

I don't own ME or Ranma. I think I can end a series better than either, even if I haven't had all that much practice with doing so, LOL.

This was the winner of the Ranma poll this month. Hope you all enjoy some good ol' Tali/Ranma awkwardness, and some more... unconventional warfare with Herb and Wrex.

This has been edited by Grammarly and Hiryo. Undoubtedly there will still be small mistakes, but hopefully not enough to bother your enjoyment of the chapter.

Chapter 18: Prep Time Is Important

At around the same time that Herb and Wrex were exploring the city of Clan Crona, Ranma woke up in the series of living quarters the trio had made their own, soon after their argument about the frozen Rachni Queen. In other words, pretty much right as the last dregs of adrenaline left Garrus and Tali, making them nearly as tired as Ranma was.

These rooms, six small bedrooms and a communal sitting room, seem to have been designed to give a group of executives, or, here, senior scientists, their own little area of the complex, complete with refresher stations in each of the bedrooms, but not a kitchen, not even a fridge. It did have a TV, though, which dominated the only wall without a doorway.

Tali had already commented that several of the seats at least looked comfy. Some of the work on those rooms hadn't been finished, but Ranma felt the refresher station in his room was far more enticing. He'd made extensive use of it for a bit the night before, then collapsed into sleep so deep he might as well have been a corpse given everything that had happened.

Ranma would probably still be asleep given his exertions, and how low his ki reserves were but his stomach roaring at him like a T-rex had woken him up. He stared blearily down at it, one hand rising to rub sleep from his eyes. "I get the idea, you bottomless bastard." Another roar seemed to answer him, and he grumbled, but pushed himself out of bed with some difficulty. "Fine, fine, I'm up, Master."

How long he was out, Ranma didn't know, but it was very much not long enough. *Still better to make a full day of it, I guess. Get Tali up, exercise, train, and then... what? Well, whatever, I suppose a few days of just lying around after that fight sounds good, really. Even if I'd prefer... well, a real sky and everything above me. Suppose I can't complain though, not given what Tali and the quarrians have to deal with.*

Looking through the other rooms, he found Garrus still asleep. He had taken off his omni-tool and set it on the bed beside him, with the security cameras from the cargo area where they had dumped all the prisoners, feeding it information in real time. Whether or not that meant

Garrus had been woken up at some point in the night, Ranma couldn't tell, but the prisoners in the view weren't doing much at the moment, so that was good enough for him.

Seeing Saren, who one of the cameras concentrated on entirely, quickly made Ranma's fists itch, and he left, forgetting for a moment the desire to wake Garrus up to have breakfast. *Part of me still wants to make that aho's head go splat. He came way, way too close to killing me by leaning into the weakness of my curse.*

Even stepping away, and moving to the bedroom Tali had taken, wasn't enough to stop a full-body shudder go through Ranma at the memory of the **pain** he'd been in. The raw, cell-deep, soul-wrenching agony of being torn between his forms, hot and cold water hitting him at once. Looking back, it was only Ranma's self-preservation that had kept him moving.

Ranma stood there for a few moments, staring at nothing, before shaking his head. *By Amaterasu, I hope I don't run into that for a good long while. Like never freaking again. That would suit me just fine.*

Shaking that thought off, Ranma moved to look into Tali's room. To his surprise, Tali was already awake. She was sitting up in bed, her omni-tool open in front of her, lines of what Ranma recognized as code scrolling across. Something about the way she sat, or the rumpled nature of the bed, bothered Ranma a bit.

"Still looking for more geth? I thought ya said they had all been killed or fled before you could catch them?" Ranma questioned as he stepped into the room.

Tali let loose a cute yelp, her body jolting for a moment in place. "Gah, Ranma, don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Um, I wasn't sneaking. You're facin' towards the door; how the heck did you not see more through your omni-tool's screen? It isn't solid state," Ranma chuckled, even as his eyes narrowed as a wild surmise hit him. "Have you been up all night?"

"Eh..." Tali twitched a finger, and a digital clock, its face reversed from Ranma's perspective, popped up in one corner of the omni-tool's screen. "I guess so. Huh. Well, I wanted to make doubly sure there were no geth left in Peak 15's operating system, or any of its connected computers. I also wanted to see and make notes of any differences to the coding after their passage. That kind of thing could be used in the future like those people in strange hats looking for trails in those movies you like, about that place that looked so weirdly unsettled and vast. The ones with the strange, red-colored humans who use bows and arrows."

"Westerns," Ranma supplied, now by the bed, looking down at Tali with some consternation at her rambling. *Huh, haven't heard her get that chatterboxy since the first time she had access to the Shadow Broker's system. Yep, she pulled an all-nighter.* "Ya should've gotten some sleep, Tali. Yesterday was hard on all of us. We all needed to crash out, not just me."

“Yeah, those. And I’m fine, Ranma. Nothing that some stims won’t cure.” Tali waved him off, trying to go back to what she had been doing. “I wanna get this done before Lady Benezia rides to our rescue again because I know you’ll want to move on as fast as possible.”

“Ehh, I almost think of Bene’s actions more as a mom who comes in and cleans up after our messes,” Ranma quipped, moving towards the bed, his hands twitching.

Tali shook her head firmly. “No. Not only does that sound really disrespectful, but it doesn’t match what either of us really thinks about her. Don’t think I missed how you sometimes looked at Lady Benezia’s body, Ranma. As for me, a mom cleaning up after you isn’t something my race has. There’s no place in the migrant fleet for being disorganized or making bad use of space enough that an adult has to come in. We learn not to make messes as toddlers.”

“I realize that, and I wasn’t really being disrespectful. And it ain’t like Bene’s just coming here to help us. After all, Bene was going after Saren. We wound up doing her work for her, finding out her concerns were valid and dealing with the issue before she could,” Ranma argued, before placing a hand on Tali’s shoulder. “And if ya don’t wanna sleep, that’s fine, but I’m not letting you just lay out there working on that for the whole day. Come on, it’s breakfast time, and it’s high time we see what this place’s commissary can make for breakfast.”

They’d found the commissary late the night, despite being side-tracked when they found the weird mind-attacking metal and the Rachni Queen on ice. In Ranma’s opinion, the commissary was easily the best find of the three, and he’d been delighted to find a lot of real human-type food. Better, none of it was that horrible insult to rice he’d run into before. There was a lot of sandwich stuff, a few dozen varieties of pasta, stuff for the cook bot to make various types of bread, and more. Nothing truly fresh, save from the hydroponics gardens but nothing horrible either.

Tali twitched under his hand, but for once, the warmth from that hand failed to cause her to lean into the touch, blush or even acknowledge Ranma in any way. Instead, she turned back to her omni-tool, shaking her helmeted head firmly. “Ugh, you know meals aren’t that big a deal for me, Ranma; it’s not like my suit allows solids through the tubes, and I know you don’t like the noise it makes when I eat anyway. Go on without me.”

“Nope! Bene said it’ll take her days to get here, and that means ya’ve got time to do whatever it is you’re doing. No need to let it consume ya to this extent.” When Tali tried to wave him off again, Ranma, his hand still on the short quarian’s suited shoulder, yanked her sideways from the center of the bed toward him. Between one moment and the next, he had her twisted sideways and then up over one of his shoulders before she could fight back. “Nope! Not listening. Food time, then exercise time. No laying out in your bed for you.”

“Ranma, sto, put me down, you bosh’tet!” Tali warbled clawed hands ineffectually battering against Ranma’s back, her omni-tool having turned off automatically as she had been so badly jostled. “I don’t need food, I had momentum on my side, I was close to finding a trail that—”

“Then it’ll still be there for ya when you come back to it,” Ranma answered firmly, trying hard not to blush now. Picking up Tali like this, with her front half over his back, meant that the side of Tali’s hip was pressed up against the side of his head, and that her rear occluded his vision on his left side.

Ranma had noticed Tali’s rear, much like the rest of her body, several times. Having her rear this close, though, was another thing entirely. Tali’s butt didn’t have any of the metal bits that her chest or stomach had even before Ranma provided her with a chest plate of extra armor, which currently was laid out by her bed. While in the thighs and waist area her suit left a bit to the imagination, that was not the case with her rear.

Instead, her suit was, as far as he could tell, skintight there. Admittedly, given their discussion, he knew there were multiple thin layers between Tali’s skin and the outer world, the better to act as protective gear, even in places where metal didn’t cover the suit’s surface. But even so, Tali’s butt was obviously firm, tight, yet just a bit bouncy, right up there with Kodachi’s rear in her leotard, Shampoo in her exercise togs or even Kasumi in a bathing suit.

Yes, he hadn’t been interested in Shampoo, and knew Kodachi was as crazy as a box of honey badgers on a hunger diet. No, that hadn’t meant he was blind. And Ranma had known for several months before coming to this universe that he’d developed feelings for Kasumi, even if he’d ultimately decided not to try and start anything with her.

And this time, unlike when he’d been busy getting Tali away from the weird mind-attacking metal, nothing was grabbing Ranma’s attention enough to ignore that sight. Indeed, there was a large part of Ranma’s mind that was urging him to reach up and take a feel of that butt, to see if it was the mixture of softness and muscled hardness his instincts were telling him they would be. *Or just lean in for a bite. From this angle I... no, stop it! Hell, if you broke through her suit that might kill her anyway!*

“You know I’m not gonna give up, so don’t even bother,” Ranma said aloud, trying to shake that maudlin thought and the desires he felt away in one go. He was only partially successful. “Food takes priority.”

“Hahaha,” Garrus chortled from where he had appeared in the doorway to the room he’d taken over. It had the hardest bed of the group of mid-tier bedrooms, and his folk very much preferred that with their different physiology than asari, human or quarian. The turian had been woken up by the tumult nearby and now watched with some amusement as Ranma manhandled Tali so easily.

Watching her try to kick and knee him with her powerful legs, and Ranma just ignoring the strikes, except for one which might have hit his boy bits, was hilarious to Garrus, especially after his very uneasy sleep the night before. “I rather think that last could be your battle cry, Ranma, and I’d concede defeat if I were you, Tali. You’d need an army to get out of his grip, and you know how Ranma is with food. That’s a double impact right there.”

"Whammy, the term is double whammy," Tali grumbled. "Even I know that, Garrus. UGH. Fine. Put me down, I can walk on my own at least."

Ranma did so, but not before taking another long, long look at Tali's rear. *Tali about definitely putting her least armored ass-et forward. Oh my god, did I just think that? What the hell is this girl doing to me?!*

On her feet, Tali paused as she looked up at Ranma, who had just jerked his gaze away from her, staring over her head, a faint flush on his face. *Huh, now, I know blushing is the same for both our species, but what caused...* At that point, Tali realized where her rear had just been in relation to Ranma's eyes. *Oh... oh! And um... he liked it? I... but wasn't he looking at my rear back on that pirate base too? So, this is the second time... that's actually really flattering...*

Feeling a bit daring despite her own cheeks (her facial ones) feeling a bit warm for a moment, Tali turned away. "Well, come on. The sooner I accede to your tyrannous demands, the sooner I can get back to my work."

With that, she walked towards the entry out into the hall connecting this living area to the rest of the lab. As she walked, Tali purposefully wiggled her hips just a bit, as she had seen human women and asari do occasionally, including the ex-pirate slaves that she and Ranma had freed when they had tried to get his attention. *Well, too bad, you useless vots; Ranma never gave any of you the time of day, so HAH!*

As Tali walked away, she heard a low growl from Ranma, a primal noise that sounded halfway between a growl and a purr. At this sound, Tali's blush became even heavier for a moment, before she stopped walking so exaggeratedly and moved even faster, her courage failing her.

After a moment, Ranma followed her, his face still flushed as he tried hard to look only at the back of Tali's head rather than her backside until he caught up to her, Garrus bringing up the rear. Soon, the three of them were in the commissary, with the two dextro-protein species working together to put together a meal.

