Garrus murmured, as he moved forward. With the snow and wind, even his rifle couldn't have ranged on where Ranma and the colossus had been fighting it out. "Not that I'm complaining, it was just an observation."

Moments later, the last of the geth went down. And yes, Ranma had refrained from doing any damage to its head. Instead, his fist, ignited to the point where it could melt metal like an acetylene torch, had stabbed into the geth like his fingers had become claws. A second later he had simply torn his hand back out, and the geth fell, the light in its flashlight going out.

"Heh, I now completely understand why the geth are all called flashlight heads. Do they all have that same head across the board?"

"They do," Tali said, before she began shivering as she came down from her adrenaline high. "Oh, ugh. W, who knew that my suit wasn't so good at keeping touch-based cold out! And I could only make one extra heater for my suit, and the bosh'tet destroyed it."

"Er, I can help if you want?" Ranma offered, holding out a hand. It no longer blazed like the sun but was still giving off plumes of heat that made that covering from his breath seem small.

"Oh, yes please," Tali stuttered, gesturing to her shoulders with one hand. "J, just act like you're giving me a massage."

Shrugging, Ranma nodded and rested his hands on Tali's shoulders. Instantly, the nice soothing heat from his hands began to seep into Tali's suit, drying it off and warming Tali.

"OOooo keelah se'lai, that feels even better than your massages," Tali nearly moaned. Her knees gave out a little bit, and Tali fell back into Ranma, causing him to blink and his hands to fall off her shoulders. Feeling both daring and desperate for some more heat, Tali took his hands, and wrapped Ranma's arms around her waist. *I might not be able to actually feel skin on skin contact, but this is still nice! And the heat is really welcome!* "Could, could I ask you to just keep your arms there like this for a bit, while I look at the information on this head?"

Blushing, Ranma nodded, and kept his arms where they were, a faint flush starting to suffuse his features. *Um... this, this is really nice... I mean, I kind of knew cuddling was nice already, but when Usagi did it, I always felt a little concerned she'd try for something more or was uncomfortable because of the timing. But with it just being me and Tali, yeah, I, I like this...*

As Tali worked, she continued to speak, not about what she was working on, but simply the wonder of snow, her words stumbling over one another in reaction from once more fighting her people's boogeyman. "I mean I thought it was beautiful when we were in the snow buggy, and I still do in a way. The snowfall is like the dust particles you see if you land on an asteroid or atmosphere-less moon. I saw at one point I left an image of myself behind in the snow, how fun

is that? It was destroyed by a few of the geth a second later, but still. I could do without it being so cold, though.”

Tali waved her free hand to the left, where the distant wall of the other side of the valley could be barely seen. “Yet even here, in what Garrus called a valley you could fit two of the Migrant Fleet’s largest ships side to side! And this is a valley! I don’t think I really understood the difference between being on a space station and being on a planet. There’s so much sky, so much space! I’ve only ever gotten this feeling of vastness when I’m doing EVA work, and this isn’t so overwhelming. It, it feels natural, almost, like the horizon is the right shape or something? Although here, again, could do without the cold,”

Even if it is a great excuse to have from his arms around me. No! Bad Tali! Keelah, you can’t think of him like that dammit! He’s just a human, a friendly human, who’s, who’s doing you a favor right now with body heat...

That thought did not stay in Tali’s mind for very long, but it certainly stayed there long enough for her body heat to go up a little bit more. Thankfully, Ranma didn’t seem to notice and simply laughed. “And this is just the first planet of many you’ll see with me, and eventually Herb and the rest of our crew, I suppose. Remember, this is just a sort of side trip. An important one maybe, but still a side trip. There’s so much more to show you, hell, me too, considering how many planets there are out there. You’ve now seen snow, but what about an ocean, or river, or a forest?”

“Well... I suppose I can only say I look forward to the journey then.” Tali chuckled before she shook herself, and bent all of her mind to work again.

Get snow to one side of them, his movements a little bit harder now as more snow came down, softer snow, hearted for and all of them to move in. He looked at the pair, one eyebrow rising behind his sniper’s visor. “Am I interrupting something?”

“One of my heating units got hit by shrapnel,” Tali said, not even looking up at him although her face burned with embarrassment inside her helmet. “Ranma’s just keeping me warm. That’s all.”

“Ah, is that what they call it these days?” Garrus mumbled, torn between wanting to make fun of them, and starting to genuinely feel sorry for the pair. It was very obvious even to Garrus, who was in no way an expert on romance, that the two of them were building serious feelings for one another. But he also knew there could be literally nothing between them. *Not just because they are different species, but because of the quarian’s immune-deficiency syndrome. Even if quarians and humans are compatible, they still couldn’t even hold hands.*

“Okay! I’ve got a full comprehensive list of the exterior defenses of this Peak 15 place. Apparently, the geth believe in compartmentalization, so I don’t have anything on the interior layout or any defenses inside, although I have to admit the exterior is impressive. Whoever built

this lab was an amazing architect. They've got three other colossi, eighty troopers, and twenty hunters, along with one Prime assigned to exterior defenses, along with geth turrets. Those and the colossi are stationed directly at the laboratory itself."

