

Howdy all. This is the December Ranma poll winner, with 1,678 votes to 1,672 for Stallion before the carry-over effect was added into the poll for this fic.

I will be updating Bhaalson Remodel on AO3 as well, and posting [Journey Gone Astray](#) (hopefully) if [Hiryo](#)'s got it back to me by Christmas.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly and Hiryo as of 12/30/2025.

Effect 16: A Horse Goes Stomping: Peak Violence

With Tali having sent a complete map of the rest of Peak 15 that included all of the security checkpoints, and even some real-time data on where the geth had been gathering, Ranma and Garrus pushed higher into Peak 15's interior. Two floors after getting back into contact with Tali, the two of them ran roughshod over three geth Troopers, burning through a few walls to first get around their position, then take them from behind.

That was the first time they'd actually run into anything since Tali had contacted them. All the other positions on the map had been abandoned by the geth, leaving only the automated guns, of which there was a multitude.

Garrus had wondered about that, and now, looking down at a reading on his omni-tool, he slowly reached up to his mask and pulled it off, indicating to Ranma that he could do the same. Not willing to deal with the slow drain on his ki, Ranma had purloined one back in the laboratory. "They're not pumping the air on these floors with anything harmful," he reported, his mandibles twitching into the turian equivalent of a frown.

"That's suspicious as hell, but I gotta say I'm kinda glad of it," Ranma admitted, shaking his head. Despite how much practice his ki was getting to combat such things, it was still draining. *Especially after the day we've already had, the tunnel we made in the snow, and everything else.*

He did not say that aloud. Rather, Ranma tugged at his pigtail thoughtfully, looking down at the geth that they had just hit. These looked a little different from the ones they'd been fighting, and looking at their backs, it looked like they had been made to be fitted with something. Similarly, the arm they had been using to carry rifles had little built-up bits to indicate that maybe they should have a different weapon attached.

Ranma was about to point that out to Garrus when he heard a low hum to one side. Instantly, he rolled, before kicking off the bottom of one of the walls, into the air. This let Ranma avoid a second shot, as a first shot went through where he'd been standing a moment ago. That first shot went over Garrus' shoulder, with the second going between his legs.

Bouncing off the ceiling, Ranma came down in between two weird, wavy bits of air in the hallway. Before the Hunters could train on him, Ranma grabbed the side of their heads, their chameleon-like cloaking devices failing, and smashed the flashlight-like heads against the sides of the hallway. "That was a little trickier. Still, not all that much," he mumbled, the remains of the two robots falling to the floor of the hall, still twitching.

"It would have for me." Garrus held up a hand to his armored chest for a second as he tried to get his heart under control. "And I could do without any more shots going between my legs, please! We turians aren't nearly as vulnerable down there as you humans are, but still, no one wants to be shot in the carapace over that particular area. How did you know the Hunters were there?"

"I heard a hum right before they fired," Ranma admitted. "It's the first time I've been able to do that, but I guess there wasn't enough background noise to cover it up this time. Then I traced the gunshots back to where they had to come from and saw two distortions in the air."

"Distortions I get, but hearing the humming of a mass effect weapon? I suppose it isn't all that unusual for you with how enhanced everything else is about you, but—"

"Dude! Think about your words, please," Ranma laughed, shaking his head. "And there ya were just talking about your boy bits being in danger."

Even with that hint, it took a moment for Garrus to get it, and then he groaned, smacking his forehead. "I'd say that you should grow up, but yeah, I'll give that one to you. You wouldn't believe the amount of shit some of my fellow troopers would've given me if I had made that kind of joke in front of them. Heck, that even crosses over species lines, man."

"Some people have a sense of humor; some people have to work at it. It's okay," Ranma soothed, causing Garrus to mumble a bit under his breath. Ignoring that, Ranma looked down at the destroyed bodies of the two Hunters.

Even after that bit of back-and-forth, Ranma felt a little off balance, and it had nothing to do with the sudden ambush. Rather, it had everything to do with how this battle had gone from beginning to end, something he'd had time to think about after they stopped running into geth. As dangerous as the fixed guns were to normal people, Ranma wasn't normal, thus letting him think about the real threats he'd faced since coming within sight of Peak 15.

I've gotten used to the high-tech stuff, the mass effect weapons, missiles and what-have-you that're everywhere in this galaxy. I'm willing to admit that there's shit out there that could kill me. But there's a very big difference between that and running up against an enemy who's already begun to think of ways to counter my toughness and my abilities. Especially someone who doesn't just come at me in an upfront manner. Smart enemies are dangerous, sly ones willing to use traps and pawns're way worse!

Tali's voice coming from Garrus' omni-tool interrupted his thoughts, and Ranma hastily opened his own to the same frequency. "There're at least two other Hunters ahead of you. I can't tell if there's more because, well, cloaking. The two I can see are working on a panel along the corridor. This will also be the last time I can get anything out of the cameras. The geth runtimes in the complex's OS are rallying. I might've surprised them again by taking command of this specific group of security cameras, but it won't work again."

"Thanks, Tali. Are you heading our way, or are ya gonna try and find someplace to bunker down?" Ranma asked, shaking off his moment of introspection.

"I'll try to make my way to you two. If you could keep on beating blunt objects and making as much noise and chaos as possible as you work your way up, I'd appreciate it," Tali answered with a strained laugh.

"Continue to make noise, got it," Ranma quipped, and then ran past Garrus in the indicated direction of the two Hunters. He came around the corridor faster than either of them could track, even if they already had their weapons opened in the right direction. They didn't and were indeed doing something to a panel.

That panel exploded a few seconds later, but only because Ranma had smashed one of the flashlight heads' robotic skulls straight into it. The heat and the explosive wave did no damage to Ranma, as he twirled around, a kick smashing into the other Hunter's chest, shattering it into pieces.

Garrus ran up to join him, and Ranma shook his head slightly, the two men moving forward together, with Garrus' rifle up and aiming ahead of them just in case any other Hunters in the area that Tali hadn't seen. "One good thing about fighting the geth. There's no blood, and no moral issues about smashing them with full strength blows," he commented.

"I can see that," Garrus shrugged. "Or at least, I suppose it would be for you and krogans, if krogans ever thought about things like morals and how fragile other people are. Those of us with weaker muscles don't tend to think about that kind of thing."

"I feel so sorry for you," Ranma mocked, and Garrus snorted, patting his rifle as if to say that he would take long-range fire over raw strength any day. Ranma gestured to the panel that the two geth had been doing something to. "What were they doing to this?"

Garrus stared at the destroyed panel with bits of the Hunter's head still embedded in it, smoke wafting out of it, then looked dryly back at Ranma. "If you wanted me to try and figure that out, you should've left more of it intact. You'd need someone like Tali or a forensic specialist to get anything out of it now."

Shrugging, Ranma tapped into his omni-tool, opening up the communications with Tali, only to get nothing but static back. A second later, that static was replaced by a loud squeal, and

he winced, shutting it down. "Crap! They figured out we were using the local communications network. How much ya wanna bet they're blanketing all the coms with static now?"

Ranma had seen more than enough sci-fi movies and military shows to know that was a thing enemies did to one another. He hadn't run into it before this, but then again, he hadn't had anyone he was trying to call.

"Probably. The geth can communicate through the system itself, no need to actually use the communications network," Garrus said, scowling a little. "I just hope that Tali is going to be okay."

He flinched a bit at the suddenly dark, dangerous look that crossed Ranma's face. "Hey, don't look at me like that, it's not my fault we can't talk to your girl!"

Ranma blinked, then, to Garrus' amazement, blushed a little, looking down and away sheepishly. "She's not my girl."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that." Garrus snorted, before going on a quieter tone, reaching over to squeeze Ranma's shoulder, "Just because I know you can't do anything physical doesn't mean that I'm blind to the emotional connection between the two of you. I have no idea how that's going to end up, but neither am I going to make fun of you for it."

Ranma steadfastly ignored that and moved forward. "And I'm not worried about Tali," he lied. "She's a big girl, well, no, not really, but you know what I mean. Tali can take care of herself; she sure as heck was doing that before she met me."

Garrus followed after Ranma silently for a few moments, eyeing the corridor ahead of him through the sniper mount on his rifle, before he couldn't hold himself back any longer. "I've seen your female form. Do you really have any right to make fun of someone else's height?"

"... Okay, that was a good one." Ranma held up a sheet marked eight out of ten. "I'd give you full marks if you had actually interrupted me when I said that."

Garrus laughed, and Ranma chuckled, and the two continued on, with Garrus pausing occasionally to look at the map. When he did at one point, he looked confused for a second before gesturing up to the ceiling. "There are two areas where the corridor constricts ahead of us, complete with security guns. Do you think we can bypass them?"

Ranma looked at the map himself, then expanded it, making sure that there was another floor directly above theirs. That hadn't been the case occasionally as Peak 15 was a winding complex dug out of solid stone. "Looks like it, although you have good timing. If we kept on going, we'd be under solid stone again in a few more yards."

With that, he leapt upwards, using the Clinging Gecko technique to hang by the ceiling. One hand began to heat up, and Ranma hid a grimace as he used his heating technique to burn through the metal flooring. Today had really begun to stretch his ki reserves a lot, and he was only thankful that he'd kept so many food packs in his ki space. *I'm gonna need to stop and eat something after this*, he reflected, just as he finished cutting out a circle into the roof of the hallway.

Reaching up and through the space again, Ranma melted through several pipes, then up into the floor of the floor above them, letting that bit drop as well. He then had to return to Garrus, lifting the turian up into the air and basically hurling him up at an angle so that he could land on the floor above.

Garrus did so well enough, rolling as he hit, coming up with his rifle trained ahead of him, before twitching around, just as Ranma jumped upwards. "Spirits blast it, next time wait! I nearly shot you."

Ranma nodded at that, looking a little sheepish, but thankfully, the hallway they found themselves in was clear of threats. He pulled out a ration bar and bit into it, devouring the whole thing, the length of his hand and as wide as four fingers, in two bites. "Let's keep going."

Rolling his eyes at his companion's oddities, Garrus pulled out the map for this floor, enlarging it for a second, before pointing down the way he had initially been pointing his gun. "That way to the stairs. We'll need to fight our way up two more floors before we can try that trick again, if we have to. When we do, we'll be in a large, open thoroughfare, where a lot of different hallways meet. Judging from the layout, I'd assume it was meant to be some kind of communal sitting area eventually, like the Promenade."

Ranma nodded, his eyes narrowing. Garrus saw his look and nodded as well. "Yeah, we're probably going to run into some real opposition there."

