

Howdy, all. This was the winner, by a very thin margin, of the Ranma poll for February. It was honestly surprising, even if I did vote for it, as that wasn't even enough to deal with the carry-over effect, which was going in Stallion of the Line's favor. But several of my mid-tier patrons did not take part this month so that let Effect win.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly. The whole chapter has been sent to Hiryo, but there's no way he'll get it back to me by 12 tonight. That's what happens when you lose five days when you should be working on the patty on only fic, pushing that back and leaving barely four days to work on this one.

Chapter 1#: A Horse Goes Stomping Part 2

As Ranma was pulled out of the room she was currently crouching in a corner of, Tali was glad that she was forced to wear her environment suit all the time. Because the helmet allowed her to cut off communications for a moment, not allowing any sound out. "Who does that little {skank} think she is, grabbing Ranma like that?" She grumbled in the privacy of her helmet.

Upon consulting with a few of the former pleasure slaves who were in the best condition mentally, Ranma and Tali had decided to slow the 'Explode The Base' plan, wanting to search it further for things that could be worth selling or clothing for the slaves. After all, none of the slaves were dressed appropriately to be around anyone but their previous captors, and neither Tali nor Ranma were comfortable with that.

Unfortunately, most of the slaves were in no condition to help. One of them, a recent acquisition apparently, according to the woman herself, had been a computer tech on a freighter. Emma Wister was relatively useful, having had her wits about her when she was brought to the pirate base and kept them in the weeks since. She had told Ranma and Tali that lots of the pirates had stashed away bits and pieces of acquired goods for themselves, several of which might well be worth quite a bit. Enough to help Emma and the other slaves get back on their feet or at least pay for the medical and psych help they needed after their captivity.

Yet Emm, a human woman in her mid-thirties, was pretty much the only one among the slaves who was any help beyond lifting and carrying things. A few of the asari, with their inhibitor chips turned off, were helpful in transporting stuff onto the ship, while three human girls were able to look through clothing that they could wear that wasn't too blood-soaked after the battle despite being too weak from malnourishment and the depredations of their former captors to do more.

But the rest? Tali understood and sympathized with what they had gone through. Falling into batarian hands and having her suit cracked and everything that would follow was one of the horrors any quarian woman away from the Migrant Fleet had to live with.

This included two Batarian women, the first women from that species that Tali had ever seen. Hearing from the pair, twins, that they had been sold into slavery by their own mother had actually made their plight worse. She fully understood that many of the others had to be assigned to take care of those who couldn't look after themselves at the moment and thus couldn't be much help.

Yet her sympathies waned every time she saw the women who were well enough to help and free to do so instead of trying to get friendly with Ranma. This included the asari among the slaves. Every one of them was physically fine, yet only two of them had volunteered to help transport sellable stuff out to the Trojan Horse. The others kept on trying to flirt with Ranma!

A case in point had occurred just now, leading to why Tali was crouching over a large hole in the floor of the Lord Governor General High Marshall's quarters. One of the women, apparently one of the Lord Governor General High Marshall's favorites, had told Ranma that he had just installed a false wall in his living quarters. Ranma had promptly torn it down, and Tali had eagerly stepped forward to start to dive into the computer that had been thus revealed. Only for the same girl to drag Ranma off on the pretense of knowing where another similar wall might be.

"She didn't have to do that, and she didn't have to press up into him like that," Tali grumbled. "That's not nearly as bad as those other girls wanting to put on a, a fashion show for him or that one girl who asked if she could share his quarters on the Trojan Horse, but still! Share his quarters indeed, I'll share my fists with your face, you..."

Tali kept on grumbling for a few minutes in this vein as her fingers began to work automatically. She first powered up the system, finding it ran on its own separate battery, like an Omni Tool or radio, unconnected to the base's network. Tali then tried to connect her omni-tool to it, continuing to grumble for several moments and not noticing this wasn't working until it occurred to Tali precisely what she was doing.

"Talizorah'nar'Raya, you stop that right now!" She growled, still in the privacy of her helmet. "He's human, you're not! You can't ever be in a relationship, and being jealous of a friend getting some attention like that is wrong."