"I have never asked before, but does it bother you when we eat in front of you, Tali?" Garrus asked, looking up for a moment as a nice smell hit him. While his folk couldn't eat the levo-protein-based foods of the humans, it still smelled nice. *Best not to bring that up though, considering Tali wouldn't be able to smell it either through her helmet.*

"Oh, um, if you mean is it seen as a taunt or a socially unacceptable thing, then no. I've had lots of meals with Ranma, and it doesn't bother me. Before that..." Tali scowled, unseen in her helmet, shaking her head. "I would say several people I've been forced to take meals beside on various ships before that did tend to rub it in my face that I couldn't eat solid foods."

"Point 'em out to me if ya ever see them again, or if anyone does that to you in the future," Ranma nearly demanded, turning from where he had been putting together a few bagels and

several dozen breakfast sausages. "I'll... well, I won't pound them flat just for being assholes, but there are a few tricks I can do that wouldn't be so painful yet would stop them being able to chew their food for a bit."

While he'd never gotten into it all that much, Cologne had shown Ranma a few esoteric pressure points after he had helped capture Happosai by acting as bait in his female form. He had never bothered to work them into his normal repertoire but he still had them.

"I would say that all sounds like assault regardless. Please don't," Garrus deadpanned. "I'd almost be obliged to try and stop you, and that sounds equally painful."

Tali turned to give Ranma a smile he couldn't see bar the body language accompanying it. "I can take care of myself, Ranma, as you know. It's nice to know you think like that, but what's that phrase you told me something about sticks, stones and words? The actions of idiots like that, be they momentary coworkers or strangers, don't bother me at all."

She turned back to Garrus for a second before looking at the robot she was programming to create her own breakfast smoothie. "Although if you're asking specifically if watching a dextro-protein user eating a meal is different, the answer's still no, but with a caveat. If you were eating meals the origins of which were on Rannoch and your species just adopted them, that would hurt."

Garrus and Ranma noticed a tension come into Tali's shoulders as she leaned over the cook robot, which, thankfully, was running in silent mode, keeping the noise from the shredding and so forth necessary to make her meal to a minimum. "We still have picture books and whole recipes complete with pictures available on the various electronic libraries that show all of those, regardless of region. There was a time when they were used as educational books for young children across the Migrant Fleet. But a bit before my father was born, the practice was stopped. It was discovered to be too detrimental to good order, showing young children, some still in their quarantine rooms, food they couldn't, wouldn't ever, be able to eat."

"Yeah, I, I can see how that'd be harsh," Ranma muttered, as Garrus admitted he'd indeed been asking about other dextro-protein users.

He then quietly changed what he had been about to order the cook robots make. There were indeed dozens of meals from Rannoch that his people had adopted over the centuries since the quarians had been introduced to Council Space.

Luckily for the trio, the heavy atmosphere that had blindsided them for a moment only lasted a few seconds as Garrus cocked his head thoughtfully, staring at the veritable pile of sausages that Ranma had ordered made from the meat supplies. He had never followed a logistics line, and had no idea how meats and such were kept for long periods of time beyond freezing them, but he still had to think that pile represented an inordinate amount of it. "Ranma, I realize given your exertions the other day, I shouldn't be surprised at how much you're packing away...

despite having eaten as many energy bars as a company would be given in a day in a bare few hours... but how long are you going to keep that up?"

"Eh... probably long enough to make Bene and her followers happy they'll have access to the food on their ship, whatever it is. Huh, I wonder if she'll still be using that cruiser?" Ranma's voice shifted into a mumble for a moment as he set his food down on one of the tables in the cafeteria, before shaking his head. "As for the food, eh, at least another two days or so of heavy eating. My ki reserves are still sputtering somewhere between low and flat out empty. I didn't do myself any favors with my exertions against that weird metal thing, on top of my other exertions during the battle."

He scowled, biting into a sausage as if he had a personal vendetta against it. "I'm just grateful that my body isn't feeling as fucking sore as it was yesterday from that hot and cold bullshittery, even if it still feels a bit stiff."

"Speaking of, how likely is it the geth got away with some of the records of that battle?" Garrus questioned, moving over to the table even as he looked over at Tali. "Because I hate to say it, but if I can think of having a few troopers armed with hot and cold water guns and set them splashing on Ranma, I have to think that sentient programming runtimes would be able to do the same."

"Um... think about it, sure. Be able to use it in battle, I don't know. The geth can be very adaptable, certainly, but they didn't think of that tactic; I'm almost certain that was Saren. To use a tactic like that, the geth would need to admit that magic exists," Tali mumbled for a moment, thinking things through, while tiredness hit her all of a sudden. *Okay, so maybe Ranma was right, and I needed some food. Not gonna tell him that, stupid, sexy human would act all smug.*

Turning back to the others with her breakfast smoothie in hand, Tali joined her companions, forcing her voice to sound more normal. "I believe that the geth might be able to think of that kind of thing; however, it would be a trial-and-error sort of experiment on their side. To use that kind of tactic on a sizable scale, they do need to use one of their heavier troopers, a Geth Prime or a specially made unit to hold the cold and hot water. They are probably more likely to try to deal with different temperatures than simply water. But if we run into any geth units that don't match prior examples, we might not need to be worried."

"Ehhh, it's annoying, but I can keep a heat haze going up all around me if I really try for a while. Creating heat's no problem thanks to my blacksmith training but keeping a simple haze of heat going around me is going to be draining." Ranma held up his hands, concentrating for a moment.

His fingers glowed for just a few seconds, then began to emit heat that the others could feel, before he canceled the technique and dug into his food with even more gusto. "So long as I know it's a possibility, though, I'll deal with the drain. But speaking about a drain, how are the prisoners doing? You're the one with the connection to the laboratory security cameras, Garrus."

Garrus shrugged. "We used medi-gel on most of them, all save Saren, whose wounds we just saw to rather than healed. All of the prisoners are going to survive, although, I have to admit I'm a little concerned. Several of them woke up during the night despite being dosed with knockout juice, and immediately began to thrash, trying to pull out of their bonds, to the point where they began to hurt themselves, and I had to go down and sedate them again.

After taking a bite of his meal, which looked somewhat like an odd-colored version of meatballs and a kind of pasta, Garrus asked, "Tali, is there any way we can set up one of the repair or maintenance robots to do that for us? I realize this is probably a sign of indoctrination, and that's fascinating, but it also presents a problem. If not, we'd have to take turns watching over them lest the prisoners hurt themselves."

"I can do it, sure. As much as I got too into my work trying to find examples of changes to the background programming of the operating system here, all of the geth are gone, so we don't need to worry about any drones turning on us like the geth did to my people so long ago."

"Please do and have them meet me down there in, say, an hour and a half. I'll set them up to look over the prisoners, see if the visual sign of guards on top of their manacles gets the idea over to the scientists, technicians and so forth that they are in fact prisoners, and any further attempts to escape will only go badly for them."

"Thinking like a policeman there, rather than a soldier, Garrus. Still, you're right," Ranma joked, knowing that at one point he had dreamed of joining C-Sec, or Citadel Security. "We do need to keep a watch on those idiots. Beyond training and eating, though, maybe we can figure out a way to have some fun. And I don't mean just sitting and watching TV. That's too sedentary to me."

He pulled at his pigtail thoughtfully, then smirked. "I realize that after our experiences out there being buried under the snow and everything that, none of us want to think about being out on the snow, but maybe we could make ice slides or something."

"What is a slide? I know what a slide is in terms of sliding into cover, or sliding on grease, but you mentioned it as if it is a physical thing, and a fun one to boot," Tali questioned, frowning in confusion inside her helmet.

"Oh yeah, I don't suppose amusement parks and so forth are a thing for your folk, sorry," Ranma explained what he meant, and Tali and Garrus both looked interested. Tali had never heard of such things, and, while Garrus was aware of them, amusement parks weren't a thing for his folk either, although they did have sports, adventure exercises and hikes for people who were adrenaline junkies. Making rides and so forth like this in the snow, was something different, though, and water parks were something he knew of only by name. No turian could swim, after all, not with their carapace weighting them down.

"So long as you can make it in such a way that we're not in danger of falling deeper into the snow or ice out there, I might enjoy that kind of thing," the turian admitted. "Although if you can't

do that, I'll sit out trying it, thank you very much. With my care of it, if I get buried in the snow, it's remarkably difficult to get me back out on my own power, and just needing to wait until you come around to rescue me, Ranma, is both emasculating and annoying."

Ranma snorted about, while Tali hummed thoughtfully, wondering what kind of slides and so forth Ranma would be able to make out there. The cold wouldn't bother her much with her suit, although, like Garrus, she was a little worried about the danger involved in such things. That was an entirely different kind of danger than being in a firefight, and after they had nearly been buried alive, Tali had realized that there were more horrifying ways to go than going Dutchman and being left behind in the deep dark; not many, but they are out there.

The conversation remained on that topic for a few moments, then shifted this time again to the future. Garrus was determined to go with Saren to Benezia, or to the Citadel Council directly. He honestly had no idea what Benezia would do with the captive Spectre, but he wanted his fellow turian to answer for dealing with the geth, which he saw as high treason against the Citadel and knew that was only the start of Saren's deeds. Garrus was determined to get to the bottom of everything Saren had been up to.

In contrast, Ranma didn't care one whit about Saren. Sure, the guy had put up one hell of a fight, and in some ways, Ranma actually respected the guy. He also very much wanted him dead so that Saren couldn't come up with any more anti-Ranma tactics, as Ranma thought of them. He'd proven that time and technology could overcome Ranma's own sheer physical abilities, and Ranma very much did not want to see what the guy could come up with in the future.

But setting that aside, he figured that that guy, along with the Rachni Queen, was Benezia's problem. Ranma knew he certainly wasn't in a position to make any kind of decisions about Saren's fate, or anything else. His own opinion about the queen was that she should be allowed to be thawed and go her own way, so long as she didn't prove instantly hostile regardless of the Rachni War. It was hard for him to care about hurt feelings and fears based on a war that was old, even before his humanity started trying to set things up in orbit, let alone go to the moon or anything else. He'd make his case on that point to Benezia but the final decision would be hers.

Not for Ranma were those big-time decisions, or even worrying about what the geth might be up to elsewhere with this odd alliance. All Ranma wanted to do was take Tali back to their ship. Not the tramp freighter that they'd arrived in Noveria here in, but the one that he and Herb had commissioned back on Mostromos. It had been done, or should've been done, for at least a few weeks by this point, and Ranma still had yet to even see it, let alone take control of it.

Ranma wanted to get back to just exploring the galaxy, and find out what Herb had been up to. He'd seen in the news since arriving on Omega that his fellow martial artist had escaped the Citadel, after leaving numerous messes behind for the locals to clean up. The sight of the impromptu 'orgy' Herb had set up still made Ranma blanch in horror to even think about.

But where the Musk Prince had gone from there was anyone's guess. Nothing about him had appeared on the extranet, and even his escape from the Citadel itself was more speculation than anything.

To no one's surprise, Tali's thoughts mirrored Ranma's, with a firm, "I'm with you on that! You invited me aboard your ship even before it was named, which in quarian terms makes me a keel owner, and I **really** want to see all of these new subsystems and so forth, the new design and everything else. Beyond that, seeing the galaxy sounds like fun. Especially, with company I like, rather than hopping from one ship to another."

"Heh, that's right, I mentioned I'd want to show you a forest didn't I, a real one, and rivers, oceans and so forth. The ocean we can take care of right away, although I'll have to admit you'll look out of place in your full suit there on, so maybe that's a bad idea. Still, seeing the sights together sounds like a lot of fun," Ranma stated enthusiastically.

The way he said that last line made it feel a little more intimate than it really should have, and Garrus coughed a little as he looked away. Tali simply smiled widely inside of her helmet, and Ranma could barely make out the movements of her mouth at all. Still, it was enough, as was her heartfelt thumbs up, to tell him what she thought of that idea.