"I suppose, we'll get to that when we come to it," Ranma mumbled around his food. Once he swallowed, Ranma took point again, shifting around along one side of the hallway as Garrus covered the other from behind him with his rifle, looking for more trouble.

OOOOOOO

Unfortunately for Tali, trouble was about to find her, rather than her companions.

The young quarian smacked her hand against the panel she had just been working with, cursing. "Well, there goes any hope of using any of the video cameras! I thought that little program I made would've worked for longer than that. But no, you little geth bosh'tets, you're now blocking any kind of access! Well, don't get used to it. You're going to be purged from this system the moment I can force a reset, you stupid scrap codes!"

Turning away from that, Tali powered off her omni-tool, and lifted her shotgun, moving along the corridor cautiously. She truly did hope that Ranma and Garrus were drawing all the geth's attention to their position, but wasn't about to trust that.

This caution saved Tali's life. She was inching her way forward, eyes flicking to either side of the hallway, when a door to one side opened just a little bit, and a nozzle was pushed out of the small isolation room that she had seen on the map. Catching the motion, Tali was already leaping backwards as fast as her legs could push her as fire erupted from the Pyro's weapon. The ball of petroleum created fire scorched the area all around her and filled the hallway with a fireball the size of a krogan for a second.

Fire then came from two Troopers as they also came out of doors further down from the Pyro who had attempted to fricassee Tali. They fired through the fire at her, causing her to duck and roll, then crawl backwards for a few seconds, before thumbing one of her newly created grenades from her pack. "Thank you, Mr. Random Engineer, for those packs of omni-gel," she muttered, rolling two chaff grenades along the floor.

The pair of grenades went off, filling the hallway with noise, light, and little bits of metal filament that wrecked the scanners of the geth. Unlike humans or any other sentient being, they didn't simply keep on firing. The two geth instead held their fire, something in their logic centers preventing them from simply firing while their scanners were messed up by the chaff for a few seconds before they could override that impulse.

Tali used this moment to get back to her feet, turn, and race back the way she came, pulling out another little surprise she had created recently. She then slapped the prepared slab of explosive gel shaped into the shape of a panel to the wall as she ran. This didn't work, as the two Troopers just turned their attention to it, hitting the explosive a bare second after Tali had gotten out of the blast radius.

A second later, as she came to a crossway in the hallway, bullets smashed into her chest from the side, sending Tali reeling with a cry of pain. "AGHH!"

Luckily, she was still wearing the extra armor that Ranma had made her back on Omega, and the armor held easily. The next bullets, though, nearly hit her faceplate even as Tali rolled sideways along the corridor. She fired back, but her shotgun blasts only hit one of her two attackers. The other one kept on firing, and then the Pyro was near enough to launch another fireball her way.

Even as she turned in that direction, Tali pressed her back into a doorway that irised open at her touch, sending her flailing backward. This fall saved her life as the fireball slammed into the doorway where she been standing a second ago, and Tali turned her tumble backwards into a flip with difficulty, thanking Ranma for the tumbling exercises he put them through while on the Shadow Broker's ship. She then ducked out into the still-burning doorway, her shotgun out and blasting the Pyro.

The Pyro had been standing in the open in the middle of the hallway and had no room to dodge. The large shell took the robot straight in the head, disintegrating it. The Pyro collapsed, headless, its weapon still on, guttering lightly against the metallic floor.

Backing away for a second as fire came from every side at her, Tali allowed the door to close. Looking around, Tali realized she was in a small break room of some kind, complete with a fridge, a small microwave, and an equally small table. It was very much not a place that someone would come for actual rest and relaxation, but rather to grab a bite to eat and go. That didn't mean it was without hiding places.

Back in the hallway, four geth pushed forward, training their guns on the door. One of them then moved forward, activating it, as the other three covered the first trooper, firing the moment the door opened. However, no living person was on the other side, and their fire instantly petered out. The quartet of geth units then moved in, only for all three to lock onto a vent for the complex's air circulation system, its panel having been removed.

They instantly shifted towards it, firing into the darkness. Looking through the lens of a small drone that had attached itself to the ceiling right next to a light fixture, Tali noted that from her hiding position behind a sofa. If the geth had been looking upwards, they might've spotted it, but all four of them had seen the open vent and leapt to the logical conclusion.

Her helmet's targeting system already slaved to the drone's telemetry, Tali popped up over the sofa, firing as she came. Two of the geth went down, their sides exploding under the blasts from her shotgun, before the other two could turn. A third fell, then their shots hit, causing her to stumble, one of them hitting her in the shoulder of the hand she was holding her shotgun's grip with, causing her next shot to go wild.

The last geth charged forwards, a long dagger appearing from its wrist as it leapt up and over the sofa, bringing the dagger down. The dagger impacted Tali's chest, driving her down and into the ground, but didn't cut through her armor. The ki-enhanced metal Ranma had crafted withstood the strike, even though another hit to her shoulder caused Tali's arm to go dead once more.

Even as her back slammed into the floor, Tali's other hand flicked up and into the geth, slamming her own hasty omni-tool dagger into the creature's chest. Unlike the geth's weapon, Tali's bit deep, but not deep enough to reach anything important.

The geth then fell forward, trying to pin her underneath its weight, its blade arm up and ready to stab her in the head, its other arm grabbing her shoulder. But Tali's omni-blade sliced deeply into his chest again with desperate strength. This time, her hit cut the droid nearly in half, letting her roll to the side. It fell, still scrabbling at the floor of the breakroom, but a second later, Tali put a shotgun shell into its head, which finally stopped the robot from moving.

“Good armor, yes, armor good,” she mumbled, leaning against the wall of the break room for a second, her breath heaving in her helmet, sweat matting her brow enough to activate some of the internal circulation systems, her suit's systems quickly siphoning off the added perspiration just as it always did. “I honestly didn’t think Ranma’s bragging was anything more than that when it came to monomolecular blades, but it worked! For a given value anyway.”

Her armor now had a severe laceration cut out into it, but somehow, the ki-enhanced armor had held enough to protect her vac suit, something only ship-grade armor should have been able to do for less than a tenth of the weight. *I dislike the very idea of putting anything between me and actual tactile sensation, but that was too damned close!*

One of the other geth platforms twitched, and Tali instantly turned, blasting it again with her shotgun shell, then shooting it again, and the others just for good measure. When the noise of her last shot died down, Tali felt a little sheepish. “Well... what did Ranma say at one point, there’s no kill like overkill?”

Shaking her head, Tali ducked through the doorway, looking in either direction for a second, breathing a sigh of relief at not seeing anything instantly coming her way. That ambush had been far too damn close!

She then looked at the map of the area, and then back to where a fire still raged in the hallway from the body of the Pyro. “And of course, the way I have to go is through that. Lovely. First ice, then fire, what’s next for this keelah-cursed day?” she muttered before looking around for ways to douse the flames coming from the Pyro’s internal petroleum reserves. She wasn’t about to just wait there for it all to burn out, after all.

OOOOOOO

Ranma and Garrus didn’t run into anything but a few Hunters scattered through the next two floors. If Ranma had been on his own, Ranma might’ve thought that that was a good thing, that their sudden shift in strategy, burning upward through the floors as often as possible, had taken the geth or whoever was leading them by surprise.

However, Garrus was far more paranoid than Ranma and reminded the pigtailed martial artist of the large area that they were going to come to soon. It was the best place in the entire complex to plan a large-scale ambush. Worse, unless the geth fell back on some of the prepared defenses around the main command center, it was basically the last place for such a thing as well.

Staring down the hallway towards the large semi-promenade-like area, Garrus spotted something moving within. He reached out, smacking Ranma on the back, and Ranma instantly crouched, ready to call on his Umi-Sen-Ken if need be. “Movement.”

Staring through his sniper scope, Garrus made out several geth, all of them moving behind preprepared cover facing in their direction. Unfortunately, that direction was the only way they could go. The hallway they were in was entirely surrounded by solid stone, as was most of the level they were on. If Ranma had been at full strength, perhaps he could have melted his way even through that stone and followed a map to create a tunnel that could bypass this area, but as it was, they would need to force their way in.

Before they could do anything more, shots began to come their way from some of the geth, and with no place to hide, Garrus went down on his stomach, returning fire and presenting as small a target as he possibly could, while Ranma jumped up, using the Clinging Gecko Technique again to run along the ceiling. From his ki space, he dropped the dented, battered makeshift shield he'd made from a panel of the corridor several fights before. "Here, use this!"

"Much obliged!" Ducking into cover, Garrus rolled several smoke and chaff grenades forward, made by omni-gel just like Tali's.

The fire lessened, the same logic conundrum that, unknown to the two men, Tali had made use of earlier, coming to the fore again. Someone on the other side, though, was still able to fire, and a barked order, its tone telling Garrus that whoever it was, was a turian, as it shouted orders. "Override your logic centers, blast it! Suppression fire is a thing, you dolts! Keep firing."

"Complying," one of the geth platforms ahead of them answered, its voice also reaching Garrus' ears over the din of rifle fire, which instantly began to pick up.

Thankfully, Ranma was still unseen on the roof, while the shield he'd dropped for Garrus was enough to protect him as he crouched there for a second. Moving forward, while Garrus fired below him, Ranma then jumped to one side of the entryway. Landing, he pulled out his own gun, a heavy weapon that would normally need a krogan or two men to use, firing towards a few of the geth troopers on the gangway above, striking several, one after another.

The moment he began to fire, the real trap sprang. Shields went up around many of the geth troopers on the floor of the open area, save for one of the Pyros, who had yet to take part in the fight. It raised its weapon and let loose a blast of flame, and suddenly, everything was heat, force and noise, as a massive explosion blasted through the area. "GRAA-the-fuAGGG!!"

This blast destroyed several Troopers who hadn't been able to get under shields in time. It also overcame two other shielded areas nearest the Pyro who began the explosion. It was torn apart while the blast washed over Ranma's position within the semi-promenade and out through the hallways in every direction.

Even from where he had been crouched at the back of the ambush site, Saren felt the heat of the explosion through the shielding that protected him from the blast wave, wincing just

a little bit. He'd had Hunters start to spoof most of the panels between the anomaly and this point, so that they had no hint that the defenders had gone back to pumping something into the air after lulling them into a false sense of security and it had worked.

This time, though, it wasn't any kind of nerve agent or poison gas. Or rather, in insufficient quantity to be such. Rather, it was a simple compound that, when added to oxygen, made the already incredibly flammable and explosive molecule even more so.