Tali paused for a moment, then shook her head. "And maybe some of these girls are flirting with Ranma because of how much time they spent among the pirates. Acting like that, all eager to please and happy, might be some kind of defense mechanism or something."

With that thought, Tali pushed aside her last vestiges of jealousy and annoyance to truly concentrate on the job at hand. The computer had been set up specifically to not allow access. There were numerous codes on it, as well as no physical way to connect the computer to another system like Tali's omni-tool. Yet, after dealing with the Shadow Broker's system, this was child's play for Tali to get through. An open panel, a few changed wires, a bit of omni-tool creation, and she had access. Second later, Tali was downloading what looked like several dozen folders with the names and descriptions of planets where the man had done quite a bit of business, or at least it appeared so once she opened one of the files.

Others didn't have much of anything in them, but the one on Omega and another one on a different planet in Turian space looked particularly interesting, as that was the planet where the parts for this base had come from, and many of the weapons that the pirates had been using. Apparently, a turian company had been getting quite a bit of kickback from the pirates, and Tali just knew that the Turian Hierarchy would be very interested in that.

As would the people on Omega, probably. If Ranma and his friend's upending of Omega had left any of the man's contacts there still in one piece. Frankly, Tali doubted that.

There was another folder on the computer system, too. This was full of bank account numbers, which made Tali wonder if maybe his royal governor or whatever had been trying to create a bit of a nest egg for himself to retire with even beyond simply being the boss of this base rather than going out on raids himself. "Well, whatever you were planning, you're dead now, and your money can be better used by your victims, Bosh'tet."

Tali didn't know how long she was working there before Ranma came back in, followed by a few of the other slaves and the computer technician, Emma. Tali saw them come in, their form reflected in the old-fashioned solid-state screen of the computer. And she also saw Ranma's eyes shift from looking straight ahead to looking downward, his face turning a bit red for some reason. *What is he...oh!*

It only occurred to her then that Tali had been basically hunched over, her rear in the air as she worked on the computer where it had been stuck in the floor of the room. After all, the nearby table had been shattered by the gun mount in the roof after Ranma had trashed it, so there hadn't been any surface nearby to put it on to work at it with ease, so Tali hadn't bothered to move it.

A flush began to suffuse her face as she realized that this position basically presented her rear towards the door, where Ranma currently was. *Well, it, it isn't like my suit's that skintight... right? Keelah, when was the last time I saw my suit from behind? Have I ever seen it from that angle? Oh, {crud}, I've seen Auntie Raan's like that, and it definitely showed more than our chest areas do, eep!*

Yet at the same time that Tali felt embarrassed at the angle Ranma was looking at her from and the fact that Ranma was noticing, she also felt a little thrill at the fact that Ranma was completely ignoring the women around him to look at Tali's rear. This included Emma, whose body had clearly interested Ranma when the woman had first spoken up after the pirates and been dealt with. *Not that I can blame him for looking. Emma was naked at the time, and even someone like Beverly or that other matriarch would envy that woman's chest! But, but Ranma prefers to look at me like this?*

Again, Tali had to push that thought aside. *Stop it, you stupid girl!*

"Hey Tali, I think we're almost done," Ranma stated, looking up above Tali's head at the far wall. *Damn! Just urgh! Freaking hormones and all these girls tryin' to cozy up to me. My self-control's got to be at a breaking point to look at Tali like that for so long.* "We found some weird stuff, but Emma here and the others think it was well worth it. What about you?"

"I wouldn't call it weird, although I think that what's his face was thinking of cutting and running at some point. Why he decided to use a computer like this rather than simply put it all on his Omni tool and gene-lock it, I don't know, but..."

"Oh, two of the pirate captains are actually related to him," one of the slave girls said. She was the same one who had noticed that there had been work done on the floor of the base commander's living quarters. "There was some scuttlebutt among the pirates. I think that one of his sons or whatever was going to try to take over soon if something wasn't done."

"So gene-locking it to his Omni tool wouldn't have worked. But then, why not just memorize it?" Tali wondered, pushing herself to her feet and pulling out a few of the parts that she had used to allow herself to connect to the computer.