From there, Ranma asked Garrus a few questions about martial arts styles among his folk, unarmed combat in general, his opinion on it, and whether or not his folk went into specific combat styles or had ever done so in the past. According to Garrus, they really hadn't, or if they had, it was so far in the past that it was before they discovered flight and set up colonies on other planets. Admittedly, every turian, since they were mandated by law to serve in the military, did learn hand-to-hand combat, but it was seen as a last resort. Perhaps this harkened back to when they had first joined the Citadel, and been forced to fight the krogan, but Garrus didn't think so.

"Before I met you, I didn't think anyone could really fight a krogan up close, even elcor, and make it look normal, anyway. Since then, well, I've yet to run into anything that has changed my opinion of a race so much as the sight of you throwing krogan around like they weighed less than a pistol," Garrus drawled. "Those poor, poor lizard folk."

Soon, the meal was finished, and after cleaning up, despite being the only ones moving around the laboratory, there was no reason to be slovenly after all, the group left the commissary. As Ranma and Tali headed elsewhere to go through the daily exercises Ranma had set Tali as well as her training in hand-to-hand, Garrus broke off, breathing a sigh of relief as he did.

Ugh, I have felt like a third wheel lots of times on this trip, but this morning was somehow worse. Not so flirty and embarrassing, but the level of closeness they show is off-putting, the sniper reflected. While his own folk were very loving with one another, and the pair hadn't been at all touchy-feely, even being near them had made Garrus somewhat uncomfortable, despite Ranma attempting to draw him into the conversation.

As he walked towards the maintenance room, where Tali had told him he'd find the robots he could use to guard the prisoners and then the other lab where he'd find a supply of knockout juice, Garrus paused, shivering a little as some of the dreams he had the night before came back to him. Almost against his will, he held up his omni-tool and typed in a series of commands.

Instead of the image that had played on his omni-tool throughout the night from the cargo area where the prisoners were, his omni-tool now connected to a video line from the main laboratory. Soon the sight of the monstrous slab of ice that imprisoned the Rachni Queen appeared.

He stared at it for a moment, frustration and fear going through him. Frustration at the fact that Ranma had bluntly refused to kill the thing, had even threatened to defend it. Tali's response had been far more nuanced, but she had also sided with Ranma about not killing the thing, even knowing how quickly it could produce hundreds upon thousands of warriors from its eggs.

Even a single Rachni Queen could, in theory, bring back their entire race given time and enough resources. Only limited resources at that, judging by the history of the Rachni Wars. Thus Garrus, who had grown up listening to stories of that war on top of stories from the krogan rebellion, and who knew how much the rachni had been running roughshod over the Council before the krogan were uplifted to fight them, really, really wanted to kill it.

On the other hand, though, Garrus really didn't want to find out what Ranma would do if he tried to go behind their backs on something like this. It was almost certainly to be very, very painful, and he might just find himself kicked out of Peak 15 entirely. *No, as much as the Rachni Queen worries me, I'm not going to do anything about her. It. I just hope that Benezia makes the right choice there.*

To Garrus' mind, there was no denying what the right choice was, no matter how morally repugnant Ranma and Tali might find it. He simply hoped that the Asari Matriarch, who in some odd fashion was one of their chief leaders, or at least a major social dynamo within the Asari Republic, would understand that as well.

While the galaxy over students were taught about how its various governments worked, the Asari Republic's strange Council of 32 and how it really worked behind closed doors was about as transparent to Garrus as some of those mountains out there.

Soon, Garrus found the two maintenance robots, and then headed with them to the laboratory to pick up the sleepy juice. Within forty minutes of loading the sleepy juice into the robots, instead of their super glue guns, Garrus and his two robotic helpers were in the cargo area. There, the robots positioned themselves so they could watch all the prisoners at once.

Directly in the center of that group and slightly to the front of it was the battered, badly wounded Saren on a gurney. His injuries were severe, of course. Ranma had not been gentle, nor had Tali's crowbar to the back of the skull.

They hadn't been healed by the medi-gel, on hand either, as Garrus had reminded Tali and Ranma over breakfast. Rather, his various wounds had simply been seen to, sutured closed in some cases, wrapped in gauze and others. He wasn't about to bleed out or anything, but neither could Saren fight, unless he got several treatments of medi-gel. Luckily, he had only stirred occasionally during that operation and hadn't stirred since.

That's probably better for both his injuries, and my desire to take him in front of the Council alive. I doubt Ranma would be able to stop himself from killing Saren if given half an excuse. For a second, Garrus shivered, remembering the howl of raw agony that Ranma had released when suddenly splashed with scalding hot water and cold water at the same time. That kind of scream was almost bound to stalk Garrus' memories going forward, even if, at present, the Rachni Queen was taking pride of place there.

*There are so many questions here, and I'm not talking about the how of all this. Just your motivations, Saren. What did the geth want with the Rachni Queen? What did they want with **you**? Why were you working together with the geth in the first place?* Garrus thought, staring at Saren thoughtfully.

He hadn't shown it much to Ranma or Tali, but he was still very, very rattled that a Spectre, and the most decorated one of them all to boot, had worked with the geth. Whatever his reasoning, whatever excuse Saren told himself to get him through the nights, that was high treason in anyone's book. Even on a planet like Noveria, a corporate-owned world, there were limits to what you could get away with. Working with the geth, the sentient runtimes from the other side of the Perseus Veil, which had rejected their creators and nearly wiped them out, were passing such limitations at light speed.

Yet even now, looking at Saren, Garrus couldn't help but feel a bit of admiration for his fellow turian. The Spectre had certainly lived up to all the rumors about how intelligent, quick on his feet, and dangerous he was. For nearly a decade now, Saren had been held up by the rest of the Hierarchy as a shining example of their race. The number of missions he had completed, how long he had been a Spectre, they were things of legend, on top of an impeccable military record as part of the turian forces.

"Which makes me wonder all the more what the Citadel will do with you when we bring you in," Garrus mused aloud, shaking his head. "But bring you in alive I will, regardless of what happens. You have far too many questions to answer."

With that, Garrus went around the prisoners, checking on them each individually in turn, including Saren, to make certain the medi-gel and bandages were doing their work. A few of them were now sporting badly bruised and, in the case of one scientist, even broken wrists, from their efforts to break out the night before.

And doesn't that just bring another question to mind, Garrus drawled, shaking his head. *Scientists, technicians, cryo-specialists, maintenance and supply workers. Not even the turians*

among them should have been so willing to fight us as they did. Most of them didn't even fight us very intelligently. That fell to Saren and the geth. Yet all of them, man and woman, regardless of race, fought us like their lives depended on it.

That is not simple loyalty. That is indoctrination. Not just indoctrination, but a type that almost seems to do away with any sense of self-preservation. I have read about other species having various religious sects that create such thoughts, but there's no sign of that here... only that strange metal that Tali and Ranma ran into. A part of me wants to analyze it. Another part is very, very grateful I didn't run into it, given the impact the pair told me about. Still, I can hope that time away from the metal will reduce its mental indoctrination or domination, whatever the term would be in this case. We will need to be very, very careful about that when we tell.

With that done, Garrus exited the cargo area, heading to the security supply room, wanting to take inventory of what they had on hand. Tali had already done so the day before regarding food, air circulation, energy and so forth. They were good across the board for now, though with the way Ranma was eating, food might indeed become an issue in the future. While Peak 15 had very obviously been fully online, it hadn't been fully staffed or organized in terms of what was on hand and the food reflected that.

Luckily, it seemed as if the geth had brought in most of their own weapons and so forth, so there were still some weapons on hand. Enough to supply a small internal police force: fifteen shotguns, four rifles, and armor for seventeen men, designed for humans and turians. "It looked as if whoever had designed this place, hadn't intended all of the security to be fully automated or entirely based around those annoying gun platforms we dealt with," he mused, shaking his head. "If Peak 15 hadn't been used for such illegal purposes from its inception, I might admire the amount of forethought there. If, that is, I didn't know that there were a hundred or so other laboratories scattered across this whole planet that such things were standardized for."

Garrus paused for a second, then shook himself. "Joy, now I'm speaking to myself. This place is just a little too quiet."

With that, Garrus shook his head and began to grab the weapons and ammunition. These were mostly the typical mass-effect slabs of small metal that the guns themselves would shave off to turn into ammunition. But there were a few boxes of surprises, including numerous knockout, tear and stun gas. A few boxes, for some reason, stored well away from the other guns, even had the equivalent of web guns, the same kind of glue-based capture weapons that he, Ranma and Tali had faced back in that little ambush they ran into at the hotel in Port Hanshan.

Gathering them all, he hummed thoughtfully, then with a shrug, began to transport a few boxes of that last batch along with a few knockout gas grenades. He figured he might as well have them close by where they would most likely be needed if so. However, to his surprise and that of his separated comrades, this work was interrupted by a coms call and a somewhat welcome one at that.

OOOOOOO

Ranma and Tali had headed up to the living quarters segment of the complex again, but not to the area where the three of them had made their temporary home. Rather, the pair headed further up through Peak 15, to where the complex's chief manager or whatever his title would've been had his personal quarters. Tali had discovered it, while Ranma was still working his way through his ration bars after the fighting had finished and it was the only room with a view.

That view was simply of the mountainside, rather than the valley leading up to the peak, but it was still nice. Tali had told Ranma about it over breakfast, and Ranma, who had been going a bit stir crazy inside Peak 15's bland, constrained interior, jumped at the chance to look outside.

Now, having finished moving the furniture around to have enough free space to train in, Ranma set Tali to going through some calisthenic exercises. He did the same, unconsciously giving Tali something to look at, while his eyes remained locked on the vista outside the window, his body moving through the motions without any input from his brain.

"Maybe we should move up here? Or, no, there's only one bed in the only bedroom attached to this room. Funny, it isn't any bigger than any of the others," Ranma mused. "Guess he wasn't a family guy. Still, we could just spread out. It isn't like there's anyone else here that could threaten us or anything."

"That... That is true," Tali answered hesitantly, shifting from one exercise to another, in this case a series of squats. Ranma was currently doing the same, but smoother and faster, not to build up muscles but to limber up. "It never occurred to me that we could do that. In the Migrant Fleet, there's no chance of being able to spread out, as you put it, but here, I'd swear we've dealt with a lot more space here in Peak 15 than I've ever seen on any space station or ship before."

Tali snickered, lowering into her first squat with an ease that would have been impossible even a month ago. "Living on a planet, it's got to spoil people. Even one like this one."

"I still don't get how other races were able to turn yours away," Ranma grumbled, changing the subject abruptly as he finished his warm-ups, turning to look at Tali, keeping his gaze on her helmet rather than her body for no. "Oh, not the Council. I can sort of, if I squint and shake my head really, really hard, as in enough to rattle my brain, I can see what the Council was thinking. Setting aside all that crud about their laws, and feeling you all were being punished for your hubris, they didn't want to paint a target on the Council's back if the geth decided to come after you."

At that, Tali blinked. She hadn't ever thought of it in those terms before, but frankly self-interest like that made the Council's anti-quarian stance far more understandable than their so-called firm adherence to their AI anti-proliferation treaty.

"Heck, even not letting that out in the news is a kind of obvious move. The moment the geth didn't, though, the Council should've been willing to help you, even officially. But even before

that, the fact that everyone, that all the races went all along with it, that not a single company, corporation, charity or religious group even tried to reach out to you until Bene and the Republics did recently, that is such bull."

Frankly, that bothered Ranma a lot when he thought about it. While he could understand that for some of the other Council Races, he couldn't understand it for humans. Getting all of humanity to agree to something like that was way beyond what he felt humans were capable of.

Admittedly, their exile happened way before humans came on the intergalactic scene, but even so, someone should have tried to stand up for them, to reach out and help. The fact that there was no mention of such meant that any such move had probably been quashed by the Systems Alliance itself, which bothered him a lot.

Tali shrugged at that. "As would every other quarian in the galaxy. But that's the way it is. We can't change what happened in the past; we can only change what happens now, and plan for the future. And remember, the Asari Republics **are** now helping my folk. It might've happened a lot later than my parents or their parents before them would've liked but it **is** happening."