The resulting explosion was so hot and so powerful that Garrus cried out as the blast wave hit his position, sending him tumbling down along the hallway, even as his clothing caught fire and the flames roiled over him. It was only the fact that he was a turian and had a built-in exoskeleton to go with his body armor that saved him from death, and even so, he was forced to keep rolling, putting out the fires he had started in his clothing. That, and his distance from the center of the explosion saved him. If Garrus had been even a yard closer, that wouldn't have been the case. Even his shield wouldn't have saved him.

Ranma had no such protection. His chest plate wasn't any kind of protection against an explosion that basically went off with him near the center of it, and he howled in pain as he found himself seared from one side to another, unable to escape, and at the center of the explosion of wave, having been hurled in one direction to crash into the leftmost wall of the ambush area.

Yet to the astonishment of Saren, Ranma wasn't actually burned or crippled by the explosion. The fire and heat barely affected him. His training with Master Vulcan had basically made him immune to hot temperatures, if not actually fireproof, as, in Vulcan's words, "A smith who doesn't fear the flame is no smith at all, but one who cannot stand the heat is not worth his weight in grass."

That didn't mean he was immune to taking damage from an explosion like this, though. His entire body felt as if it had been put in a vice, then someone had come along and hit every portion of his body with an extra-large hammer. But he was still pushing himself to his feet as Saren watched.

Still, given everything I've seen him doing, I had planned for this eventuality. The turian's mandibles opened wide into a vicious grin, and he ordered, "Now!" looking over at several Pyros who had been quickly retrofitted with something entirely different from their normal petroleum jelly-based flamethrowers.

Staggering to his feet, Ranma looked up just in time to see twin spouts of water coming towards him, exceptionally cold water, which slammed into him a second later, triggering the change. As hot as Ranma's clothing and everything else had been made from the explosion, that barely tingled, Ranma gritted her teeth through it and pushed herself up away, rolling out of the line of the spouts of water. *What the hell!? Are they trying to cause a steam explosion? Why!?*

Only one of the geth was able to track her quickly enough, but that was enough as two others on the ground floor came out from where they had been shielded. These two had also been retrofitted but not with cold water.

Ranma had a brief instant to see steam rising from the water of these two new attackers. Her eyes widened before hot and cold water hit the redhead at once.

Just like the one time when his lower body had been in a bath, and his upper body had been hit by cold water, the pain came instantly. "GAGGGHHH!!!" Ranma screamed, her voice shifting octaves as one form and then another became prominent, the scream so loud and pain-filled that even groggy, Garrus flinched and even Saren's eyes widened in surprise.

The human body was not made to change genders with a splash of water. It was not made to change like that at all. Worse was being caught mid-change or forced to change from one form to another quickly. The semantics of it really didn't matter; what mattered was the amount of agony that was now flashing through Ranma's entire body as he was hit by this specially prepared trap.

Shaking his head, Saren got over his surprise and watched grimly for a moment as the geth continued to assault him with hot and cold water. It wasn't tearing the youth apart to be so swiftly forced between changes, as Saren had privately hoped, but it was very obviously painful and debilitating. Better, the Geth Prime and the others around him needed no urging to open fire the instant they could.

Bullets began to slam into Ranma, and it was all Ranma could do through the pain of his/her agony to raise his/her arms up to his/her face, guarding his/her head desperately. His legs fell out from under him, hit multiple times. Her arm almost fell away from his head as it too was hit, but Ranma desperately dodged to one side, yet his body did not respond to her demands. The pain was too much, too much to push through, too much for him/her to concentrate through. It was all Ranma could do to keep his/her arm raised in front of her head, his gender changing from one second to the next, the pain increasing with every second as if his very atoms were being pulled apart.

If Ranma had been alone, Saren would've won. This last trick would've overcome Ranma, as depleted as he already had been throughout the day's fighting. However, he wasn't, and Garrus began to fire even as Ranma's screaming began. Now, instead of aiming towards the Prime or where Saren could barely be seen up on the second floor, Garrus fired on the easier targets of the geth on the first floor, hitting one of the geth there that was sending scalding water towards Ranma.

Before the others could try to cover, he had hit two more, although he had been hit in his shoulder by return fire. Luckily, lying on the ground, he didn't need both arms to steady his rifle and kept up a steady fire, shifting from one target to another.

Finally, the last one shot him with hot water, leaving Ranma in his female form as her body seemed to try and settle down into one shape for a second, but that shape wasn't Ranma's normal female body. Garrus had seen that body before, but the one he saw ahead of him in the open area was markedly different. Ranma's height remained the same as if he were still in his male body, although one leg looked as if it were a little shorter than the other. Her (Garrus was very uncertain on that point right now) rear on that side was a little rounder, and her hair was a mix of red and black, although, from what Garrus could see behind her, Ranma retained her female upper body. It was as if, having been hit with both cold and hot water at the same time for so long, Ranma's body had shifted so often that it was now stuck in between.

It was even worse inside Ranma. Her (currently only by majority) body had indeed been forced into some kind of half-male, half-female body, and all of her insides and everything else had been so badly rearranged that Ranma was barely functioning. Indeed, as a master of his body, Ranma could tell that bits were beginning to shut down, his innards too rearranged to function.

It was with desperation that Ranma hurled herself forward, rolling into and through a patch of cold water. The change hit, but this time, the pain didn't last all that long. It was still agonizing, Ranma's body having been pushed well beyond any kind of limits of endurance that Ranma had ever felt before, but when it changed ended, Ranma was back in his full female body.

It felt as if she'd been pulled, stretched tight, been in the sun too long, burned, chilled, and everything else that you could think of. Yet she was in one piece, and Ranma growled as she pushed herself to her feet.

All around her, more geth came up and out of their defensive barriers, but that initial explosion had damaged many of them, proving stronger in an enclosed space than their calculations. Their weapons still worked, though, and a hail of rifle fire and actual fire from the remaining Pyros came at Ranma. Two of them fell to Garrus' precise shooting, and Saren opened fire himself, hitting Ranma several times, but he made a mistake there. He aimed center of mass, and Ranma's armor took it.

"Spirits blast it!" Saren grumbled before firing again, only for his shot to go through the back of a geth's head as it got in the way of his shot.

This allowed Ranma enough time to push herself off the ground with her one working leg, then disappear into her Umi-Sen-Ken. That technique didn't actually take a lot of life energy, which, at the moment, was a **very** good thing. Ranma could tell she did not have much left. *Nothing for it!*

In desperation, Ranma pulled back the ki she used to create his ki space, giving her a bit of a jolt. Both pants pockets instantly shredded, dumping everything within out instantly as she jumped from one place to another. The Umi-Sen-Ken failed in the next instant, but by that

point, Ranma had gained the balcony above. Punches from her one working arm and furious headbutts smashed seven Troopers into so much rubble, and then she was through, grabbing the Geth Prime around the middle and hurling it up and over the balcony before charging towards Saren, who had already backed away.

The traitor Specter's shots hammered into her, precise and fast, even as he retreated on a small hover platform down the hallway, shouting orders. "Pour it on from behind, dammit! Hit him harder! We can win this!"

They truly could. Ranma's wounds weren't healing any longer. One leg was simply mangled from the shots she'd taken during the second portion of the ambush, her head was ringing, Ranma was basically seeing double, and punching at both targets, with the one arm that wasn't hanging uselessly at her side, more mangled bits of bone and flesh than a working limb.

Still, she had been able to move around with just one leg, almost like a pogo stick on steroids, and now, as she smashed another geth into pieces, Ranma launched herself forward, snarling as she chased after Saren. Moving down the hallway forced many of the geth to shift position, and Garrus took advantage of that and their bloody-minded concentration on Ranma. Only a few of the geth on the first floor remained to fire back at him, and his small target allowed him to kill two more geth up on the second floor of the open area before he was forced to fire on the remaining on the floor.

The Geth Prime behind Ranma unloaded into her, until Ranma tore a portion of the ceiling off, hurling it backwards over her shoulder. It crashed into the Geth Prime, whose personal shield activated, and through the scintillating energy, Ranma charged back, slamming her already crippled shoulder into the Geth Prime's shield. That shield failed a second later, under the repeated blows of Ranma's ruined arm, which she used like a flail, screaming in pain with every hit.

Ranma was in before the Geth Prime could try and pull back. A hard blow caught the Geth Prime's chest, caving it in and hurling it up and into the air of the ambush zone.

Her last working leg failed her as a shot came from behind. The bullet caught it right through the back of the knee, dumping Ranma to the floor. This was followed by several more from Saren, who was still staying well back.

Ranma barely could shift around to stare in that direction and pushed herself off the ground with his one working limb. She had no ki left to heal her wounds, not nearly enough to keep up with all everything that had happened but still she tried.

And still, Saren's attention was completely on her, as he knew victory was at hand.

Just then, a voice from behind him intoned, "Bosh'tet says what?"

Taken completely out of his focus, Saren turned, his mandibles opened, gaping in surprise. “Wh—”

The word cut off as a heavy wrench the size of Tali’s arm slammed into his face. The other side of the wrench had a small gyro-jet rocket on it, an idea that Tali had gotten from Ranma after he introduced her to a style of sci-fi called ‘steampunk.’ The idea of making weird and unusual weapons out of tools and odd bits of stuff appealed to her.

Now, the effort of her work, and a goodly bit of her hoarded omni-gel, blasted in with far more power than Tali’s own arms could contrive. The hit shattered several of Saren’s mandibles, crushing one of his eyes, and hurling him up and off of his small personal hover board.

Tough and experienced Saren might’ve been, but that kind of blow would’ve put most people unconscious. As it was, he slammed into the ground and rolled, but that roll brought him close enough to Ranma, and before he could realize his error, Ranma grabbed a chunk of geth from nearby and hurled it unerringly towards him, gritting her teeth against the agony she was in.

The blow crashed into Saren’s back, sending him forward, and Tali met him with a hand outstretched, holding a small device of some kind. The Taser in her hand activated, and Saren screamed, his body convulsing. Normally, that kind of thing would not work as well on a turian as it would on a human or someone else who had actual skin rather than a carapace, as a turian’s carapace didn’t transfer electrical energy as well.

However, Saren had quite a lot of mechanical transplants within him, his arms, legs, chest, and head. The sudden intake of so much voltage shorted out many of those systems on top of the damage that Tali’s crowbar and the hurled piece of geth had done, and as tough as Saren was, he was no Ranma. Tali pulled away her little electrical plug prod, and Saren’s eyes, having already rolled up behind his head, collapsed boneless to the ground.