"I think you're giving them far too much credit. Lord high commander whatever that struck me as a very bright guy. Plus, maybe he liked the whole cloak-and-dagger stuff. Maybe memorizing or putting it on his Omni-tool was just too simple for him. He definitely had a flair for the dramatic. Just look at that 'uniform' thing he wore," Ranma said dryly. "And who cares anyway? He's dead, and this base is going to be gone minutes after we leave. So why does it matter?"

"You got a point there," Tali laughed, standing up and moving over to the entrance. "I suppose it just offends my sensibilities a little when someone goes to such efforts to hide stuff when there are better ways to do it."

Ranma patted Tali companionably on the shoulder. "Well, I think we can take it a given that you're probably as intelligent as a thousand of whatever his name was, so I wouldn't let it bother you."

“Only a thousand?” Tali joked, and the two of them walked out of the door through the base with the other slaves following them. Tali unknowingly walked so close to Ranma that their moving hands occasionally tapped against one another as they walked, but Ranma didn’t notice.

When they reached the hangar area, they found one of the asari there, using her biotic powers to move a few of the... more mentally and physically damaged slaves on gurneys into the ship.

The three girls who would come with Ranma to get Tali hurried forward to help with the last of those while Ranma and Tali turned back and headed deeper into the base again towards the power generator. There, Tali input a twenty-minute timer on a control program set to cause the generator to go critical.

Five minutes later, they were back on their temporary ship, the Trojan Horse. As they entered the cargo bay of the ship, Tali stopped and stared at a large, frilly-looking plant with thousands of tiny, silver-blue leaves. She’d seen plants before this of course, and even trees on a few space stations. But why this one was here was a question, one Tali voiced aloud.

An asari turned from tending the tree, gesturing to it excitedly. “This is a tree from Voldas in asari space, the Voldani tree. It’s highly prized for its leaves because they can make an exquisite type of tea, but the price anywhere but on Voldas is enormous because the leaves go bad so quickly once plucked, and the taste is ruined by refrigeration. If we keep on taking care of it and start selling the leaves on Omega, it will give us a steady supply of money, a lot of it!”

“YEP!” another asari chirped, laughing wildly, almost a little too much to be truly sane, a sure sign she wasn’t entirely over what they had all endured just yet. “A handful of those leaves will sell to other asari and Salarians so well, we’ll make more in a few transactions than we could ever make as dancers.”

Meh, my mind, that’s not the most surprising thing that these girls think is going to be worth money. There’s a landscape painting around here somewhere that’s got way too many purples and blues in it for my tastes, but apparently, it’s from some famous artist or something. It’s apparently worth enough to buy a ship,” Ranma shrugged. “Don’t ask me, I’m not an art collector or anything.”

Tali agreed with that statement, as the very idea of spending that much money on something so superfluous as a painting was weird. Sure, she could understand sentimentality, and having a painting that someone from your family created saved was one thing, or creating a painting on a wall or something else open to the public was good for morale on any vessel. But to use so much money on something simply for its artistic value? That was an act that no one in the Migrant Fleet would understand.

Emma, who had apparently taken over the loading process, rolled her eyes. The middle-aged woman was a bit... intimidating to Tali, with her almost aggressively feminine body, but there was evidently a mind to go with her big tits, wide hips and rear. "It's not that the creator is famous, Ranma. That painting is by a drell, and it shows their old homeworld, which was destroyed by a solar flare. It's literally priceless to art collectors and to the drell themselves, despite how much their society has subsumed itself to the squids."

"Well, that just means you gals will have an easier time of it setting yourselves up on Omega, so I guess that's good. I don't need to actually understand why it's so expensive," Ranma shrugged again and headed deeper into the ship.

Soon enough, the ship was taking off, and Tali turned to where Ranma was at the controls. "Where to from here, Captain?"

"Oh yeah, a captain of two," Ranma snorted. "Well, first, plot a course for Omega, obviously. How long will that take us?"

With so few mass effect relays in the terminus systems, ships had to rely on FPL to get practically anywhere, but luckily, the computers on this tub were up to it. "Around six days," Tali answered. "Do you want me to input that into the computer?"

"Yeah. After that, I think I'm going to be spending the entire trip up here," Ranma said, shaking his head.