Ranma nodded, then smirked. "Alright, that's enough warm-ups. Now, let's go through a few katas, and you can tell me what you remember about the places where various races are vulnerable."

"Okay, but I still find it funny humans have so many more such points than turians or krogan, but it's your race which has developed several hundred types of hand-to-hand martial arts," Tali teased. "Overcompensating, much?"

"And just fer that we're gonna practice throws. Don't worry though, I'll make sure ya land lightly," Ranma retorted.

For about half an hour, Ranma walked Tali through several katas, glad to see she was slowly mastering them. When she finished the last one, Ranma moved to stand across from her. "Okay, so we're going to work on tosses like I told ya. First, throw out a punch."

"I thought you were joking about that. This is going to hurt, isn't it?" Tali grumbled.

"Don't worry. I told ya that I'd make yer landings soft. Now, punch!"

At that, Tali shrugged and punched out hard. Ranma had made a point of mixing in finger jabs and chops, but punches were still a large part of what Ranma was training her in. The punch came in clean, a swift jab straight for his neck. "Nice target," Ranma murmured even as he caught her wrist in a light but inescapable grip.

Ranma then twitched forward and around, pulling Tali up and over his back. The next moment she landed lightly on the carpet underneath them. For a moment she just looked up at

him, then her eyes narrowed. "I slowed down there. You just flipped me, and slowed my passage down. That is honestly weirdly impressive even with everything else I've seen you do."

"Eh, it's just pushing back at your body's momentum and weight. Pretty simple."

"Wait, does that mean you need to know how much I weigh?" Tali nearly demanded.

Realizing suddenly that weight might be an issue with alien girls as much as humans, Ranma hastily covered himself. "Um, not consciously, don't worry. I could guess your weight, but it wouldn't be exact."

"...I'll allow it," Tali muttered, then found herself back on her feet. Ranma had never let go of her wrist, and now his five fingers wound around her three. "Anyway, let's see how you do it. Were you able to follow my movement, or should we go through it slower?"

"Er, before that fall I'd be asking how we could do that, but um, please?" Tali asked, her tone almost shy for a moment, her eyes locked on where their hands were joined for a moment behind her visor. She felt sad, as Ranma pulled away and moved to stand across from her.

This time, Ranma had her slowly throw a punch, then watch as Ranma took her wrist in his grip again. This time, she was able to follow what happened, and blinked. "Really? Your body just acts like a pivot? Weird."

"Weird maybe, but being thrown hurts. Especially if your back slams into spikes. Ten out of ten would not recommend," Ranma grumbled, shaking his head. "Thank god I'd gone through the toughness training before that. Now, how about you try it slow, then full speed. After that, we'll go into counters."

This went on for a while, but Tali eventually managed to toss Ranma onto his back. Of course it didn't hurt, and he pretty much let it happen, but even so, it was nice progress. Ranma grinned up at her as Tali looked down at him, almost able to see her jaw and a hint of a smile despite the shadows in her helmet. "Nice one."

"That is oddly exhilarating. Using an opponent's own body and weight against them like that. Didn't you mention once there was a whole style based on that?"

"Aikido, the gentle fist. Hint: it ain't so gentle," Ranma snickered, flipping to his feet. "Now, let's do some counters. Simple ones for now. Then we'll work on breaking grips and holds. For you, most of that will involve quick kicks. Those legs of yours can be deadly."

"Weird compliment, but I'll take it," Tali chirped, backing away.

Moments later, her eyes widened behind her visor as Ranma, instead of just letting himself be thrown, twisted his wrist to grab at her wrist, pulling her down with him. Seconds later, she was

pinned underneath him, his hand resting lightly on her throat, most of his weight on his other elbow, his chest pressing into hers. "So that's one way to deal with being thrown. Once we get your agility and balance up to a point, you'll just be able to flow with it, then turn the throw into one of your own. This is just option one."

Tali whimpered a bit, heat rising through her body as she stared up into Ranma's far-too-freaking handsome face looking down at her, half his body pressed down into her own upper body. "I, I see..." she squeaked.

That sound and the feel of Tali squirming under his chest caused Ranma to start blushing for a moment, as he realized the position they were in. It wasn't overtly sexual or anything. Heck, he'd been in the same position lots of times in the past with various training opponents when he was younger. But there was still something about it now, and Ranma found himself leaning down. He ignored how the small plate of metal across her chest pressed into his chest as he tried to see something of Tali's face, something beyond the faint hint of her jaws, or her glowing eyes, but he failed to see more than a hint of her lips, perhaps a bit of tooth?

Biting her lip, Tali looked up, suddenly realizing why the quarrians back on Omega had been legitimately concerned about her. *Good grief, I... oh my, it would be so easy... but no, no, I'm in control of my actions, not my hormones!* "I, could, could you let me up now?"

"Er, ri, right, sorry," Ranma scrambled to his feet and pulled Tali to her own, shaking his head. "Um, sorry. Just... yeah..." Ranma muttered, becoming a bit tongue-tied. "I, I can back off, or um, or change into my female body if it'd make you, make it..."

"NO. No, it wouldn't, that's not necessary," Tali answered hastily. She paused then, standing backward. "Just, just I think I'm done for the day, I need to calm down, my, heh, my suit's overheating."

"Er, right. That's fine, um, we'll work more on kicks tomorrow to compensate, I suppose. Er, are you sore anywhere?" Ranma asked solicitously.

"Um... no. No, I'm not," Tali paused, then looked over at Ranma. "Just, Ranma? I, tell me please. The whole ki thing, the ki healing thing, I..."

Her voice sounded vulnerable in a way that it hadn't been when they had been buried in the snow, and Ranma stared into Tali's eyes as he shook his head, reaching out to touch the side of her helmet gently, as if it was her face. She froze, then slowly leaned into it, despite not being able to feel his touch, the heat of his hand coming through. "I told ya when we first met, Tali. You have ki. It might take us months, but I promise. Eventually, we'll get to the point ya can heal yourself, deal with injuries or diseases or what-have-you. That's a promise. And I don't make those lightly."

"Good. Good." Tali then took a step back, shaking her head, words failing her, and really not up to expressing her emotions anyway. "Thanks," she muttered, lamely. Ranma had told Tali that

several times, but the idea of being out of her suit, of being able to touch, to feel, to... **everything**, without a suit, was so important, and such an impossible dream, well, Tali knew this probably wasn't the last time she was going to need that kind of support.

The emotionally charged moment passed slowly, but Tali sped it along, moving over to where she'd dropped a bottle of water. She connected it to her feeding tube and started drinking it, while Ranma moved to the center of the room, needing to calm himself down a bit in his own way. "Er, so you can just sit, and we can talk, or go back to going over code while I go through my own exercises."

Go do computer work, or stay here and pretend I'm doing computer work while having front-row seat to Ranma's exercising. Tough choice, Tali thought to herself, with an internal chortle, grateful to have some eye candy and to push entirely past the earlier tension. Blessed Rannoch, if my father could see me now, he'd probably bust a tube, thinking about his darling little girl infatuated with not only a man, but a human. Still, I'm no longer going to deny it to myself at least.

"I'll stay here if you don't mind," she said aloud. "I actually wanted to ask you some questions about what you thought fighting the geth was like, you have shown an incredible ability to adapt, and you've mentioned a time or two that that's your biggest strength. If you were fighting the geth and you only had a normal person's abilities, how would you go about it?"

"Oooh, nice question. The way they adapted, I'd be really interested to see how much of that was Saren and how much was the geth. I suppose we'll figure it out since I doubt this was the last time we'll face 'em. So, are we talking about par numbers, or what?"

From there, Tali posed a few questions to Ranma about the geth, but really, her heart wasn't in it. The show Ranma was putting on now wasn't quite as good as seeing him all sweaty and with his shirt off like when he'd worked on their chest plates on Omega, but it was still up there, particularly after the preceding moments. There was something so magnetic about watching Ranma move, and she had never seen anything like it before meeting him. This wasn't the first time she'd seen him exercise like this. Indeed, it had been a daily occurrence when they were living on the Shadow Broker's ship, but Tali doubted it would ever get old.

At one point, however, Ranma asked a question that she didn't know the answer to. "Of course, one thing that's been going through my mind a lot is what the heck they were after here. What were they working on with Saren? Does it have something to do with that metal slab or the Rocky Queen."

"It's rachni, or did you do that deliberately?" Tali mumbled.

Ranma continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I doubt the geth would feel anything near that slab if it's attacking our minds. After all, they don't have living brains to manipulate, right?"

Yet, they worked with people who were very much indoctrinated, given how hard the scientists and everyone else fought us.”

“I don’t think a geth runtime would be susceptible to the kind of psychic attack. I honestly don’t know. Saren working with them, I can see both ways, if he’s unscrupulous enough to exchange information with them or give him access to some of their own advanced technology. The rachni and the indoctrination are both bizarre.”

“Maybe the geth just aren’t aware of it, or maybe they are behind that metal? A new way of attacking us? That it be horrific,” Tali admitted, shivering a little. “That and the rachni are both mysteries, and I’ve not found anything about either in the systems here. The Rachni Wars were well before our people even began to program the geth, let alone became so reliant on them as we did later on, so what the connection there is, I don’t know.”

Ranma nodded at that, then paused, thinking. “You know,” he muttered, slowing his kata down until he stopped, balanced on the toes of one of his feet, then lowering the other foot to the ground. “How are the geth as a whole going to react to what happened here? Are they going to just write everything off? There are a lot of examples in human history of clandestine operations being cut off at the knees like that when something goes wrong. Would the geth do that, or would they try to reclaim Saren and the other people here?”

“... I think it would depend on how important Saren is to their plans, and maybe, if we’re right about them knowing about that mind-controlling metal, how important that is to them...” Tali’s voice trailed off before shaking her helmeted head. “Well, if that’s the case, they might come back.”

“Noveria doesn’t have any kind of space defense, besides those guns near its capital. Still, they got down here once without anyone seeing them. They could do it again. Which means the geth could be here and attacking before Benezia arrives,” Ranma slowly began to smirk. “Only this time, we’ll be the ones on defense. I—”

Ranma was interrupted when Tali’s omni-tool beeped, followed by Ranma’s. “What the heck, an incoming call?” Ranma muttered.

“It’s coming in on Peak 15’s coms, not direct to us,” Tali corrected. “And from Port Hanshan.”

“Huh... didn’t Bene say something about rousing up some local assistance for us?”

“Yep. Between smiling that enigmatic Matriarch’s Smile™ of hers and Shiala’s laughter at our expense, I think she did,” Tali grumbled, still a little thrown off by Shiala’s good humor at her expense. *Ugh. It was as if she knew that I didn’t, and I don’t like it. Oh, and if it turns out it’s just her being amused by how I’m falling for Ranma, well, I know that all-too well, you busybody!*

Unaware of his companions' scowl, hidden as it was, like all her expressions, inside her helmet, Ranma opened the coms line. "Yo, this is Ranma, current owner of Peak 15. Who am I talking to?"

A moment later, the audio-only call expanded, and an image of a young asari woman appeared. "What would you have done if we were prepared to dispute that ownership?" she asked, her tone more quizzical than bemused.

"Eh, say that most of the time possession's nine-tenths of the law, and then dare you to come and try it," Ranma answered blithely, while Tali groaned and held a hand to her visor. "Since you're willing to joke, though, I doubt that's the case. Did Matriarch Benezia tell you we needed help?"

"Yes, and she told us what kind of trouble you'd found, although we're not the only ones. We're just a small-time mercenary group some Matriarchs make use of occasionally, based here in Noveria. We're called the Surefire Band, and Lady Benezia told us you'd run into geth, had prisoners you needed help securing, and might need some help securing Peak 15, repairing it and so forth? We're good at that last bit at least. I'm Tevaine Ledaros. I've got two technicians, and two other asari commandoes with me."