Ranma stared through bloodied lips at Tali, her face shifting into the best approximation of a smile she could make right now. “Well, aren’t you a sight for literally sore eyes,” she whispered, before finally falling unconscious. Tali hurried forward, grabbing Ranma as she slumped to one side, quickly pulling him to prop her up against the wall, her hands then beginning to twitch, from one wound to another, trying desperately to figure out what she should do first as Ranma’s blood continued to pump out of some of his wounds. Most had cauterized, ironically, by the ongoing hits of flame from the Pyros. With his ki so badly depleted, his general immunity to fire and heat had faded significantly, and had, somewhat ironically, meant she hadn’t bled out yet.

She would still have done so swiftly if not for Garrus, who arrived on the scene a moment later. He too was looking very much worse for wear, and one arm hung loosely at his side, but the other was fully capable, and he quickly knelt down next to Ranma, dumping down

an armload of what Tali instantly recognized as some of the meal packets and meal bars that Ranma kept within his ki space before grabbing out a Medi-gel pack from his own belt.

"We need to get him to eat! His body will start healing itself if he's got fuel. You do that, I'll keep him from bleeding out," Garrus ordered, slapping the Medi-gel to the ruins of Ranma's arm. With that seen to, he quickly began to cover the other wounds with gauze and bandages. *Thank the turian military for being overzealous in making certain we're ready for medical demands. And thank the humans for creating Medi-gel.*

Medi-gel was the biological equivalent of omni-gel, a gel-like biological substance that could, with the help of medical nanites embedded into it, repair the majority of injuries. It had been one of humankind's best inventions prior to joining the Council. Since then, it had spread, changing medicine and medical equipment galaxy-wide.

Now, Garrus watched as the Medi-gel emptied quickly, as if the gel inside had been sucked into Ranma's body. Almost immediately, her arm began, to Garrus' quiet astonishment, regenerate in places. In others, bullets were pushed out of wounds, and then those wounds closed so quickly that Garrus could actually see it happening.

"W, what the heck happened! I've never seen Ranma so battered or even thought it was possible," Tali dithered, even as she grabbed one of the food bars, pulling it open with her talons and stuffing it into Ranma's mouth. The fact that even unconscious Ranma instantly began to chew and bite and chew again was not nearly as surprising to Tali as the amount of damage that the redhead had already taken, or how fast the worst of it, the wreckage of Ranma's arm, was healing.

"Traps within traps," Garrus answered, shaking his head as he looked over at Saren's unconscious form, his tone an alloy of admiration and anger. "You know, I didn't believe that Saren was working with the geth before this, not deep down. Not until I saw him up there taking shots at Ranma along with the geth. He planned this; he planned a trap for Ranma, knew, er, her abilities. And it was almost enough. If not for your arrival, it would have been. I wasn't moving fast enough to get up in time to help."

Tali nodded, then pulled up another bar, Ranma having already eaten two. It took three more bars, but slowly, as the others watched, some of the bleeding started to stop from underneath the bandages that Garrus had put on Ranma's body. This let Garrus use his last Medi-gel pack on his own arm, the biotic nanites burying into his carapace and beginning to heal the bones and sinew beneath.

For her part, Tali kept on feeding Ranma, as Ranma kept on opening her mouth. Seven more bars, and Ranma's eyes started to flicker. It was only when the injuries to Ranma's legs stopped bleeding that Garrus started to remove the bandages, wondering what he would see underneath.

What Garrus saw was beyond his imagination. Medi-gel was amazing, and if you had enough of it, you could prevent even scarring, save from the worst wounds. Wounds like Ranma's arm, the one he'd used like a fleshy flail to batter the Geth Prime's shielding down. Here, however, Ranma's ki healing, burning through calories like a torch through butter, went above and beyond, healing her wounds so there was barely any scarring, and faster even than the best Medi-gel could.

Ranma's arm was fine, more than fine, entirely whole. What scars and wounds remained slowly disappeared as Garrus watched. In contrast, Ranma's legs seemed to have been given less priority and were only slowly healing in comparison to his arm.

Looking down, Tali shook her head, tapping one vac-suit-covered finger on Ranma's armored chest. "I am so glad that he wore this! Mine saved my life earlier, too."

Not making any effort to correct Tali on Ranma's current gender, Garrus nodded. "I wonder if I can convince Ranma to make one of his ki-enhanced suits for me, or, if he finds his original, can I have this one? It isn't exactly my size, but I would take anything like that I could get my hands on," he joked, although there was more than a bit of earnestness in his tone as well.

"Maybe." Tali frowned a little inside her helmet before shaking her head, looking in both directions along the hallway. "Do you, do you think that's it?"

"I... don't know. If there were more geth, they'd probably already be attacking us. The geth certainly wouldn't want us to keep on feeding Ranma and get him back to health. Although I don't know how long it will be until he's got enough energy to do anything but heal himself, an enemy wouldn't want to chance it. But I don't think we've seen enough scientists for a place this big."

"I actually don't know how many experiments or whatever were actually going on here at one time, but I suppose you might be right," Tali agreed reluctantly, before yelping as a gentle hand caught hers where he was still forcing an energy bar into Ranma's mouth. "YEE! R, Ranma!?"

Ranma smiled crookedly through the haze of raw agony that she was currently feeling. Whatever had been done to her DNA or whatever had happened during those moments when she had been hit by both hot and cold water, it was going to take a long while for her body to fully recover. Through the haze of that, she could barely feel any of her other injuries, although she knew that blood loss also had something to do with that. *Very fucking ironic that the distance between my wounds is helping me to heal them all.*

Right now, though, there was something even more important to concentrate on. "Go on," Ranma groaned, her voice barely above a whisper. "You can't, you can't let whoever might

still be here get entrenched more than they already are. And you're the only one of the three of us who's still really combat capable. You'll need to take the lead, Tali."

Tali blinked at that, only now realizing how battered Garrus looked. His carapace was cracked in a few places, and although his legs were intact, one of his arms still hung loosely at his side, his Medi-gel not working nearly as quickly as the ones Ranma had been given, thanks to his subconscious control.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "If there are still Hunters around, you're pretty defenseless."

"Pretty defenseless doesn't mean entirely. And I can't move. You need to push on," Ranma ordered firmly. She tried to raise a hand to touch Tali's hand again, only to not have enough energy. All of her ki was basically being shunted directly to her injuries, and right now, that was... Well, with the Star Wars knowledge that Ranma had gained from Kasumi, the redhead would liken it to filling the sarlacc pit with one trenchful of sand at a time.

"You saved me," she said earnestly, staring into Tali's facemask as earnestly and emotionally as she could at the moment. "Thank you. But you gotta finish this."

Blushing more than a bit in her helmet, Tali hurriedly turned away. She moved around a bit, shifting all of the food packs and food bars on top of Ranma, causing her to grunt a little bit as they hit sore parts, but putting them well within range for her to grab and bring up to her mouth as easily as possible.

With that done, she looked over at Garrus, who shrugged but lifted up his rifle. "We'll be back. Don't worry, Ranma, we've got this."

"I don't doubt it." Ranma smiled at Tali before grabbing up another bar and munching into it, basically inhaling the thing. *I almost wish I knew that French frog's trick to enlarge my mouth at the moment*, she thought, biting into it hungrily, then stuffing another into her mouth even before that one was fully chewed.

She looked over to where Saren lay, grateful to note that after Garrus had taken a moment to put some handcuffs on Saren, both his arms and his legs, without doing much beyond bandaging his various wounds. And that he was within range once Ranma felt up for a kick. Already, her wounds to her legs were starting to heal. *Thank God they didn't have any explosive rounds or anything similar, or else I would've lost limbs, rather than simply being holed by so many bullets that my limbs looked like Swiss cheese.*

As it was, Ranma could feel her body slowly starting pushing out more of the rifle bullets that had gotten stuck inside rather than going straight through, of which there were quite a number.

That simply added to the agony that Ranma was already in. The pain in her head and in her very blood and bones showed no sign of letting up anytime soon from her recent ordeal and drowned out all the smaller agonies.

As she stared at Saren, Ranma fought the urge to push through the agony and pain to lash out with a kick right the fuck now. Even as weak as she was, if one of her legs was fully healed, a single kick would do it. A single kick would remove the most dangerous opponent Ranma had ever run into. Oh, Saren alone couldn't have hurt Ranma, not in hand-to-hand, not even with a monomolecular weapon. But he hadn't fought alone. *No, the fucker fought like a commander, plan, analyze and finally trap. Fucker could have killed me. Would have, if not for Tali... and now he's nothing but a prisoner. Damn it. Life would be so much simpler if he had died in the fight.*

"You are so damn lucky I have my Code, you Fucker," she muttered. "Whatever information we could've gotten out of you would not be freaking worth your life right now."

With a sigh, Ranma bit into another protein bar. *Gonna need to restock my whole stash at this rate. Not to mention the rest of the stuff I had in my ki space. Ugh!*

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It didn't take Tali and Garrus long to reach the command center from the semi-promenade-like area. The complex's main command room was only up another story, and then along a long hallway. It was actually closer to the surface of the mountainside than any of the other levels, leading directly up to the landing area for Peak 15 and out to a series of offices overlooking the mountainside. Indeed, those were the only offices that did so, with an equal number of apartment rooms doing the same below.

They didn't run into any further geth, but they did run into automated defenses galore. Luckily, Tali had time to gather up enough resources to turn into small drones, which flew forward to grab the attention of those automated guns. As they did, Garrus and Tali put rounds into them from a distance.

In the close confines of the laboratory, the greater distance that Garrus' sniper rifle could fire at, hadn't really mattered much at all but it could penetrate metal more easily. Meanwhile, the better stopping power of Tali's shotgun, with its larger, customized shells, actually worked far better at knocking out shields.

Soon, the pair of them were outside the door leading into the central command room. There, Tali shook her head as she connected her omni-tool to the control panel to one side of the door. Obviously, it had been turned off and locked down, but powering it up was easy, and she soon found herself once more doing battle with the geth programs within to open the door. "Oh yes, oh yes, you little scrap codes! I'm going to get rid of you as soon as I can! Full purge, that's what I'm going to do to you, scrap every single bit of code in these computers!"

"Has anyone told you that you have a way of making computer programming and cyber warfare sound incredibly bloodthirsty?" Garrus asked, wincing occasionally as the pain in his arm bothered him. It was healing, but slowly. Still, he knew you'd be right as rain within an hour, and simply dealt with the pain, a sense of pride more than offsetting it.

He had taken part in taking down a corrupt Spectre working alongside geth, an enemy no one on this side of the Perseus Veil had ever fought. While it would probably be classified to the highest degree afterward, the knowledge that he'd had some small part to play in that made him smile in his own people's fashion.