"What, why? Is this a machismo thing where you think you have to take all the watches or something?" Tali asked, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

"What, no." Ranma blinked in surprise, shaking his head with a laugh. "It's just, well, I'd rather not..." He flushed a little, then shook his head. "Let's just say that I noticed a lot of the looks I was getting, and while I'm kind of flattered, I really don't want that kind of attention, especially not from ex-slaves who should really start to er, value themselves more than that."

Ranma wasn't about to explain how he'd already had one orgy with ex-slaves, and while the experience had been immensely fun, it wasn't something he wanted to experience again. *At least not with complete strangers*, Ranma admitted, trying not to let his gaze go down Tali's body again. *Stop that! Tali is your friend; don't think of her like that.*

Another small part of his brain added, *yet, anyway. Maybe if you're able to build up Tali's inner energy to the point where she can consciously use it, then you can start thinking about Tali that way. But not before.*

Tali laughed, that high, tinkling bell noise that Ranma so enjoyed hearing, not noticing how his own smile had widened at the noise, either at that or at the way that Tali leaned over

and patted his hand, a move that she would never have made when they had first met. "Poor Ranma, being pursued by so many attractive women of various races. I have to wonder how many men would turn down the opportunity to be thanked for rescuing damsels in distress."

"Eh, while I have a lot of experience saving damsels in distress, I've never really liked the idea of being thanked like that for it. And I'm not most people," Ranma said.

"That is a one hundred and fifty percent accurate statement," Tali agreed, letting loose another laugh. "Still, Omega makes sense for a stopover. They'll have the facilities to help the girls if they've got enough money to pay for it, and with the stuff we took, they should. Credit chits aplenty, and did you see that solid gold statue?"

Ranma shook his head, and as the pirate base exploded below them, the ship moved off, entering FTL as the two of them continued to laugh and joke about what they had found at the pirate base. Several jumps later, the pair of them had agreed to watch some movies that Tali had downloaded into her Omni tool from Shiala that the commando had thought both she and Ranma would enjoy. There were dozens of human created action movies on there that interested both of them, although it did make Ranma remember John and his team of alliance troops on Omega. *I wonder if they're still going to be there? And what they thought of how I was kidnapped?* He mused, leaning back as the movie began on the big screen in front of them.

Scene break

At the same time that Ranma was heading back to Omega, Herb, Usagi and their new companion, Wrex, arrived on Tuchanka by shuttle. The freight hauler that they had booked passage on had dumped the shuttle out well up above the atmosphere and then scooted out and away. Very few non-krogan wanted to be anywhere near the race's home planet, let alone on its radioactive surface.

Upon his first site of the planet from orbit, Herb reflected they might've had a point. Now, standing on the planet's surface, he was certain of it. The brown and dark red coloring from orbit was indeed a good sign of what I would find here, Herb reflected, staring around them. The shuttle had touched down in a strange, open area near what were clearly old fortifications of some type on top of a steep hill. In the distance to one side, Herb could see a city built into the side of what looked like the start of a series of mountains, and nearer, there were other stone fortifications built up into what was very obviously in the outer fortress of some kind out on the plane. *Providing an outer area of defense for the city, perhaps?*

But there were no plants here. There was no green, no nothing growing. It was simply stone and sand as far as the eye could see. Well, that and heat. The sun, which was much closer to Tuchanka than Sol was to Earth, was high in the sky, and it was baking-oven hot, causing a heat haze to rise off of the ground all around them. *Still, this is about what I expected.*

Although I would assume that they have underground caverns for growing things, like in that one science fiction fantasy from that Herbert person. As for the heat, I can handle that too. Indeed, my draconic side actually seems to enjoy it. I have a feeling like I want to just lay out somewhere and let the warmth seep into scales I don't, actually have, Herb thought wryly.

"Yo, human, you do know you're glowing green and blue right now, right?" Wrex asked, breaking into Herb's thoughts on the geography around them.

{So, here I kind of describe how it might feel to someone with ki being subjected to radiation, a slow but normally unstoppable assault on their body on a level that even the greatest ki user would normally be unable to sense. But Herb's body can and automatically deals with it. Tell me what you think and if I should expand it further}

Blinking, Herb looked down at himself and saw indeed that he was glowing. *Something is calling on my ki heali-Ahh, I see. This must be a response to the background radiation here. Fascinating, I thought that my simple toughness would be enough to see me through, but evidently not.*

This really wasn't a surprise to Herb. While he'd been blasé about the idea of dealing with radiation, he had known that likening it to, say, getting skin disease because you took in too much sun was rather foolish. He didn't understand much about the hard sciences, chemistry or physics, but he understood enough to know radiation was bad.