"Which is what, another four miles or so through this nonsense," Garrus grunted, pulling up a map of the area. "And all three of us on foot to boot. This will be unpleasant."

"Well, it's not going to get any closer complaining, sniper boy." With that, Ranma lifted a suddenly squeaking Tali off of her feet. Setting her on one shoulder, she moved over to Garrus, who began to protest vocally, before he found himself being carried under one arm. "I bet I can make better time like this than either of you two could make on your own 2 feet so..."

With that, Ranma began to run, as Garrus began to protest. "This is both undignified, and immensely irritating! I'm not talking about being carried like this at all, rather, being treated like I'm some piece of luggage to be carried around, while Tali is getting a child's ringside seat! This is the rank favoritism dammit!"

OOOOOOO

If anyone who had known him, even as short a time ago as a year, looked at Saren now, they would have been incredibly concerned. Saren's eyes were sunken in his face yet seemed to glow blue. His exoskeleton seemed to have become almost skeletal in some fashion that a non-turian would be unable to understand. The armor over his face seemed only barely able to move, his expression continually dead, almost entirely without emotion.

A similar look was prevalent on the faces of the scientists around himself and the man he was talking to, regardless of species. Several had glowing blue eyes, with the salarians showing more of the blue than the few other turians, humans or asari. None had as jaundiced a look as Garrus, but it was still there. It was as if they had all been afflicted by something, but Saren was easily the furthest along.

"I am not asking for immediate results, here, Doctor Fuaig. That Rachni Queen has information I need. It doesn't matter how long it will take to thaw her out without damaging her brain, or how long you will need to hide it from your higher ups. I will help there is much as I can but that information takes precedence over everything."

"W, we're already getting a lot of push back about how much money this installation has soaked up. Admittedly, it's only been four months since we took control of Peak 15, but still. A few months down the line when we're making real progress in thawing that creature out, we won't be able to move it. But I estimate that we only have another month before one of Binary Helix's upper management sends someone to physically investigate. Vargas and other senior analysts are already making noises about my autonomy."

“Leave that to me. If I can’t simply hide the real books underneath a wall of fake data, I have other means of making certain that you aren’t bothered by the rest of Binary Helix. I’ll admit that the information I just got about administrator Anoleis being replaced is somewhat annoying, but I’m certain that we can come to some agreement with the newcomer.” Saren’s mandibles twitched in what even the most charitable would call more of a rictus than a smile. “If he even looks at Peak 15 in the first place. Continue your work, doctor. The figures of the galaxy might well rest upon it. Your life certainly does.”

The salarian Doctor shivered a bit at that, but nodded, and moved over towards his workers. He glanced over to the side where a Geth Prime stood, wondering again how Saren had somehow convinced him and his workers, indeed even the murderous robots, to agree to work together. Once more, he wondered why he was working with them, with Saren. But Saren had brought a chunk of old metal into his office weeks before the geth arrived and after that, slowly all thoughts of disagreeing with Saren, of not working with him, faded away for some reason. Even now, Fuaig felt this strange compulsion to obey, to go along with everything Saren told them and he could not disobey.

As the doctor and his team returned to their work around the frozen ancient evil in the center of the massive examination room, Saren moved over to the Geth Prime. “What is it? You know you’re not supposed to come in from the interior defensive line. And speak turian, geth. I have no desire to need to translate your binary communications any longer.”

“This unit has detected that the outer defense force has been neutralized,” the Geth Prime spoke, its words coming out in a weird timber, as if hundreds of voices, each of them just a tiny bit different, spoke as one. “Video intelligence gathered during the battle and sent back to us in real time indicate the anomaly of Omega and two others. Second enemy designation: quarian, false creator. Third enemy designation: turian.”

Saren’s eyes widened a little, and he quickly ran over everything he knew about the two so-called human super soldiers that had erupted onto the galactic stage nearly a year ago by this point he thought. “Bring the Rocket Troopers together into one unit, I will have work for them. Bring the Pyros inside. Reinforce the hunters with shock troopers and hoppers. Keep the colossi close, have them prepared to move further back behind the lab deeper into the mountain. They can climb to a certain extent, correct?”

The Geth Prime nodded his head in an imitation of the human movement that had crossed so many species. “They can, although slowly.”

“All that matters is that they will be able to retreat in time. We’re going to need to do something about these three, very obviously, and that’s going to take a lot of doing, given what we know about the anomaly. Yet suffice to say that with a bit of work, we can make the terrain do a lot of the work for us...”

End Chapter

This doesn't cover the next fight, because I decided my initial writeup of that battle, and Saren in particular, was not doing the man justice. He might be slowly becoming a remote controlled meat puppet, but Saren is known as the most effective Spectre for a reason. Even more than that, the geth give him a force that will obey his orders without concern about the cost, and both would react to Ranma's presence, specifically, rather than assume they could deal with him like they could the in-game John Shephard a few years from now.

On that note, I hope I showed enough to make it clear that the work at Peak 15 had just begun. I also hope that shifting the timing on the Lorik/Anoleis thing made sense.

Beyond that, I hope you enjoyed the double helping of Tali/Ranma goodness. It will continue for a while. Right now, they're still both trying to fight their feelings to a certain degree even as they are drawn to one another,