"Attention Invaders! Peak 15 is under the auspices of Binary Helix. Your attack on our property has been noted, and we have already called in Elanus Risk Control Services. If you flee out into the snow now, you might be able to hide yourself somewhere, or you can surrender," a voice bellowed from a speaker nearby.

Garrus and Tali exchanged a look, then stared up at the speaker.

"I'm sorry, but did you honestly think that was going to work?" Tali inquired politely, genuinely confused. "We fought our way through this entire place, and you're only now telling us you've called in Elanus Risk Control Services? We've fought geth from top to bottom, and you're only now trying to threaten us? Really?"

"It's got to be some kind of scientist behind that, only someone who is so lost in quantum mechanics or whatever equivalent there are in other sciences to that kind of thing would think that little speech would do anything at all at this point." Garrus snickered, a very odd sound from a turian, shaking his head and then moving his shoulder again. Yes, it was already feeling much better.

"Y, you should take this seriously! This is corporate warfare, and that holds the death penalty on Noveria!"

This time, Garrus and Tali didn't bother looking at one another, simply shaking their heads in unison. "And if you really have called the ERCS in, we'll tell them you're committing treason against all the galaxy working with the geth. Even on corporate worlds like this, some things aren't allowed. Working with AI's who clearly want to wipe out all living life is one of them."

Tali's words seemed to get through to whoever was on the other end of that conversation, if such it could be called, and they stopped trying to talk to the pair. A moment later, Tali smirked and nodded. "I've got the door controls under my control for a little bit. It'll only open partially, we'll have to get in quick."

Garrus nodded firmly, rolled his neck a little, and then backed away from the door, thumbing a grenade into one hand. "Ready."

Tali pulled away from the panel, the wires dangling from her omni-tools flickering up and into the rest of the device on the wrist of her vac suit. A second later, the door opened, just big enough for one of them to enter, and Garrus had already hurled his grenade forward the moment it started to do so. Before it was fully open, such as it would be, both he and Tali had hit the deck, and the flash bang went off even as mass effect rounds flashed up over their heads.

With her visor, Tali couldn't be blinded by the flash bang, and her shotgun barked, taking out a turian by the door, while Garrus had to look away for a few seconds before now firing into the smoke and chaos within the room.

Despite the fact that Tali hadn't used rubber rounds or anything like that, the scientists kept fighting, something that Tali remarked on as she delicately stepped over the body of one of the scientists who had been lucky enough to take a round from Garrus, rather than herself. She was frankly in no mood whatsoever to take prisoners, not after seeing what Saren and the ambush had done to Ranma, but she understood that, in the long-term, it probably was a good idea. "Does this seem strange to you? Off somehow?"

"This whole mission has been off, and everything we've seen since entering Peak 15 has struck me as highly unusual. You're going to have to be more specific."

"... I'm not sure that counts as a joke, but you are getting better at repartee," Tali mumbled, nodding her head in acknowledgment, before looking down and around the scientists. "It's just, scientists fighting to the last? I, I don't see that. That seems weird to me."

"Why? Turians certainly would. Just because a turian goes on to other things after serving his stint in the military doesn't mean he forgets how to fight." Garrus gestured to the one turian scientist in the room, the one whose chest had disappeared under a hit from Tali's shotgun.

"Yeah, but that's only for turians. I mean, most of them are humans and salarians from what I've seen so far. A few asari, and what, four turians throughout the entire complex?"

"If you ran into one, while you are on your own, then yes," Garrus agreed, still not getting it.

"Scientists aren't normally known for their courage, right? I mean, sure, if this place was as important to them as one of the ships of the Migrant Fleet is to my people, I could see it, and we would've run into a heck of a lot more traps to boot. But these are just supposed to be regular scientists, here to research something and get paid. None of the ones I fought before, or here, ever spouted any kind of rhetoric or propaganda or anything like that. So why are they fighting so hard, especially when Saren is already down and there aren't any geth around?"

Only now did Garrus understand what Tali was getting at, and he reached up to one of his mandibles, tapping it thoughtfully, creating a 'tink tink' sound that Tali could easily hear despite the sound of a few electrical fires still going on nearby. Their assault on the command center had not been gentle, even if Garrus had been mostly using incapacitation rounds. "But you're right, what did they fight so hard for? They almost fought like fanatics, but fanatics **would've** been shouting some kind of slogan or something while they were fighting us, you're right about that, too."

He snorted, then gave Tali a sideways look. "I think it's a very good thing how many prisoners we've taken so far. Maybe we'll be able to get to the bottom of it."

"Either that, or from what I can find on their systems," Tali said, ignoring his look as she moved over to the main control platform set into the center of the room. There, she sat in the same chair that Peak 15's executive or chief scientist of the complex would've used and began to quickly work her fingers along the controls, her omni-tool flashing up into existence as she did, quickly connecting into the system.

Several floating screens appeared within seconds, as Tali went to battle against the remaining geth programs within the system. "Now let's see you fight me like this, bosh'tets!"

For his part, Garrus moved to one of the other consoles, where a map of Peak 15 was displayed. He quickly checked to make sure that none of the scientists he and Ranma had taken out, or those Tali had met with previously, were moving around, or at least that was what the various security programs he now had access to were telling him. This included dozens of video cameras, and Garrus suddenly frowned pensively.

"Something else to add to the mystery. A complex like this having defenses set up along and around the command center and the apartments for its chief scientists, as well as exterior defenses make sense. But so many internal defenses throughout the rest of the complex? Whatever they were doing here, they were as worried about internal security as they were about external threats. And that is weird, especially when you add the near-fanaticism the scientists fought with."

Tali grunted in reply, her mind elsewhere, then smirked just a little bit. "Okay, I've cut off this complex from the planet's computer network. Most of the programs remaining in the system fled before I could, but there are still a few. Should I go through with it and perform a full purge? We've got prisoners to question, so do we need anything on the actual computers?"

"Spirits, yes!" Garrus swiveled around in place to stare at Tali. "Everything that is in the computer system is evidence! Don't destroy anything. If you can hunt down the geth programs, do that; if not, then we'll figure something else out."

"Blech, so much for the easy way," Tali muttered. She then twitched her neck this way and that, her fingers wiggling for a moment in a move that Garrus had seen humans and

salarians do before getting down to some serious typing, and he watched for a few seconds as she leaned over the multiple screens in front of her, causing her faceplate to light up a little bit in an unusual manner. It was almost enough to let him see more than just her glowing eyes before her fingers began to move so fast that Garrus had trouble tracking them and she moved backward a bit.

Shaking his head, Garrus pushed himself to his feet and began moving around the room, securing each of the unconscious prisoners, moving them against the walls, and then gagging them one after another. He headed down to the laboratory where he and Ranma had first taken shelter from the gas attack early on in their assault through the complex. As he went, he grabbed the hover platform that Saren had been trying to use, reporting to Ranma what they had been up to.

Ranma barely looked up from where she was still stuffing food through her mouth, but all her wounds seemed to have healed by this point. "Good to know. I'm still running on fumes in terms of my life energy, and my body is, well, it's like dealing with a full-body migraine, I guess," Ranma grumbled. "I feel so sore inside and out, it's like every cell in my body is just twitching like someone ran a live wire through it. Which is funny, considering electrocution via a normal live wire wouldn't actually do all that much to me."

"Yes, yes, you're a super soldier and you're not used to being in pain, got it," Garrus quipped, hiding his real concern for the other man behind a joke that even he could tell was somewhat lame. Thankfully for his pride, Ranma didn't call him out on it, and Garrus headed on his way, leaving Ranma there.

Ranma was still there by the time Garrus returned and began transporting prisoners down into the loading area below. This included Saren, who, under Ranma's glare, Garrus handcuffed several more times before dragging him onto the hover board. He made no effort whatsoever to heal Saren's wounds, either, unlike with some of the other prisoners.

How long this took, Garrus couldn't tell, but Tali was still at it by the time Garrus rejoined her. "Ranma's on the mend, but don't expect him to be moving anytime soon. The trick with the hot and cold water apparently really wrecked him from the inside out. And I'm talking about the molecular level, not just his actual insides."

Tali snorted at that, looking over her shoulder and Garrus for a moment, before, with a final flourish, she hit a button. "Does that surprise you? His curse completely changes his body from one form to another. Bones, innards, sex organs, everything. I can't even imagine what that must be like, being forced in one direction, then torn in the other, then torn back and forth."

"Point. I take it you're done?"

"I wouldn't say that. I've isolated each segment of the system here and caught a few more of the geth programs. I've shut down all nonessential programs, so they don't have nearly as much underlying code to hide in. It's about as much as I can do without doing a full reset on the systems here, and you already told me I couldn't do that. Still, I was able to ensure that the geth programs themselves wouldn't be able to access the memory files. Do you want me to start copying those out?"

"Only if copying them doesn't start some hidden program erasing them," Garrus warned. "For now, I think we need to call in the local security services and get them moving."

"Really? You think they'll be able to handle keeping a Specter under wraps?" Tali asked, more curious than dismissive.

"...Now that you mention it, probably not," Garrus admitted. "That only means we should call in the Council, but I'd rather just show up with Saren in chains and all the evidence instead of calling another Specter in. And then there's how they'll react to Ranma's presence."

Let alone yours, Garrus admitted internally. Council policy towards the quarians was essentially to treat them like lepers, and the Council didn't like having them around at all. Having one be so essential to proving one of their vaunted Spectres was dirty wasn't going to go over well.

"Well, Ranma and I will be calling this into Lady Benezia. She was investigating Saren, and I think she's got a right to know that we ran into him here. Which, actually, Ranma and I weren't suspecting at all. We figured we'd find something linked to him, but the man himself? That was not on my heads-up display for sure," Tali stated, chuckling wryly.

Garrus quickly went through his mind what he knew about the asari Matriarch Benezia, then slowly nodded. "...Actually, that makes some sense. And, um, having an Asari Matriarch of her level, well, her standing next to me when I present Saren to the Council would be a big help, I think."

"Good. In that case..." Tali gestured Garrus forward, and one of the nearby consuls lit up for a second. "I've got that system monitoring the rest of Peak 15's operating system for death responses. Tell me if anything happens," Tali ordered, as she began to bring down the firewall that she had set up between the local operating system and Noveria's local network and then from that, to the galaxy's greater Extranet.

Almost instantly, the remaining geth programs tried to escape as their brethren had, while other geth programs within the local network began to move. Those, Tali couldn't do anything about that from here. They escaped off-planet and into the greater Extranet, but two of them attempted to hack into her own communications network, and that Tali could do something about.