A momentary flicker of concentration pulled Herb's ki back into himself, but he could still feel it at work, healing small infinitesimal amounts of damage from one second to the next throughout his entire body. It felt almost like someone was hitting every part of Herb's body with low-powered life energy attacks, or perhaps as if some kind of disease was trying to worm its way into his body, some cancer trying to attack him on the cellular level, a level Herb had never needed to defend before, with scant results.

Perhaps, ironically, it is because of my body's experience with the gas concoction that Vasir used to capture Ranma and me that the radiation is not gaining much headway. I will need to monitor it occasionally, and to make certain that there is no lasting effect regardless of my ki, but at the moment, I believe I can handle this. And perhaps my body will acclimatize to it eventually.

He said this allowed to Wrex, who shook his head slightly. "Yeah, I kind of figured that might happen."

"And you also thought it would be a final test to see whether or not 'this life energy stuff' of mine really was connected to your own durability and healing factor?" Herb guessed archly, one eyebrow rising in query.

"Yeah, that too." Despite being called out like this, Wrex was unrepentant, shrugging his heavily armored shoulders, letting a slightly scary grin cross his scaled face. "I saw you do a lot of things, sure, but dealing with radiation, especially without consciously needing to direct your life energy like you need to do with those attacks of yours, well, it's just another sign of the possible connection there."

He turned away from Herb to look back into the shuttle to the entrance into the cockpit, where Usagi's head could be seen sticking to one side of the pilot's chair. "Are you sure you're going to just stay there? I don't want you wandering around here without a minder, girl. I might not've known you long, but that sounds like a recipe for disaster. And while disasters can be fun, I'd rather not any of them happen on my own homeworld."

"I'm good," Usagi said with a laugh, waving a hand languidly. "I hate environmental suits, and I'm not at all interested in archaeology. Call me if any fights or anything interesting comes up or if you need me to move the shuttle." While she couldn't pilot a spaceship, Usagi actually had a shuttle license, which put her above Herb, although Wrex could pilot one, too. "Until then, I can catch up on my naps, watch some movies, and have some me time."

"I'll warn you now that a few of my folk will probably be by to try to steal this shuttle..." Wrex's voice trailed off as Usagi's grin widened, causing him to chuckle. "Gotcha."

"That girl has spent far too much time around Ranma if she thinks that is any idea of a good time," Herbert mused. While he liked fighting, even the idea of fighting opponents like the krogan wouldn't be enough to cause him to smile like that. *And if there are any other interpretations for why she was smiling at the idea of krogan coming around, I do not want to dive too closely into it.*

With that in mind, Herbert turned back to Wrex. "Is there any reason why we put down here rather than closer to that city I can see out in the distance? And is that our destination? The seat of power of this ancient clan you mentioned that kept records?"

"No. That is the center of Urdnot Clan territory. My clan's territory. I don't even know where to begin to look for those ruins or their records," Wrex admitted. "But my clan's own historians, the womenfolk, they might know more. It's... look, our womenfolk, they are the keepers of a lot of what other races would call our society, okay? Us men, we've always had other stuff to deal with. As for putting down here, while I'm part of the clan, I don't know any of the local codes to get past the anti-air guns. To sit down any closer."

"I always got the impression that Tuchanka was uninhabited these days, generally speaking. But your people still see the need for such?" Herb inquired, frowning faintly.

“Hah!” Wrex snorted, his tone an alloy of pride and resignation. “While it’s true Tuchanka’s population is like... less than four percent what it was in the past, before our revolution, do you know what people called more than one krogan being the same area together for long periods?”

“No, although presumably, something like trouble or an annoyance?” Herb quipped, snickering. “Although not much of trouble for someone like myself.”

That took the wind out of Wrex’s sails for a moment and he turned away, marching through the sand towards one of the nearby buildings built into the side of the fortress they had landed inside. “Snarky little so-and-so! Well, the term is a fight. When more than one of us gets together, almost inevitably, there’s conflict. There always has been and always will be. So yeah, anti-air defenses, along with those forts and even hundreds of mines, are scattered around here.”