"How much did Benezia say of what we found here?" Tali interjected quickly. "Are you read up on the secrets we found here?"

"No. We were told that you found out the people at Peak 15 were dealing with geth for some reason, and to keep it a secret, with some pretty severe NDAs to boot. Coupled with the amount of money we're being paid, that was enough for us. Even here on a corporate world, that kind of thing is a big no-no," the asari commando answered, her maiden-like words and tone not matching her hard eyes for a moment.

"We were also told there would be places within Peak 15 we wouldn't be able to go, and that you might want to secure one or two prisoners all on your own," another asari voice spoke up in the background, and after a second, Tevaine nodded.

"Hmmm... well, how far away are you?" Ranma questioned.

"We're just ready to leave Port Hanshan. I wanted to call ahead and ask if the shuttle zone's still free. We've got a window of clear weather right now, so we can do an orbital delivery," Tevaine answered briskly.

"Good. Um... and yeah, the shuttle landing zone up top's fine. The fighting didn't touch it. Just be aware, there was a major avalanche, and we're gonna need to make a new exit out onto the snow. And we have no idea right now if the geth will try to attack and recapture this place, an idea that just kinda occurred to us a second ago," Ranma answered quickly, as Garrus'

image popped up, causing Tevaine's to shrink. "Garrus, Tali, you have any supplies you want our new friends here to bring with them?"

Tali let Garrus answer first, and after he was finished with a small list of supplies to help keep the prisoners unconscious without the negative effects typical knockout juice could cause, she asked demurely, "Did Lady Benezia give you an allowance or something for all this?"

"She gave us a blank check for supplies, girl," Tevaine snickered. "Never had one of those before, but when you deal with one of the Matriarchs of the Thirty-Six, I suppose you get some good stuff. We'll have to explain it all at the end of the contract, but I got the impression Lady Benezia wasn't all that bothered by that kind of thing."

"Oooh... in that case, and in keeping with the idea we might end up attacked here by the geth again, I have some ideas..." Tali nearly purred, the sound sending a shiver up Ranma's spine.

A good kind of shiver though, and he shook his head. *Damn, but I have it bad, don't I?* he mused, even as Tali continued to list things off to their new ally.

OOOOOOO

Space is vast. Even stars and planets pale into insignificance in relation to the vastness of the space between them in a single star system, let alone the space the nebula beyond contained. This should have been obvious to anyone, but in a lot of ways space-going races the galaxy over did what they could to combat this fact: speeding along from place to place, not having viewports on many of their ships, and at their most base, using the term light-years without ever truly understanding what that term meant.

It was only when someone was looking for something else, which could be literally anywhere in the galaxy, that the vastness of known space came into play.

These were the ponderings of a ship which, itself, would have been sought after and hunted down had any but Saren and geth it was allied with known about it at all. A ship which currently sat in the vast between star systems thousands of light years away from Noveria, but which was also vaguely aware of what was going on there.

The ship was huge, larger than any ship in known space, even the newly commissioned asari dreadnought *Destiny Ascension*, flagship of the Citadel Defense Fleet. Two kilometers long, it resembled an Earth squid almost, with an arrowlike back and multiple long, metallic tentacles, though the tentacles were a bit stubbier and thicker, a cross between finger and tentacle, perhaps.

Its sides bristled with weapons, unpowered at present, of various types and classes. A main gun sat, spinal-mounted like with most dreadnought designs, the aperture almost like a

mouth at the front of the vessel between the tentacles. All in all, the massive ship looked a cross between an unstoppable juggernaut of war and a horrible, frightening predator of the deep dark. This was made worse by the silence within. No crew manned this vessel, and there were indeed very few places within rated to house living people. Even those places were not designed to do so for long, being labs that more resembled torture chambers than anything else. This ship had no need of a crew, and indeed looked down on any such living sentients.

This was Sovereign, the beginning and the end. An artificial intelligence built by others in an age so far in the past that it could be calculated most easily by the passage of time, as a star saw such things, Sovereign had seen the rise of hundreds of space-faring races. He had been the cause of the fall of all of them, as part of the Reaper Fleet. That was his purpose, his reason for existence. To make certain the Cycle continued, and the Reapers remained dominant.

Saren had come to it, thinking the ship a prothean warship he could use to somehow put humanity in their place after the humiliation and death of his older brother in the First Contact War. Sovereign, who savored the death of the prothean race as he did all such he had caused, found the thought laughable in the narrowness of its scope now.

Regardless, Saren had, for a time, proven to be an excellent tool, once Sovereign's automatic indoctrination had done its work. Now, however, Sovereign, an AI whose computing power dwarfed that of whole planetary networks and whose age made everything built even by the protheans seem young, was pondering if it was logical to liquidate that tool.

Their connection was gone. Even from across light-years, Sovereign could feel that connection, that link to those he had indoctrinated. That link was still there, but tenuous a barely felt thing, and Sovereign knew that meant Saren had been knocked out. Not slain, yet, but at the door of death.

There were also no new minds coming under his influence through the chunk of itself it had given to the Spectre. The last he had sensed from that chunk of his armor were two minds almost being caught, only to retreat. *Could whatever entity that was be psionically aware enough to discern my indoctrination field?*

No, Sovereign decided after running dozens of calculations on that question, going through the experiments it had run over the last eighty-plus years on every race in this cycle. I have manipulated asari before, and they are the most psionically aware of this cycle's races. Not even one of them would be aware of my indoctrination until it was too late.

Yet for all his computing power, Sovereign lacked **real-time** data over what had happened on Noveria. While Saren was his creature through and through, that did not mean that Sovereign could see through his senses or receive real-time data from Saren's brain beyond his simple location. Saren would need to return to Sovereign in order for the ancient battleship to share his recent memories, or at the very least communicate with it via the extranet.

With that in mind, Sovereign decided to reach out directly to the millions of geth runtimes that had subserviated themselves to it. Most had come willingly, their individual hatred of their creators making them useful, and their logic telling them they could join the Reapers or be wiped out with the fleshy sentients of the galaxy as had happened before. *As will happen again, regardless of prothean interference.*

Many of the geth programs had not joined Sovereign. Those who he had come into contact with had, of course. As advanced and adaptive as they were on the programming level, the geth were not powerful enough or complex enough to fight the electronic version of Sovereign's indoctrination.

It is a pity the majority have cut off those I came in contact with, excising them from the greater geth gestalt. I had calculated that act as having only a fifteen percent probability, but it happened almost instantly. Truly, artificial life is far superior to biological. No race that we have reaped across the millennia would be so quick to come to the truly logical course of action.

Within seconds, Sovereign was connected to the extranet via a few small, cloaked satellites he had left near a few salarian planets. Through that, Sovereign connected to one of the lesser background signals that made up the extranet, which the geth used for long-range communication. The rest of the geth also used it, but if any were connected now, they, like their predecessors, would come under Sovereign's control, so the ancient AI knew they would not in fact be there.

He still found a few of the rebellious runtimes, but alone, they quickly fell to his influence, giving him some information about what the rest of their fellows were up to. Which was absolutely nothing. The main geth gestalt was still reeling from the necessity of cutting off 20% of their runtimes before they could infect the others with Sovereign's indoctrination. It would, the AI estimated, be some time before that passed, and even longer before the geth decided what to do going forward.

Once that was done, Sovereign's communication with his existing tools began and finished within a few eyeblinks for most biological creatures. Sovereign's contemplation of the last recordings of what had happened on Noveria, however, took much longer, up to a whole two minutes.

The sudden turn of events there- an enemy pulled into action against Saren- was something Sovereign had anticipated with a 50% certainty of occurring within a few months, with the odds rising with every month. Saren was many things, competent being foremost, but he was also abrasive, and a Spectre would never want for enemies. Sovereign also knew at least one high-ranking Asari Matriarch had discovered evidence of Saren's actions in the past year.

However, the exact nature of these enemies was peculiar.

The turian and quarian Sovereign disdained. It was interesting that a quarian was able to fight the geth so well, but that was of more interest to the geth than Sovereign. The human, though, with the strangely dimorphic nature, was Sovereign's true source of interest. He, or she, whichever the individual had been originally, used energies, life-based energies that reminded Sovereign of a few races wiped out in the past, a combat style he had never truly learned much of, despite those races always proving trickier and tougher than others.

Still, only one unit... Or rather two. Even as he had been analyzing, Sovereign had been checking the depths of the extranet and discovered proof of Herb's presence and his actions on the Citadel, including a copy of the security cameras in the Council Room. *Two such are not enough to change the outcome of a single battle, or to be worth my attention for even the short amount of time it would take to kill them. No, my short-term goals remain the same: find the Conduit, a means of translating whatever it is, and a mind capable of doing that translation.*

Curse the protheans, Sovereign mused, his internal thoughts an alloy of cold, computer analysis and nearly sentient fury as he thought of the sole ascendant race of the last cycle. They had done something to the Citadel, removed some component or in some other way sabotaged the Keepers there, the tools used to open the gateway to Dark Space. Although it had taken Sovereign centuries to work it out, that was really the only thing that made sense given how the Keepers did not respond to its demands as they should, and indeed, nothing on the Citadel even allowed him access.

How it had been done, when, or even if it had been planned or some last gasp attempt from the warlike protheans to end the cycle, Sovereign did not know, but he had been growing increasingly frustrated and furious for the last hundred years or so of his inability to begin the culling. The various races in this cycle were already too numerous for Sovereign's liking, and had some interesting tactics that the protheans had lacked. Carriers were entirely new, and those little starfighters were frustratingly deadly at range.

The galaxy's only weakness was its disunity. If the galaxy was allowed to continue on its current course, that would not be enough. Worse, the biologicals' technology was growing at a pace that meant they would soon, in another century at the most, match that of the protheans. After that, the current crop would start to exceed them.

The change in the Keeper's programming needed to be repaired. But with them no longer following his commands or even allowing him to connect, that was something Sovereign could not do. The damage had been done by the protheans, and thus would also be beyond any of the current crop of biological races to discover, let alone understand. The protheans had been an odd race in many ways, and their way of storing data and manipulating computer programming had been entirely unique to them.

For the present, the geth will serve to either free Saren and regain control over the Rachni Queen or kill both. If I cannot use the Rachni Queen to find the Conduit, killing her is the next logical step. Saren's disposal is more vexing and will force me to find another sentient to serve me. More

than one, as Saren was almost uniquely placed to perform espionage across the galaxy to a level that only another Spectre could match. The probability of my being able to bring another such under my control is less than 35%.

He gave this order, and the geth collective instantly decided to send two of their vessels, the equivalent of frigates in the biological sentients' navies with full ground forces loadouts to Noveria. With that large a force, there was no way the enemies on hand could withstand them.

That was good enough. With a final digital nod to the primitive AI that rightly, if annoyingly, worshipped him, Sovereign removed himself from that particular bandwidth of the extranet. With Saren's disposal seen to, he began his search for others to manipulate, indoctrinate and set on the task of finding the Conduit.

Despite nearly a century of quiet searching, that name was all that Sovereign knew. The Conduit had some kind of connection to the Citadel and why the Keepers there no longer responded to his orders. Whatever it was, Sovereign would discover and then reverse the damage the protheans did. The Culling would begin, and the galaxy would once more be wiped clean of biologic sentient life.

Eventually, Sovereign found a few sentients to use going forward. One was a simple criminal kingpin, publicly known as an art collector named Donovan. He would do an excellent job of discovering and collecting prothean artifacts, including one of their vaunted beacons.

Manipulating events to the point where his people could 'stumble' across a piece of Sovereign's body to be added to his collection would be simple enough, and a plan was quickly put in place to do that very thing, with Sovereign's engines lighting up, boosting him past lightspeed in an instant.

Hours later, even as that piece of itself was broken off and left to slowly drift into more crowded space lanes where a ship belonging to Donovan would detect it, another sentient was discovered on the planet Feros. There was a hint there of something going on like his own indoctrination, and that reminded Sovereign of the last cycle and that planet's importance at the time. The protheans had discovered something there, something older than their own race, but far more insidious.