She fought back, while Garrus watched as the programs that she had labeled geth tried to move. Eventually, though, she couldn't stop them. Now no longer trying to fight her, but get away, the various runtimes quickly began to disappear, and were gone from the system before she could delete more than half of their number.

"Dammit! I knew that was going to happen. Maybe if there were a few other programmers here, we could've stopped them, but..." Tali sighed, shaking her head and leaning back in her chair. "Oh, well. Nothing we can do about it now. Short of stopping them from entering again."

I think, Tali added mentally. For all that the Migrant Fleet taught engineers like Tali ways to combat the geth runtimes, finding them once they completely tried to hide their presence was the next best thing to impossible in any system that wasn't created by a quarian with that thought uppermost in their mind.

Worse, fighting them like this almost gave her as many shivers as it did to see how alike their hands and bodies looked to her own folk. It was disturbing to see how much alike the rogue AIs were to their creators, right down to the kinds of programming the geth runtimes were built on and what the quarians used.

"But we're connected?"

Tali nodded and pointed to another system. "If you think it'll do any good to contact the locals about what was going on here, you can do so, but from that console over there. I'm going to send out a call to Lady Benezia."

"I'll do that. If only to warn the locals that someone important is going to be coming by. Do you have any idea how long it might be before she arrives?"

"Nope. I have no idea where Lady Benezia is, really. All I know is that Lady Benezia deserves to know that we captured Saren," Tali said, before suiting action to words.

It took a bit, but about ten minutes later, the connecting call went through, and Tali found herself staring at Shiala, the leader of Benezia's security team. Shiala blinked, stared at her for a few seconds, and then, to Tali's surprise, seemed to slump a bit in her chair in the pickup, as one hand rose to, in Tali's opinion, somewhat melodramatically, rub at her eyes and face. "What has Ranma done now?"

"Hey! Why do you automatically assume that Ranma did something?" Tali demanded.

Shiala blinked, then one of her brows rose, amused. "While you're leaping to his defense does you credit, young Tali, you wouldn't be calling my mistress, if there wasn't something that you wanted to either pass on or unless Ranma had bitten off more than he could chew.

Considering that is something Ranma would probably never admit to doing outside of death, it's saying it stands to reason that the first concept is more likely."

"Well, all right, but you didn't need to sound so put upon. Especially considering we've kind of done you and your lady a favor," Tali shot back. For some reason, the look on Shiala's face made Tali want to both defend Ranma and scrunch her shoulders and look away as if her Auntie Ran had found Tali doing something she shouldn't.

"Does that mean that you have discovered another spy network to hand off to us?" Benezia inquired as her face suddenly appeared alongside Shiala's. It was a split-screen, showing that the two of them were in different places, though what that amounted to, Tali couldn't tell. Unlike Shiala, though, Benezia was looking at Tali with a flicker of amusement. "Although I doubt that Ranma is the type to give the same gift twice."

"He isn't, at least, well, I don't think so. Anyway, not in this case. We've... well, we ran over Saren. We picked up clues that he was involved in some kind of project on..."

As the two shocked asari stared on, Tali quickly ran through what they'd been up to since they had seen Benezia in person, which actually wasn't all that long ago. *Barely a week and a half, if that*, Tali thought even as she spoke.

Shiala began to shake her head, then smirked, before finally collapsing into laughter, saying something about trails, backlogs and out there, really, Tali only got a few words out of there, and it sounded as if Shiala was both praising and cursing Saren's abilities. Benezia, for her part, simply smiled and shook her head, a finger coming up to tap her chin as she stared at Tali. "Bringing back Bera'van'tuwan and now proven to be a Cali'vari. Ranma certainly is an interesting one. You all just randomly ran into pirates allied with geth, who then got you on the trail of Saren and this operation on Noveria? The odds of such a thing must be astronomical, and yet, we do seem to live in very interesting times."

"What does that phrase mean, Lady Benezia?" Tali asked politely. She was still a little intimidated by the Asari Matriarch and wasn't unwilling to show it.

"I will explain when I arrive, child. Unfortunately, that will take a number of days. You, Ranma and young Garrus will all need to stay there and guard your prisoners until then. Yet I can get in touch with some local factors from various asari connections on the planet, just in case you need some backup and authority."

The way she said that last word caused both Tali and Garrus to sit upright. While the Elders of the Asari Republics didn't wield as much direct power, or at least didn't seem to, as the leaders of other species might, that didn't mean they were without such. And someone like Benezia wielded a LOT of power.

"I believe you can also attest with the geth platforms there as to local authority. I will also start laying the groundwork for bringing Saren in under the guise of treason against the Citadel Council. With how much evidence you've found on site, that actually might not be all that difficult, but keeping it under wraps, and making certain that the geth don't successfully send forces in to try and free him in some fashion will be more difficult. Forward me any information and software upgrades that you can to keep such, what do you call them, runtimes out of our systems."

"I can send it directly to you, that's fine," Tali replied instantly.

This took a bit, but afterwards, with Garrus having already called in, the pair of them were done in the command center. Garrus placed the last two prisoners on top of the hover, knocking both of them out gently as they had begun to stir, before heading down the corridor with Tali beside him.

She was again looking at a map of Peak 15 for a few moments, humming thoughtfully to herself in her helmet, an oddly jolly sort of sound to Garrus' ears, when they came to where they had left Ranma. She was gone, and Tali blinked, staring at the large pile of discarded food containers that she had left behind. "Where's that fool man gone now?"

"You've got the run of the video cameras, you tell me," Garrus snorted. "Oh, and it's she, still."

Blinking inside her helmet as she hadn't actually remembered having camera access for a moment, Tali did so, although something in her body language must've carried over as Garrus began to snicker in his own people's equivalent. Tali flashed him a middle digit, a human gesture that had astonishingly been among the first to cross over from their species to every other species that had fingers. Eventually, she shrugged. "I guess that makes sense. Ranma's down in the receiving bay."

"Guarding the prisoners? Good thinking." Garrus then yawned, his mandibles stretching wide for a second, before shaking his head. "Sorry, it's been a long day."

"You're telling me," Tali agreed, shaking her head. Thankfully, quarians were kind of endurance monsters when it came to going without sleep or with a lot of low-key exercise.

The two of them made their way through the now-empty hallways of Peak 15 down to the landing bay where their assault had begun, finding Ranma glaring at Saren, who was still unconscious. Ranma stood across from the prisoner, several of the other prisoners now sporting bruises on their heads that indicated Ranma had knocked them out again, unlike Saren.

"You do know that he's not going to be able to get up out of those cuffs anytime soon, right? I mean, I stopped the bleeding, but he's still dealing with quite a bit of head trauma thanks to Tali here," Garrus reminded them as the two of them entered.

Ranma turned, her expression, which had been dark and brooding, shifting into a smile. "Hey, you two, finished with all the computer stuff?"

"Computer stuff and calling in long-term help. The locals don't want to be involved in whatever is going on here and are a little leery as to what this might mean in terms of the geth and the Council alike. They had me give a verbal agreement to state to any follow-on investigation that none of the other corporations, or indeed Binary Helix, knew what was going on here, and that whatever it was, it was all Saren's doing. Since that was in fact the case, I gave it," Garrus answered, while Tali ignored that, moving over to gaze down at Ranma from barely half an inch away.

When Garrus finished speaking, she raised a hand as if to touch Ranma's face, before pulling it back, letting it fall back to her side, her whole body radiating shyness for a second. "Um, a, are you sure you're okay? You, you were looking really freaking ragged, and I don't just mean the visible injuries you took."

"I'm still dealing with a lot of pain from that. That's actually part of why I'm still wrestlin' with the idea of killin' Saren. The only thing holding me back right now is the fact that he's unconscious and our prisoner. If he had still been awake by the time I reached him, I probably would've killed him, regardless of what might happen after," Ranma admitted.

That experience, that's something I'd only felt once before, and that for a short time. I hope to Amaterasu that I never have feel it again! The redhead thought grimly.

"Well, I'm very glad that you're remembering he's a prisoner, and that he's got a lot of questions to answer," Garrus snarked, shaking his head. "I'd also try to stop you, and given how ragged and slow you're still moving, I might even have a chance of doing it."

"A small chance," Ranma snorted, to which Garrus groaned. She looked back at Saren again, her fingers beginning to twitch as if they wanted to form a chop or a fist and couldn't quite decide which.

The sight of this caused Garrus to actually shuffle between him and Saren. "Ranma, I'm serious. We need to know why he's working with the geth, not just the fact that he **is**. Given what Lady Benezia told me about her search for Saren, this has been going on for a long while. We need to figure out why the most decorated Spectre in the last five hundred years turned against the Council, and not just the Council, but all sentients in the galaxy. Tali, back me up here."

Tali frowned inside her helmet, then shrugged. "I'd slice his throat and get on with it. He works with the geth, that's enough reason for me. And while I might be interested in learning why, I definitely would prefer him dead." On top of that, Tali had come within hearing range of the battle before actually being able to see anything, and her audio receptors had clearly picked

up the sounds of Ranma screaming. That was a sound she never wanted to hear again, thank you very much.

Ranma smirked, waving her hands towards Tali as if to say, 'see?' but Garrus just rolled his eyes. "All right. Why don't you go exploring a bit and maybe find some more food for Ranma? I'll watch the prisoners."

"I don't think I could actually eat anything right now, my body's still digesting everything I already grabbed," Ranma muttered, before sighing. "You're right, though. I came down here to watch the prisoners, but seeing Saren, remembering the ambush, it made my fists itch. Yeah, I'll remove myself from temptation."

"Feeling temptation like that is fine, acting on it wouldn't be, and you didn't. Now go on, I'll watch the prisoners, and Saren in particular," Garrus soothed. He stood there watching as Tali slowly began to pull Ranma away.

As the door closed behind them, Garrus shook his head and moved over to sit on a storage box of some kind. "Well, that was a thing," he murmured, before touching his shoulder gingerly, his mind going through everything that had happened since that initial ambush by the geth. "I don't know what you were up to, Saren, but I hope it was something interesting, at least, and not simple greed. I'd hate to have gone through all this effort for something so plebian, and I have no idea what Ranma will do if that's the case. He might not hurt you, but that leaves so much room for interpretation..."

OOOOOOO

At first, Ranma and Tali just retraced their steps, heading upwards again, having no real set destination. Ranma had the idea of heading into the hydroponics area. Spending some time there, particularly after their time out in the snow, sounded like a great idea to her. Nevertheless, as they neared the floor where they could access the hydroponics garden itself rather than its separate control room, Tali paused, humming thoughtfully.

The sound made Ranma smile, and after a second, she hesitantly reached out, grabbing Tali's hand. Tali blinked, shifting, and looking over at her and Ranma kept smiling at her. "I don't think I said it loud enough the first time. You saved my life, you know. I was at the end of my rope there, and then you come in and introduce your wrench to that asshole's face. Heh, like some helmeted, and kinda violent, guardian angel."

Tali knew what an angel was, having watched several hundred human movies and TV shows with Ranma over the time they'd been traveling together, and now she felt herself blushing so hard her vac suit's environmental systems went to work cooling her down, the interior becoming cold against her skin, and her helmet's air conditioner went to work.

But despite her embarrassment, Tali could only look down at their joined hands for a moment. She'd gotten used to Ranma being so expressive, but the sight of their interlinked fingers was still sending a strange tingle through her body. "I, er, of course I wasn't going to just stand by and let Saren try and kill you. I, I got lucky."

"Maybe, but ya still saved my life." Ranma smiled widely and then released her hand, giving Tali a wink even as she fought the urge to pull Tali into a hug. "Just, y'know, want ya to know I'm grateful, even if I hope never have to repay that."

Tali might have objected to that and reminded Ranma that he (currently she) had already saved her life several times, but Ranma would have argued back that she was in danger all those times because of him since they'd met. Still, Tali might have objected to it if not for how her mind went blank for a few seconds as that wink and the look in Ranma's face caused her heart to feel as if it was going to burst out of her chest. Added to the fact that her blush had yet to subside, and Tali was near to hyperventilating. "Er, w, well, that's what friends are for, right!?" she nearly squeaked.

"I guess. Ain't had very many of that before coming ta this universe, so it's not something I'm used ta." Ranma shook her head. "And um... never had more'n that, either."

Looking down at Ranma, Tali could only nod, understanding what had been left unsaid there, what it implied about where the two of them were going, which made her heart go pitter-patter even harder, while her logical mind tried hard to fight against it. *Keelah, Tali, don't you do it, curse this vac suit, curse my need for it to the deepest depths of unknown space! Even if you and Ranma are getting closer, nothing can come from it, not unless the romantic bosh'tet's right about how he can train you to use your ki. That's a long way in the future, damn it.*

Thankfully for Tali, Ranma, while not understanding her real thoughts, did understand embarrassment and liked to push past it as quickly as possible. "So, um, what were you humming about?"

"OH, Well, I think I found two of the main experiments they were running here," Talia answered, grateful for the change of subject. "One I ran into initially before, the one with its own control center and that chunk of debris that they were working out how to unthaw because someone is in it or something. The other one I just found is on another floor, and it's in its own separate lab. It's just the chunk of unknown metal, apparently. I want to go look at it."

"Why?" Ranma asked, cocking his head. "I mean, I could understand maybe looking at some unknown metal, I'm a blacksmith, that's one of my main areas of interest. But you're an engineer. Is it a piece of circuitry or something?"

"No, that's just it, it's listed in the computers as a completely unknown metal. But Saren apparently brought it in right at the start when he began to take over. I..." Tali had gone back to

looking at whatever her omni-tool had been showing when she had begun to hum and now paused as she continued her work. "Huh...there are a lot of logs about people going in and out of that laboratory, but I'm not seeing any records of actual experiments being run on the metal. Weird."

Ranma frowned a little but shrugged. That did seem a little weird to her, but she was the boy with a gender curse that currently had him as a girl, so she knew that she didn't really have any legs to stand on when it came to weirdness. "Okay, let's go look."

Tali nodded and led the way. The piece of metal was not in one of the labs that Ranma and Garrus had entered on their pell-mell charge through the complex, but it was just as big as the botanical garden that supplied Peak 15 with all its air. This was odd because the actual piece of metal was only about five feet high and the same width.

The metal sat in the center of the room, just resting there, held between two magnetic clamps. The rest of the room was just empty, as if it had been a lab at one point, but this thing had been stuck here, and no one had bothered to bring in any equipment or anything since. The metal itself also looked like regular steel, perhaps a chunk of armor from a ship of some kind? Regardless, it didn't look all that unusual.

However, Ranma began to frown as her eyes lingered on the thing. Some sixth sense had her hackles rising as she began to take a step forward without her own volition. *Why is it so interesting? Why do I suddenly want to get closer to it? Why are my legs moving without me telling them to?* Her steps slowed, and she began to pull away, scowling.

Tali stepped around him, staring at the metal. She moved forward, looking at it, her hand outstretched despite the fact that there were six yards or more between her position by the door and the metal. "Keelah se'lai..."

Before she took another step, Ranma grabbed her arm, holding her still. The taller girl tried to pull away, but Ranma was firm, and Tali might as well have tried to pull away from a mountain. For all that Ranma was smaller than her in this form, she was still a great deal stronger. "What're you doing, Tali?"

"I, I want to touch it. It looks fascinating. I want to---"

Ranma scowled then, staring at the thing, as she also felt almost subconsciously reaching for it, reaching to touch the metal. "What the heck? I, why would I want to just touch a random piece of metal, I... what is this?" she growled, shaking her head.

The thought was there, the thought to touch the metal, why wouldn't she, why shouldn't she? But Ranma had dealt with a few hypnosis incidents back in his old life, mainly from Tweedledee and Tweedledum, or when one of the girls after him (or one of the boys after

Ranma's female form) found a magical item that could change how someone acted. She knew the pull of someone trying to mess with her mind, and this was giving off the same feeling.

Unlike magic, Ranma could fight this. "No, I'm not going to touch it, I'm not going to touch it and neither are you." With that she began pulling Tali away firmly.

If Ranma needed any proof that she was right on this, the fact that she had to literally drag the taller girl away proved it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Again, Ranma felt the pull of whatever it was, but with a growl, she hefted Tali up into the air with one arm, tossing her towards the doorway, causing her to shriek with a shout of, "What the, you, Ranma, the heck you doing, bosh'tet!"

"Just stay there, damn it!" with a growl, Ranma turned, her hands glimmering with heat for a second. While her body was still dealing with the pain of the constant changing and transforming and wanting to be one and the other, Ranma's ki reserves had built up a little bit. Enough to use the heating technique he had learned from Master Vulcan. "So, you want us to touch you, huh? Well, prepare for the very definition of a bad touch!"

With that, she lunged forward, slamming his hands onto the metal. His hands heated to the point where they were white-hot, almost like a plasma torch, but after a second, Ranma, grimacing, changed tactics, concentrating. "Moko Takabisha!"

The drain was immense, and Ranma felt herself nearly slump, but, to her shock, instead of blasting through the metal, Ranma found herself propelled backward, her ki attack acting like a rocket's exhaust, hurling him away. She slammed into the far wall hard enough to hurt a normal person, but not enough to hurt Ranma, who flipped even as she flew through the air.

Landing in a crouch against the wall, Ranma charged forwards again, the heat haze disappearing from her hands. Instead, as the mental attack continued to attempt to burrow into her, as Tali moved forwards again towards it, she called on one of her deadlier techniques, the Umi-Sen-Ken. "Kijin Raishu Dan!" she shouted, lashing out with his vacuum blades.

Six blades of absolute nothingness slashed out, slamming into the metal, and Ranma's eyes widened in shock as they only buried themselves into it, not cutting through it as they should have. "Wat... How..."

"Amazing," Tali breathed, moving forward again.

With a grunt of effort, Ranma lurched sideways toward her friend. Wrapping an arm around Tali's middle, she began to drag her back again, even as her own mind began to waver, her anger and fury at the thing beginning to dissipate into wonder, shock and interest, something that Ranma knew came from the metal, not from her. With a final heave, she tossed Tali out of the room through the doorway and followed up, quickly shutting the door.

Tali scowled, trying to push past her. "Ranma! You're being irrational; it's just a hunk of metal. I need to analyze it. If it's so tough and the Migrant Fleet can replicate it, then my people, we could use it on our ships and..."

Ranma grabbed her arms, twirled her around, then lifted her up onto her shoulders in a fireman's carry when Tali tried to get past her again. "Nope! That is the big old metal of nope! Can't burn it, can't blast through it, can't even use my vorpal blades on it. It wants to touch it and I ain't gonna do that, thank you very freaking much!"

"But you already did! You put your hands on it, right? Nothing happened to you. Ranma, come on! You're really not acting like yourself."

"And you want to fondle a strange piece of metal that stands alone in an empty laboratory with nothing around it, no sensors, no scanners, no equipment, that's normal?" Ranma growled back. "And as for my touching it, only for a second. I could tell right away I'd need to generate a **LOT** more heat than I normally do to do anything to it."

Was Ranma a little scared right now? Yes. Mental attacks like this were no joke, and Ranma was still in pain and weak from his exertions. She very much did not want to face whatever that was. Regardless of what the message or whatever it might try to do to her. "I think there's a reason why it's isolated, and I ain't gonna deal with this!"

"It wasn't isolated, though. I told you all of the..." Tali paused, and Ranma felt her stop trying to fight them, instead simply hanging loosely over her shoulders. "I saw the access logs for that lab. A lot of the scientists went into that room and, for extended periods of time. I... Oh. Could that be why they were so willing to fight us? Why did none of the scientists even try to surrender?"

"Maybe." Ranma slowed her pell-mell race away from the thing, cocking her head to one side to look into Tali's facemask from barely an inch away. *And I still can't see much beyond her glowing eyes, darn it.* "You feeling better in there, now?"

"I..." Tali shook her head, then leaned forward, placing her facemask against Ranma's face. If not for the color of the visor and her glowing eyes. Ranma should have seen her face, but as it was, all Ranma could see was shadow, a hint of a chin and some of her lower face, her eyes creating further shadow within the helmet, but not enough to stop Ranma from seeing Tali's lips curving into a smile.

That was more than enough to cause Ranma to blush a little, and his gaze became more like a stare as she looked back at him with that small smile barely visible. "You know what you said about you needing to pay me back for saving your life? I think we can call it even now, since you might have just saved my mind. You're right, Ranma, I'm an engineer, not a metallurgist. I wouldn't be able to get anything out of a simple chunk of metal; I don't have the know-how. I could download some stuff, but I didn't even do that. I just wanted to suddenly touch it."

Looking away and trying hard not to blush even more as Tali almost tried to hug him from her position hanging on her shoulders, Ranma leaned sideways. This let Tali slide off Ranma's shoulders, a sensation that made the redhead shiver, as Tali had removed her chest plate at some point while working to clear Peak 15's operating system of geth. Her suit still had far more padding and metal bits up top, but it was more than enough, how soft she was up there, on top of the earlier glimpses of her face, to keep Ranma's blood pressure up.

"So... What do we do now? What the hell is that metal?" Tali asked seriously.