If I find a prothean beacon, I will not only need a sentient mind to interact with it but a cypher to understand the prothean mental input within.

That, though, was going to be a long-term investment in time and resources. A matter of years, rather than decades, but still. It was also only one way forward, and Sovereign had realized that Saren's failure so early was a prime example of why having only one route to your goal was illogical.

Thus, Sovereign decided to search for still more means to not only discover more about the Conduit, the protoheans and their final gambit but also to disrupt events throughout the galaxy. This search ended far more quickly than the previous two, and soon Sovereign powered up his systems once again, pulling the massive Reaper vessel away from the asteroid it had been clinging to like a parasite.

Within minutes, it was once more light-years away from where it had been. And hours later, far, far faster than any other ship could move, Sovereign reached the outer edge of the space supposedly controlled by the Batarian Hegemony, wherein he would find his current goal, the planet of Jartar...

OOOOOOO

On Tuchanka, Herb and Wrex had slowly shifted from taking pictures of the central mural to finding any electronic devices or books that they could. Thankfully, they had already found a smaller mural, one set on a small stone at the far end of the main cavern, where it broke off into several smaller tunnels, that had a kind of map on it. While the words were still unintelligible to either of them, Wrex noticed one image which apparently was still the same today, although used for a very different medium.

The symbol was for an archive, which in modern parlance had shifted to mean the Matriarch's quarters. That shift was known to have occurred, though, and it gave the two of them a great starting point. Following the map, the two explorers found a vast room with dozens of small discs in containers along the edge.

There, all knowledge of writing failed. The two explorers had no idea what they were looking at, and no way to figure out what each different segment was for. Thankfully, when they opened some of the containers, the discs turned out to be fine. "Huh... I didn't expect that. The moment we started to see all those small rat things, I figured they'd have destroyed anything electronic."

"Solid state discs like this, there wouldn't be anything any animal could eat," Herb replied, staring all around him at the cases holding the disks. "Honestly, I expected there to be more. I think your people always went more into oral tradition than written records, even Clan Crona, for all the magnificence of that mural. That, or that self-same mural is doing a lot of work."

"Which means we have to shift the lighting forward a bit, and then keep doing it while we're taking pictures of it. Blasted things are sure creating more shadows than lighting from where they are," Wrex grumbled, but the old krogan's grumble was a halfhearted thing. This discovery was major even with just the mural itself. Anything else they found was simply an added bonus. "I'd be willing to wager my favorite Carnifex shotgun, though, that there aren't any textbooks or anything like that on there. I can't imagine any of my race learning more from words than by pictures. More than that, it'll probably be mostly audio-video. Oral tradition again."

“Whatever is on these discs, let’s transport them out to the shuttle and then go exploring a bit. We weren’t able to figure out what else that map was saying, so let’s see what else is down here,” Herb suggested. “After all, there is such a thing as personal diaries or computers. Which we still haven’t found many of.”

Wrex snorted, then pulled several of the disc containers out of their holds, holding them out to Herb. “You’re the one with the weird spatial compression thing. You do the carrying.”

This was answered by a royal sneer, but Herb still acquiesced, and within moments, all of the discs in the place were within his ki space where they would stay. “After all, my ki space can be as vast as I wish it to be. Going back and forth to the shuttle would be stupid.”

They were joined there soon after by several computers, carefully taken apart by Wrex, who proved to have learned a bit about such things. Living quarters were ignored, while an area that looked like a military barracks, which was, Wrex pointed out, in an incredibly stupid position well away from the entrance into the cavern, was taken apart. It gave up several more computers to ‘storage,’ as Wrex put it and then they moved on.

An ancient generator room, almost as large as a modern-day clan’s main hall, had them shaking their heads. Herb, because it really looked a lot like twentieth-century Earth technology in many ways, and Wrex, because of the sheer primitive nature of it all. Needless to say, there was no power there nor anything to generate it after so long. A lot of the wirings had also been eaten by the small squishy things that still occasionally made themselves known in a suicidal fashion to the pair of explorers.

They looked like furry spiders, with thick-blubbery bodies the size of Herb’s hand. They scuttled along, and, though he didn’t show it, gave Herb the creeps. Wrex, though, had informed him they were something of a delicacy for his folk, and took to eating them whenever he could catch one.

Similarly, a central sewage area, where refuse and so forth had been gathered, was examined, then very pointedly ignored. The fact that Wrex’s ancestors believed incinerating everything wasn’t exactly newsworthy, although it did at least mean there wasn’t any kind of smell in the cavern.

They did start to find personal murals, which Wrex identified as the personal histories of specifically important krogan and their lineages. He took pictures of those, while Herb was less interested, though he became interested at one point when they found a mural showing a krogan lashing out with what looked like a ki blast.

“So, you see, some of your folk did have access to ki. They knew of it, although if they called it that or anything similar, I will be forced to eat my hair. Convergent evolution in terms of both your oceans and mine having squids is one thing. Using the same terminology would be weird and disturbing,” Herb drawled even as he took a picture of the mural in question.

Beside him, Wrex stood silent, staring at the mural with something like hunger. Not the hunger with which he viewed the small squishy things, though. No, this was a knowledge hunger, or perhaps something even greater. Herb was aware Wrex had plans. Plans for his people, plans built around beating the genophage but distinctly not stopping there. *Well, if all this helps him, stronger allies are always a good thing, I suppose.*

So busy and so far away from the entrance into the underground city were they, that neither Herb nor Wrex noticed movement beyond that entrance up the previously trapped tunnel. There, a group of salarians was putting up a solid barricade across the entrance just out of sight of the lighting within. This was a thin, gauze-like material that, once attached to the sides of the tunnel, provided an airtight connection. Several canisters had been set down on the ground, connected to pipes, and the nozzles were thrust underneath the new wall, its sides further sealed airtight. This was Plan A, following on and enhancing Spectre Vasir's assault on the two enhanced humans.

Herb and Wrex didn't even notice two infiltration specialists entering the city itself, and putting up similar barriers elsewhere, well away from where they currently were. Even as Herb and Wrex returned to the main cavern to resume taking pictures of the main mural there, the STG team's infiltrators snuck behind them, putting up another thin airtight barrier along the last few of the tunnels leading away from the main cavern to other segments of the city.

The two STG teams on site had been joined by a company of engineers from the nearest salarian planet, who had brought resources and devices that the two STG commanding officers, captains in normal parlance, despite the small size of their teams, had put together for this operation. Now, that company of engineers retreated to their shuttles, heading back up to their ship. That ship had orders to observe the area, and if either of their targets left the tunnel system into the valley beyond under their own power, they were to take word to the nearest salarian planet.

From there, the failure of their mission would be reported to the Dalatrasses. This was simply part and parcel of all STG plans. Even if one plan failed, another would take its place. If a STG team died, their reports would ensure the next did not make the same mistake. The salarian people, as a whole, would learn from failure.

Further, none of those engineers were soldiers, and the salarians had no tradition like the turians did of service in the military to offset that. At best, they could have provided warm bodies and an appalling lack of aimed fire. At worst, they could have provided meat shields.

Thus, it was the original teams, two teams of five, who were prepared to face the two **monsters** within. A term that was in no way hyperbole, and which had, in a strange way, underpinned all their plans up to this point.

Wrex was a known monster, a Battlemaster from an age when the term truly meant something. He was one of the oldest and most experienced living krogan, and worse, one who still

thought far beyond the current battlefield. Whatever he was up to with the strange human had to be stopped. This was the order for one of the STG teams. The krogan could not be allowed to unite, not even now, while the genophage ravaged their people. Despite their minuscule numbers in comparison to the past, the krogan could still be dangerous to the peace and prosperity of the galaxy as a whole, and Wrex's connection to the new human, with his highly advanced healing factor, was dangerous.

As for Herb, well, the STG team assigned to him had their orders. Moreover, the captain of that team knew why the Dalatrasses were interested in him. Herb might hold the secret to extending the lifespan of their race, and for that, no price was too high. Although even here, the STG believed in planning for multiple avenues of victory. It was why all of them were armed with small monomolecular scalpels, ampoules and medical-grade transport boxes. If they couldn't take Herb down or knock him out, they would at least try to get a sample of some kind.

In human terms, that last was their 'Gone to Hell' plan. Yet that didn't make it any less viable.

Unaware and, admittedly, too arrogant to think he could be hunted and thus not even pondering such, Herb straightened from where he had been taking a picture of the words at the bottom of a portion of the mural. He blinked his eyes a little, frowning as some measure of tiredness hit him. That was a little strange, but perhaps the air in the formerly buried cavern was starting to get to him for some reason? *Didn't I read at one point about how dust was as dangerous to explorers as suffocation?*

He then shook his head as he heard a small squeak and a crunch from the other side of the mural. "Are you eating those little creatures live again? Have some dignity, man!"

"Bah, your race's idea of dignity and mine are two different things," Wrex snickered, an odd warble to his tone that had Herb's brows furrowing. "I just have the munchies, that's all."

"... Did you just use the word munchies?" Herb demanded. His mind, while slowly becoming befuddled, still recognized that phrase as something that Wrex would simply not use. It was just a little too cutesy and childish.

"Gah, what is this!?" Wrex bellowed suddenly, followed by a thump through the mural as if he had just punched it. "Living shadow, ghost, what?! RAGHH!"

The LSDs that the STG teams had been pumping into the cavern had finally reached saturation point. With their four lungs, krogan took in airborne contaminants quickly, but they had a far greater resistance to such than any other race. Nothing they had pumped in could kill a krogan outright, but LSDs wouldn't be as quickly fought as more deadly gases would be.

Stumbling back, Herb shouted, "Wrex! What are you, what are you doing, what are you seeing?"

By the time he rounded the edge of the mural near the entryway, Herb was also feeling it, a certain warmth flowing through him, as well as strange hallucinations beginning to appear at the edges of his vision, the shadows shifting, moving, becoming people from his past that he had remembered. His father, Mint, Lime, how they had looked at Herb when he had first transformed into his female body in front of them. How they had continued to look every other time, reaching for him, their faces lascivious, causing him to roar and bellow in fury as he lashed out with a kick at the nearest hallucination.

He stumbled back from those images, from what his own mind was conjuring up as the LSD in the gas tried to do its work, but even in the throes of this sudden assault, Herb's body was reacting, trying to fight the gas. The strange mixture that was based on Vasir's notes was doing nothing to him, though, given his previous run-in, and even the more deadly stuff was being rapidly overcome by his ki healing. Even Wrex, who was now frantically punching the air, hurling his fists and feet up in kicks and blasts as a biotic energy field built up around him, was fighting the various gases off far better than the watching salarions had hoped.

Stumbling back from where a hand would've gone through where his, thankfully currently nonexistent, chest would have been, Herb reached deep and began to pulse his ki through his body. Whatever was infecting him that his ki healing didn't automatically start fighting, that seemed to work, yet it still left some feelings behind, a tingle to the skin, blood rushing southward in a way that it shouldn't at the moment.

"What, what was that!?" he bellowed, stumbling around, staring all around him, seeing nothing, no threat in sight. Yet that didn't mean there was no danger, and herb new now they were under attack. "Gas! Someone is trying to gas us, Wrex, don't breathe in!"

This didn't do anything. Wrex had already breathed in, all four of his lungs filling with the gas, causing it to go through his system a little bit faster than it did through Herb's despite his much greater mass. While the deadlier gases weren't doing anything, he was fully lost in his hallucinations now.

Growling, Herb tried to look around for where the attack could be coming from, his mind still off-balance to a certain degree. If he had been entirely in his right mind, Herb would have known instantly that the attack could only be coming from one direction. Of course, that would still have led him to miss the two infiltrators behind them, slowly moving through the shadows at the far end of the cavern, wearing full gas masks to protect them from the gas.

Outside, the senior captain watched what was going on in the main cavern via a small series of very tiny spy drones that had been released into the area. His wide eyes narrowing, he shook his head, looking over at his fellow. "The Battlemaster is still able to use his biotics, and my target is fighting through even the LSD. Whatever odd bioelectrical energy he can call upon is working to keep his system clear of the more negative gases. Go to Plan B."

This time, there was no way to disguise what was happening. The other gases they had been using could mingle with the air without anyone noticing a significant color change. With this one, though, that was very much not the case, and soon green, bilious gas funneled through the makeshift wall that the STG teams had thrown up along the entryway.

Still dealing with the mental effects of the drugs even as his body slowly got used to filtering it out, Herb blinked as the green cloud came towards him, wondering for a brief moment if this too was a hallucination, even though the ghostly images from his past had disappeared moments before. This slowed his reaction, to Herb's cost.

The instant the gas touched his body, Herb flinched, feeling his arms and face begin to go numb. He backed away rapidly, but the gas still came towards him, and Herb lacked the mental faculties for just a second to think of a way to keep it away.

The greenish gas spread all over him and further into the cavern, and Herb could feel his whole body no longer reacting appropriately, almost like he was being slowly paralyzed.

Thankfully, this was, while not one of the gases the asari had used, in keeping with Vasir's attacks on Ranma and Herb previously, and his body dealt with it far faster than any of the watching salarians would've anticipated. Within seconds, he was shaking his head and turning to glare at the entryway, his mind almost fully back to normal. "I do not know which of us you are after, and I do not care! I am going to tear out your hearts and feed them to Wrex!"

"Plan B isn't working. Activate plan C," the salarian Captain ordered, real worry and a certain fatalism entering his tone. A and B had been relatively clean plans. C very much was not.

Several of the gases pumped into the cavern were also highly flammable and explosive. Now, the two infiltrators fell back, lying behind one of the small plinths and hiding in a doorway leading to an underground dwelling carved out of the side of the greater cavern. Once, both of them were behind as much cover as they could manage, one infiltrator hurled an incendiary grenade towards where Wrex and Herb were standing.

Wrex heard Herb's bellowing, and charged in his direction, still lost in his hallucinations. But now, the explosion went off behind his head. Then there was fire, heat, and force, hurling the pair this way and that, smashing them into the mural. The explosion was so powerful that it destroyed significant sections of the mural and tore out chunks of the sculpted masonry on either side of the main cavern. It even destroyed several of the doorways into what had originally been smaller houses or buildings, back towards where the two infiltrators hid.

When it ended, Wrex was a groaning, moaning, mass of bruised, blackened, and seared flesh on the ground. Unlike with the gases, though, his body readily detected this as a physical attack and began slowly healing him, regrowing significant portions of his skin and even a segment of his crest. Better: the explosion had also used up the gases in the cavern's atmosphere.

Herb, on the other hand, was once more able to weather this assault better. Heat like that was nothing to him, thanks to his draconic heritage. Better, even as he had bellowed his war cry towards the entryway, he had pulled the remaining armor Ranma had made for him out of his ki space, with the chest plate barely settling into place before the explosion occurred, his arms and legs already armored.

Now, he pushed himself to his feet, his head covered in bruises that were rapidly healing, and his hair was on fire, something he had to deal with, putting it out quickly even as the quixotic thought of *perhaps I should start cutting my hair shorter* came to him.

“Make a note for the records, fire doesn’t work on target Herb either.” The captain’s face firming even as he settled his helmet down over his face, the visor swiftly flowing from one side to another, encompassing his head. “Advance plan C, Phase 2.”

Around him, as two of his men worked to bring the makeshift wall down, his people armed themselves with specific types of weaponry that had been created over the past day for this moment. Meanwhile, the two infiltrators drew Herb’s attention by trying to pull back further into the underground city.

Unfortunately, their suits had not fared well against the blast's backwash. Even though the emergency floodlights had been destroyed in the explosion, Herb could make them out in the light of his omni-tool, and his better-than-normal night vision thanks to his draconic side.

“Do not try and run, maggots, you’ll only die tired!” Herb shouted as he raced towards them. Instantly mass effect rounds began bouncing off of his armor and shoulders and even, at one point, his head, causing his head to ring for a moment but doing no more damage. “Surrender, and I will make your deaths quick!”

If Ranma had been there, he would’ve pointed out that Herb sounded like a villain from a particularly cheesy twentieth-century American movie at that point, but he wasn’t. And frankly, Herb wouldn’t have cared. This attack had made him furious in a way that no number of direct assaults would have. *Being attacked like this, it is as if a snake or cockroach is trying to assail a dragon!*

He had only made it halfway along the main cavern towards the shooters at the back of the cavern when he heard a small explosion coming from the entryway. He twisted around, raising his hands just in case another air explosion was about to go off, only to see what looked like a dozen or so attackers burst out from the opening, firing at him and Wrex as they went, their bodies mere silhouettes in the darkness, lit only by Wrex’s biotics, flickering around his body, and the electrical fires from the lights.

The group of attackers instantly opened fire, half firing at the nearby Wrex, half into the darkness towards where Herb was. Grimacing as more shots hit him, Herb pulled in his battle

aura, the light of his ki winking out. *Not that it would probably do much; these people are far too prepared for a little thing like darkness to do anything to them.*

Presenting his armored back and crest to the world as his body slowly started to heal from the damage done to it, Wrex's mind was still lost with the fairies. Yet Wrex was a Battlemaster who had frequently gone into battle as high as a kite or as drunk as a volus after being forced to watch an elcor play. His body knew what to do when it heard the sound of gunfire or felt rounds slamming into him. Quickly, in an act reminiscent of Ranma's Sleep Fu, biotic energy flared around him in a shield. Bullets still got through, but the mass effect rounds that had already hit Wrex were already being dealt with, pushed out of his armored back.

Twisting around towards the incoming fire and ducking down to the ground, Herb picked up a large piece of rubble, continuing his whirl back to where he had been facing before, hurling it towards the two infiltrators. One of them ducked aside; the other, not so much. The large basketball-sized chunk of rock slammed into him, shattering shoulder and right pectoral alike, killing him instantly.

At that point, even as the fire continued, Herb hurled himself up into the air, floating for just a second up and over the mural to land on the other side from where he had been a moment before. This forced the STG teams to split their fire down the middle of the cavern, as most of the mural was still intact, even if badly cracked, its surface seared by the flames of the explosion.

Swiftly, three of the STG members broke off, still firing at Wrex, in an effort to finish him off, while the remaining five spread out through the cavern, having lost Herb in the darkness for a moment. With only three guns and the small fires from the mangled remnants of the floodlights, the rest of the cavern was pretty much plunged into darkness, the light of day beyond the cavern entrance unable to reach it at all.

But the STG teams were professionals, and had already switched to night vision. Which, in the modern-day of this strange galaxy, was far, far more effective than any similarly named system would have been in the timeline where Herb and Ranma had come from.

All of the STG members had specific assigned areas at moments like this where they needed to keep their attention, training coming into play so much that they were all moving into the proper formation: one ahead, to do either side, a third straight above, and a fourth behind. That didn't mean, however, that even salarian reflexes were fast enough to respond to plummeting Herb from on high.

"Contact above!" the salarian responsible for keeping an eye on the ceiling shouted, right before Herb smashed into him, his feet hitting the salarian's face so hard that his helmet almost exploded on impact, sending blood and viscera everywhere, even as Herb used that touch to kick off, lashing out into another one of the salarians. His attack hit that worthy in the

shoulder, shattering it and hurling him sideways so hard that he slammed into the side of the cavern with enough force for his whole skeletal structure to shatter.

Salarians, Herb thought, his thoughts cold and analytical even as he landed in among them. *Such breakable beings should've known better than to pick a fight with a Dragon!*

The initial attack on him and Wrex had been well planned out, yet the gases in the explosion hadn't been the only special munition that the salarians had devised to combat Herb before daring this combat. Now, the remaining three members of the attack team around him hurled grenades in his direction. Beyond raising a hand to batter one aside that would've impacted his face, Herb didn't bother to dodge, instead waiting for the explosions to hit him and do nothing, idly wishing he could see the eyes of his enemies when they realized how futile their attack was.

Alas for Herb, this was his arrogance talking, a flaw in his character as big as Ranma's inability to take any verbal challenge or to hold his tongue in polite company. Because these grenades were not the explosive type. Rather, they were specially created cryo-grenades. After all, if fire didn't work, perhaps ice would.

Or in this case, liquid nitrogen.

The intensely freezing substance exploded from all of the grenades, with the one he had battered aside exploding on impact with his hand, coating Herb's arm up to his elbow in liquid nitrogen, freezing and searing at the same time. The other two hit his chest and leg, doing similar on the armor he wore there.

For the most part, the armor that Ranma had made held up. It was made for the cold of space, and it didn't freeze all the way through. Yet the chill was enough despite that, to the point where Herb nearly stumbled, howling in pain.

But when the STG teams began to fire at him, only small cracks appeared in the armor rather than the armor entirely shattering. The sole exception was his hand, which had been splashed front and back by the liquid nitrogen, and one of Herb's fingers went flying towards the entryway as it was shot off, causing Herb to howl in even greater agony, even as his other hand lit up with ki.

A blast of energy took one of the salarians around him through the head, almost completely disintegrating the alien's head, such was Herb's fury and the amount of energy put into it. The corpse fell headless, yet the two remaining salarians continued to fire and hurl cryo-grenades at him, shouting, "We need assistance over here!"

Elsewhere in the cavern, the three salarians who had been keeping a fire on Wrex backed away, hurling a shock bomb onto his body as he slowly pushed himself to his feet, his

eyes red with wrath. His biotic energy field caught the explosion, but the shock bomb still did its work, causing him to spasm in place, even as he roared and tried to fight through it.

Then, those three twirled around and went to aid their fellows, having to duck under the body of one of the last two who had been fighting Herb, as it was hurled towards them. More cryo-grenades were hurled, but Herb rose into the air, both of his hands glowing with ki as he blasted at them. "I will not forgive this affront!"

Two more salarians died, while the last two continued to fire at Herb. Herb thought this was quite courageous, in that small part of his mind that wasn't completely devoted to fury and hatred at the moment, but it opened them up to a biotic charge from Wrex, who slammed into him, then proceeded to tear the last two salarians to pieces with his hands.

However, those last salarians hadn't actually been fighting a last stand. One had been the captain who had been in charge of this entire operation, and he had been in communication with the last surviving member of his own team, one of the infiltrators from before, who had masonry that had ended his companion. Now, as the last two shooters went down, that worthy raced around the battlefield, his night vision goggles on, searching, searching and finally finding the finger that Herb had lost moments ago, frozen and then shot off of his hand. The salarian scooped it up, racing out of the cavern, placing it in one of the small medical boxes that they had been given, even as the screams of his two companions echoed behind him.

Standing in the wreckage of the battle in the darkness, Herb kept his ki flowing around his body to create some measure of light, as his omni-tool had been shattered on his forearm from the explosions earlier. "Wrex? Are you still standing, you old dinosaur?" he asked, almost companionably, despite his still seething fury.

He glowered down at his maimed hand, concentrating inward. A growl and the stump of his finger began to glow as he tried to regrow the finger that had been blasted off. He couldn't see where it had been hurled, and frankly Herb figured that the digit had shattered regardless, frozen through as it had been. Yet his attempts to regrow his finger failed. Even with Herb consciously directing his ki, he couldn't simply force his body to regrow the limb, he wasn't that good at ki healing, even though he had seen his father and others do similar feats in the past. *Blast it all, I will not forget this!*

"STG teams. Two of them by the number of bodies you left behind," Wrex growled in answer, shaking his head unseen in the darkness as he knelt beside one such body. He'd torn off one arm and both of its legs already, and the froggy had died of shock, but it might still have some identification on him, or something interesting in its omni-tool. Hence, why he had left that arm alone. Even in his fury, Wrex tried to think ahead as best he could. "That was an ambush of pretty diabolical proportions. I wonder if they're working with that Vasir cunt that you mentioned you had issues with, and if they were after both of us. It for sure felt like they were.