"I don't know. I just think we need to stay away from it." Ranma shook his head grimly. "From what I saw, I was able to damage it a little bit with my... well, call it my ultimate technique, I suppose. It's not one I like to break out, because it is literally a technique to kill. If you hit something with it, they're dead. Plain and simple. But that metal, it withstood it. And I've previously tried that technique on a lot of other metal samples since coming to this world." That had been one of the ways he'd spent his time on Mostromos.

Hesitantly, Tali used her omni-tool to connect to the cameras installed in the laboratory they had just left, looking at the damage. "I...I think you did damage it a bit. I can see slash marks on the metal facing that weren't there when we were in there before." She resolutely turned off the video camera, then looked back at Ranma. "Do you think we need to lock the door or bar it somehow? Right now, my mind is feeling a lot clearer than it did, but, but what if whatever influence it has comes back or something?"

"I don't think it will. We weren't exposed to it for that long. That was bad enough, admittedly, but still. On the other hand, if any of the prisoners wake up and try anything, then... Ranma frowned a little, then looked back the way they'd come towards the empty lab in the metal there. "Is there anything but rock above us?"

"Oh, um..." Tali booted up the map of Peak 15 and stared at it. "We're going to be under the next floor up at the intersection up ahead, but here and going back towards that lab, there's only stone."

That wasn't unusual for Peak 15, which both of them had learned by this point, but it was useful right now. "Good. In that case, why don't you head forward for a bit? I'm going to bring the roof down."

"You know, when normal people say that, they mean they're going to put on a performance or something. They don't mean it literally," Tali mock-grumbled, even as she moved further down the hallway. She had reached the steps leading up to the next floor when there was a rumble behind her. Yelping, she grabbed onto the railing, expecting the whole mountain to start quaking, but it didn't. They were buried too deep under solid stone for that.

The noise was still a worrisome, but after a few moments, Ranma came up to her, smirking just a little bit. "Well, unless someone takes a lot of time, or is as strong as me and able to lift hundreds of tons of rock in neat boulder-sized segments, I think we're good."

"You do know that there are tools and such like that kind of thing, right? Or someone could just blast through it," Tali drawled, more to be contrary than anything else.

"I know, but doing any of that with only hand-held items is going to be difficult, and you, Garrus and our prisoners don't have access to that kind of thing."

"You have a point." Tali then linked her arm with Ranma, grinning inside her helmet. "Well, we have a sort of answer to what might be behind all the scientists acting so weird here, shall we see what they were actually experimenting on then?"

"... You're liking this whole mystery thing, aren't you?" Ranma asked, shaking her head, causing Tali to let loose one of those giggles Ranma enjoyed so much. "Sure."

Moments later, the two of them entered the laboratory, where the strange chunk of ice was located. The computers were still running analyses, trying to find a way to thaw the individual without hurting them or, more importantly, damaging their brain. This would be an extremely delicate process, of course. Work on it hadn't even begun yet, something that Ranma questioned.

"Don't look at me, I've no idea. Heck, I don't even know what's frozen in there. Its name is something I've never heard before."

"Let's go get Garrus, maybe he knows something."

Tali rolled her eyes inside her helmet and held up her omni-tool. "We have this thing called communications equipment. We don't need to walk down there ourselves, you luddite."

Garrus joined them around fifteen minutes later, crossing his arms as he stared through the viewport at the large chunk of frozen ice and rock. "So, we have a mysterious metal that tries to get into your head and make you touch it, which still sounds very weird even as I say it. We have a decorated Spectre turning against the Council and working with geth. And then we have something or other frozen in the ice here, with scientists who act like fanatics, probably thanks to the weird metal. This is all adding up to a very strange mystery."

"That's another point. Why so many scientists for just studying this thing?" Ranma scowled, crossing her arms. "Was there something else they were going to be doing?"

Garrus nodded. "Something dangerous for sure. All that internal security we ran into. And..."

Tali held up a hand, showing the map of Peak 15 again. She pointed to a few of what had been labeled as laboratories, then showed video recordings from inside. They all looked as if they were more about keeping something inside, like a pen, almost, or as if you were going to observe an animal. Ranma had never seen the like before, although bits and pieces did remind him of a few farms and such like he'd seen.

Yet Garrus had seen such things before and frowned. "Those labs remind me a lot of history videos we've seen of attempts to militarize varren. What the heck? Don't tell me someone's going to be going down that road again. It's never worked!"

"Maybe, or maybe something else. Maybe this rachni thing---"

Now it was time for Garrus to interrupt Tali, his face shifting into the turian equivalent of a look of horror. "Wait, what! What do the rachni have to do with this?!"

"You know what that is?" Tali asked, beating Ranma to it as they both looked at Garrus.

"Yes! I know what the rachni are, you---" Garrus sighed, raising a hand to his eyes. "Right, Ranma's not from around here and not the history-oriented one of the two. And you're an engineer and probably never even cared about history."

"Hey! I cared about **my** people's history!" Tali announced, slightly offended.

"No, no Tali, you hadn't mentioned it to me! Huh, is that where I know that name from?" Ranma muttered, shrugging. "I've never heard of it before."

"Well, whatever. That makes what happens next simple: we burn this thing to ash."

"Wait, what? You're going to unpack that a bit." Ranma held out a hand sternly. "You're the one who told me I can't kill Saren since he's a prisoner, and now you're telling us that not only should we not free the bug, but we should kill it when it's helpless and entirely under our power? Why?"

"The rachni was a bug-like race that the Council came into contact with after going through a mass relay to try to explore a new area of the universe. They attacked, completely unprovoked, and were basically beating the Council, which at the time was comprised of only the salarians and asari. In their desperation to fight the rachni, the salarians uplifted the krogan to fight for the Council. The krogan then went to war against the rachni, beating them back and eventually winning, going into each hive and clearing them out. But of course, they then began to expand, putting the salarians and asari on the back foot until my people were contacted by the Council. We joined, and we helped beat back the krogan—"

"Along with biological weapons that made it so nearly every child the krogan have is stillborn. That part I remember clearly," Ranma grumbled, scowling just a little.

Garrus stared, but in the end simply shrugged. For some reason, many humans acted that way when learning about the genophage, which was just strange to most turians and salarians. Better to make certain the krogan couldn't become an issue rather than pay for their violence in the blood of your own race, right? Still, enough humans had reacted negatively to it that the rest of the races simply acknowledged it and moved on.

"Okay, I understand the Council has issues with the rachni and vice versa, but I'm still not going to push that button. Whatever else, the bug in there hasn't done anything specifically to me or mine. Heck, we don't even know if it was involved in those wars. The computer systems here say it's been frozen for a long while, right?"

"About a thousand years, yeah," Tali answered. "The length of time is why the computers and scientists needed to research how to thaw the rachni without damaging it."

"So, from right around the time those wars began to end. Okay, so **maybe** it was involved in them. But this is still a moral question, like killing Saren once he was a prisoner. We've got this thing under our power here. It's not going anywhere. It's still frozen in ice. Killing the rachni like this, it feels wrong. And remember that these scientists were also trying to thaw it out for some reason."

Garrus fell silent, looking over at Tali. He was still a little annoyed that Tali hadn't thought to mention the precise nature of the creature that had been frozen, but he kept his voice polite regardless. "Can you tell me anything about what kind of Rachni this is?"

"A queen. And I guess if the rachni are bug-like, that means it can reproduce?" Tali asked. There were no actual bugs aboard the Migrant Fleet, so her knowledge of bugs in general was extremely limited. And even after leaving the Migrant Fleet, she'd only learned about cockroaches and other pests of that nature.

"Great. A Rachni Queen, the kind that could, historically, birth enough rachni to overrun whole planets in weeks. Stuck in the middle of a mystery," Garrus grumbled, but looking at Ranma's face, he could tell that she wasn't going to budge. "I am now exceedingly happy that you called in Benezia, because I very much do not want to make any kind of decision on anything that happens with this thing, and I also don't want word of anything of this nature to get out," Garrus grumbled.

The decision was then made to wait until Benezia and her commandos arrived, although Ranma was somewhat annoyed, as that would take a few weeks. That would be **very** annoying, but at least this place had plenty of food, room to roam, and so forth. *Besides, he reflected as they left the area, maybe more of the geth will arrive. And this time, we'll be on the defensive. A chance to fight them out in the open again would be nice, where they can't rely on tricks, traps and so forth. And until then, I can start training Tali again.*

Decision made, the three of them left the lab, ensuring the rock would remain quiescent for now. Someone smarter and wiser than the trio could figure out the next move with that thing.

OOOOOOO

As events in Peak 15 slowed, those for Herb and Wrex were reaching a kind of crescendo.

"I would ask you precisely at what point we lost control of this situation, but frankly, I think that began the moment we left the shuttle behind," Herb muttered, crossing his arms as he stared at the clan of krogan charging up the slope towards him and Wrex. There were hundreds of them, all of them forging inexorably up the side of the mountainside, which here had been carved to look like a series of stairwells, interconnected with walled walkways.

Behind them, the entrance to a cave loomed. Finding this place had been the culmination of days of questions, and their first attempt to enter the cave system beyond, which may or may not house the city of a long-dead clan and its records of ancient times, had run into a trap. The first of many, both Wrex and Herb had been certain. So, they had taken the opportunity to create a kind of base camp at the entrance.

For some reason, doing so had been seen as an act of aggression by one of the nearby clans, the Gatatog. Wrex had gone out to talk to them the night before, but whatever he had said apparently hadn't had a positive reaction.

"Ha, that's a joke, pyjak! This situation is perfectly under control, for Tuchanka." Wrex grunted, cocking his shotgun, and leveraging it, waiting for action with a vicious grin on his face. "If these youngsters want to show they've got a quad between them, then I'm more than happy to oblige."

"You might have a point, but it isn't one I like. Still, at least with this problem, unlike with the issues with hunting down Clan Crona, come in the form of something I can actually punch," Herb grumbled before cracking his neck and charging down the slope towards the incoming krogan.

Wrex stared for a moment, then guffawed and followed after, grinning. *Well, I suppose that as much trouble as this has been, it's never been boring!*

End Chapter

As you can see, the next chapter will shift to Herb and what he's been up to. This will come in the form of a semi-flashback, 'while Ranma was busy with ***** and long before they found the cave leading to *****' kind of scene, followed by the rest of his time on Tuchanka and Wrex's first ki blast. It will be more Tomb Raider/National Treasure-type adventures for a

bit. Then we'll go back to Ranma, show a few important bits elsewhere, then Benezia and the rest arrive and a certain queen is unthawed.