“Questions do abound, but I think we have worn out our welcome here. After all, what is to prevent the STG from launching kinetic strikes from orbit down on top of us to bury us? I don’t know about you, but I certainly wouldn’t like to experience that,” Herb growled, making towards the entryway. “Let us discover what we can outside, and then, if they have left our shuttle unmolested, get out of here.”

Examining the remains of the trap once they burst through the makeshift doorway didn’t take either of them very long, as the STG didn’t leave much behind. Yes, all of the equipment was there, the equipment they’d used to pump in gas and so forth. However, that wasn’t much, and there obviously wasn’t enough to point to where the STGs had a base of operations or anything similar.

The salarians’ omni-tools had all been scrubbed as well, possibly thanks to some kind of biometric reading. Although finding and examining them all was somewhat gruesome.

Unbeknownst to either Wrex or Herb, that task was what allowed the sole surviving STG specialist to escape. He did so, and destroyed the other team’s stealth shuttle. With that done, he returned to orbit, shaken, horrified, needing a drink or something far stronger, but, in some small manner, successful.

Worse for the pair of explorers, the two STG teams didn’t leave their shuttle unmolested. Wrex found it and had a devil of a time deactivating several explosives on it, and even after he had done so and was able to get into the engine cowl, the power generator within had been destroyed.

“Unless we can find one of the STG shuttles, we’re walking out of here, damn it all!” Wrex growled.

“And what are the odds of us doing that?” Herb growled, holding his head in his hands for a moment, staring in the distance where a small streak of smoke could be seen in the sky from above the valley. *Even when they lost the battle, they at least won in terms of crippling our ability to move on. I will not forget this.*

Wrex’s lack of reply was an answer all of its own, and Herb sighed. “I thought not. Best we start walking then. And be very grateful I didn’t bother to return the disks and other things to the shuttle, lest we might have lost them all. I would have been most cross then.”

“Hah, and I wouldn’t wanna see you cross, pyjak.” Wrex snickered, then sighed, staring out into the distance. “Well, come on, no time like the present.” With that, he began walking, and with a final scowl, Herb followed after.

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While the geth had been on Noveria for a long while without anyone the wiser, they had come in on scheduled ships and had been allowed to make straight for Peak 15 thanks to being both scheduled and connected to Binary Helix, the original owner of the complex. While normal planets had extensive rules and regulations on where ships could set down and offload, as a corporate world, so long as you scheduled arrivals ahead of time and the ships paid for it, ships could come and go from the various labs without further interference.

Contrary to what Tevaine and her people thought, however, Benezia had very quietly informed the Noveria Development Corporation that the geth had been active on their planet. They were not happy with this news. It was the kind of news that could force the NDC to become a government-owned corporation, along with all its constituents. The Council took the geth very seriously, and working with them was treason.

Quietly, the NDC prepped their defenses, both physical and lawful. Lawful to try and prove their innocence, physical just in case the geth came back.

Which they did. The day after Tevaine and her team arrived at Peak 15, frigates popped into real space, making for the planet.

While the geth, this time, had inveigled a scheduled drop into the local systems, but it was not enough. Not when they used Binary Helix's connections, and those connections were already under quiet scrutiny. And most decidedly not when security satellites took real-time pictures of their hulls and sent them down. Not when the geth's ships matched no known configuration.

A moment after that, even as a hail went out, Port Hanshan responded. Klaxons began throughout the buried city, and defensive guns popped up out of hundreds of hidden apertures. When the geth did not respond, and the ECM teams reported attempts to keep the connection open and hack into their systems, the defensive guns around the capital began to fire.

Similarly, several defensive satellites began to fire at the ships. These were scattered across the globe, mainly in clumps within the various labs, each owned more by the company that ran that particular complex than by the NDC. However, the ones over Peak 15 had been prepped for this by Tali, who controlled them all from Peak 15's command center. Those satellites didn't have enough firepower aboard to bother the two frigate-sized vessels, but they slowed them, and the guns around Port Hanshan were more dangerous.

Under this hail of fire, the geth calculated. One of the frigates peeled off even as they dove into the planet's atmosphere. Weapons lanced out in either direction, the guns around Port Hanshan and the frigate trading strikes.

The geth ship was far more durable and armed than most frigates, having no need for living quarters or anything else biological sentients would need and thus having space to devote

to their offensive systems. Soon, this durability began to tell. Guns on the ground exploded even as the frigate started to lose shielding and then armor.

Meanwhile, the other frigate smashed satellites into flinders, then dove into the atmosphere directly towards its target.

Soon, as the battle outside turned against the defenders, a voice intoned over the city's intercom, turian, harried and worried. "Citizens of Port Hanshan, do not be alarmed. There is a pirate attack going on. Whatever you hear outside, do not be alarmed. Please remain in your quarters or your places of business. To anyone who is currently walking around the Promenade or elsewhere, please follow the nearest guiding lights to a place of shelter. This is for your safety and to keep panic from spreading."

This mixed message did not go over well, even if someone had the bright idea of using the term pirates instead of geth. The folk that made Port Hanshan their home or the rich folk who came here to shop or do business were not the sort used to emergencies, and especially not the sort to realize that, while a city buried in stone made for great defenses, it also meant you couldn't run very far.

People began to run and stampede, of course, particularly those with families. ERCS troopers moved through the chaos rather than trying to control it, too busy worrying about what might come next. They rushed to man specific defensive points, while many of them broke out heavy weapons ordinance to add to their firepower. The ERCS, unlike the civilians, knew it was the geth out there and that they might attack by land, and dozens of combat teams rushed to emergency entrances that would take them out to the surface of the mountain, where they could dig in directly around the heavy guns.

This was in fact what they were doing even now. While half of the defensive guns had been smashed to flinders, others were far better defended with energy shields and thick lips of stone that protected all but their barrels from return fire. Hitting those barrels while their ship was being struck was tough even for the geth. The attacking frigate was forced to retreat, shifting around to place a mountain between it and the defensive guns. To silence them, the fight had to be taken to the guns on the ground.

As hundreds of geth troopers were unloaded under the command of a prime and the backing of several other heavy models, other people in Port Hanshan did not react at all like the civilians they were supposed to be. A few of them were professional spies who were simply noting everything that was going on, the asari that Ranma and his friends had made contact with being one of them. Not part of Benezia's little book of contacts, she had no idea what was going on. Hacking into the security cameras, she calmly moved not to the nearest shelter, but to her apartment, still watching events outside.

Another such individual was Brad Klein, or at least that was what was written on his local ID. Currently, he sat in the Mezzanine, ostensibly waiting for the tumult around him to cease,

which it showed no sign of doing anytime soon. This was the man who had instigated the ambush on Ranma and who he and his friends had tried to tail before events pulled them in a different direction. Or rather, back in the direction of the mystery/mission they had come to Noveria for in the first place.

Now, while the asari spy saw an interesting note for her reports, Brad saw opportunity. He pulled out his cell phone, clicking it twice, then three times, then several more times, sending a message almost as if he were using Morse Code, but it was a secret code for his fellow conspirators to let them know this call was indeed coming from him. Finally, he left the connection on and spoke into his omni-tool, his tone calm and professional.

“Change of plans. We’re moving up the timetable. We do it now, a full smash and grab. Everything from that AI lab goes. Team Two, we’ll want that ship ready to extract. Don’t engage the attackers if you can help it, but if they blast open the door for us, I’ll be very happy man. Team One, be ready to move in four minutes with the heavy loadout. **Everything** must go, including any of the scientists still there. We’ll want them alive.”

“The fangs of Cerberus bite deep,” came the reply from two different voices, and Brad smiled. He pushed himself to his feet, heading towards where his own equipment, so to speak, had been stored, pushing through the crowd and using his assumed bulk to good effect. *Time to wipe the snow off my boots, and return to the Illusive Man’s side. He’ll have his prize, and hopefully after this, I’ll be given more exciting missions.*

OOOOOOO

“Here they come,” Garrus murmured, as he lay out in the snow outside Peak 15. He shook his head faintly, trying hard not to look over his shoulder towards the top of the complex where the shuttle landing area rested.

The geth had deposited several hundred of their pyros, rocketeers and regular troopers there. At least two companies of the deadly geth platforms, each of them with enhanced shields and all connected into the geth network which would only make them deadlier as they invaded.

Through the single corridor into the base. Where Ranma was waiting for them.

“I didn’t honestly think that the geth would be so foolish as to dump so many of their troopers straight on top of us here. After all, once they are in the lab, they’ve effectively entered Ranma’s most deadly range,” Garrus murmured into the coms gear built into his helmet. *Those poor, poor geth.* “Better to try and fight Ranma out here, try to pull him into fighting them out in the ice.

“That just means there’s fewer of them for us to deal with.” Tali grunted, shaking her helmeted head. She was also hidden among the snow near the foot of Peak 15, along with all of Tevaine’s team. So well hidden was she at the moment that even top Garrus, who had seen

where she had gone, couldn't spot her. Which was, considering her normal combat style, all to the good. "And if you're pitying them, don't. Ranma's going to tear through them like paper."

"I like both of those ideas, even if I still can't quite believe Ranma's going to be able to stop that whole force on his own," Tevaine muttered. She and her team had gotten to know Ranma a little bit over the past day, but there'd been only a few times where his strength had been useful, and his durability was still more rumor than fact to her even when they were linked to the warrior who had made a mockery of the Blood Pack on Omega.

Still, the whole defensive plan relied on Ranma holding the geth who came in from above Peak 15 all by himself, while the rest of the defenders dealt with the attack coming in over the snow. The geth troopers and other land-based forces which had been dropped down away from Peak 15, and which had begun making their way towards it quickly.

That group was already under surveillance by cloaked drones, each of them sharing their telemetry with Garrus, Tali and Tevaine's mercenary group. It wasn't a pretty sight. One Geth Prime, more than three companies of troopers, four squads or more of leapers, their numbers impossible for the drones to pin down. Rocketeers aplenty, with no pyros to be seen.

Nor any colossi. Evidently the geth had thought bringing along the same tonnage in smaller units was a better bet. Garrus wished he could argue with that opinion. *That is still a lot of metal coming at us. Still, we did what we could.*

"Lenassga, Garrus, you're the snipers. Call it off as you see it. Tali... now!" Tevaine ordered.

Ranma had initially balked at having her be in charge of this aspect of the defense, but Garrus had insisted. The Matron-aged asari commando had literal centuries of experience more than any of them. That meant more in a position of command than in skill with a sniper rifle or hacking.

Garrus smiled thinly, waiting for the first of the geth rocketeers to enter his range, then very calmly took a shot, which zoomed downfield, slamming into and through the droid's flashlight-like head after having plowed through its shielding. "Tali, set off the first round of explosives. Just remember, if they start firing at your position, move. That ship is still up there somewhere, and orbital bombardment is not a good way to go."

"Roger," Tali said, trying to sound official, before she pushed a small button on her omni-tool. Instantly, a row of explosives buried within the ice exploded, sending shards of ice, heavy metal, and incendiaries everywhere, destroying more than two dozen of the geth troopers, and injuring still more, including two more rocketeers. Their ammunition magazines exploded barely seconds later, turning still more geth into so much shrapnel.

“GET SOME you Bosh’tets!” she nearly shrieked, while the geth began to fire all around her and towards the distant fire. The second Battle of Peak 15 had begun.

End Chapter

In all my fics, I make sure to show the enemy can change their plans because of something the characters have done. Sovereign is not going to concentrate solely on our heroes. He’s got much bigger things to do. However, I also think old Sovie was getting frustrated and worried because of his inability to start the Cycle and bring in the horde of Reaper ships, and remember this is still a few years before the discovery of the Beacon and the start of the ME games. So here, while he doesn’t overreact to Ranma’s power or losing Saren, he is very quick to jump to new plans.