“I see. And will we run into any opposition within your clan to our search?” Herb wasn’t so much questioning on that point as assuming, really. Wrex was somewhat of a closed book, but Herb had noticed there were several subjects on which that book closed far faster and more abruptly than on others.

“Our search shouldn’t matter a damn to any of the males still here. My presence, though, that will probably bring us a bit of trouble, yeah” Wrex said, the tone of resignation coming back into his voice. Then Wrex’s voice firmed, and he clenched a hand, giving Herb the impression that he would be cracking his knuckles if the krogan used that particular bit of body language. “And if so, well, it might be time for some changes around here.”

Wondering what that was about and deciding that Wrex would tell him in his own time, or, more likely, trouble would come their way, and he would find out that way, Herb moved after the man. *Well, regardless, this is certainly going to be an interesting time, and I will learn more about the krogan and how they have so much ki, if nothing else. And if I get to fight a horde of krogan, all the better. I still resent Ranma for having so much fun with that while I was stuck dealing with Aria back on Omega.*

Scene break

“Attention, unidentified ship. State your business to be approaching Omega, or you will be fired upon. Omega is under new management and we no longer allow pirates or slavers to make their home here.”

“Well, that’s different,” Ranma said, staring at the intercom. “Before, we were nearly within docking range of Omega before we got a call like that. Still, I suppose I should have

figured that'd change once John and his folk helped set up the local merchants as a government."

"Mmm... Judging from the sensors, that's not the only thing that's changed. I'm seeing several strange ship classes... larger than frigates but not as large as cruisers... huh. My omni-tool says they are destroyers. That ship size isn't really used a lot these days. Too big for the asari and their frigate-based swarm tactics, too small for the turians and their love of big guns," Tali mused. "It's supposedly a class with a lot of compromises built into it, which just makes it not as good at the jobs of the larger and smaller ships."

"I think the Volus are known to still use destroyers. They aren't cheap, yet you can build one for the same amount you'd need for three frigates, and they are good escort-type ships for their freighters. Especially since they are seen as not being a danger to any real military vessel, which, as part of the Turian Hierarchy, is a necessity," Emma, the middle-aged computer technician, said.

She was the only one of the slaves that Ranma and Tali had decided to allow onto the bridge, predominantly because she had shown no interest whatsoever in Ranma and was actually helpful. Considering how many of the ex-slaves had tried to make passes at Ranma, neither of those points was a small consideration.

Thankfully, Ranma had been true to his word, rarely venturing out from the cockpit and not interacting with any of the slaves beyond Emma after a few days, and it seemed as if this had worked to give the girls the hand that he just wasn't interested. This came as a relief to several of the girls, who had indeed been flirting with him as a kind of defense mechanism crossed with a Stockholm response. The others, though, especially the asari girls, who somehow were just better put together mentally to bounce back from being abused than batarians or humans, had been really interested in Ranma and had been sad to be so dismissed.

Regardless, Emma had become the de facto leader of the ex-pleasure slaves. She and one of the asari, a matron-aged asari named Pa'lai, had organized them a bit, made certain everyone had enough clothing to get by for now, saw to the medical care of those who needed it, and even made certain everyone had enough to eat. There wasn't much in the way of variety in those meals, but that was hardly their fault.

"Yeah, that connection never made much sense to me whenever it came up. I mean, the volus basically created the, the whole galaxy's bank network and basic trade laws and such, right? So why aren't they recognized as a full council member race? I mean, I know jack-shit about that kind of thing, but I know the economy's damn important. Still, I'm not interested enough to look into it deeper. I'll leave that kind of stuff ta Herbie," Ranma said blithely before flicking the communications device on. "Omega control, this is the Trojan Horse. This is Ranma

specifically. You lot should probably still remember me. We've got twenty-one victims of pirate attacks with us, along with some things they wanna sell. Who's in charge here these days? That was still up in the air when I was kidnapped."

The asari on the other end of the call paused, and when they received a reply, the asari had been replaced by a volus. "*PHSSS* Ranma of Unknown Clan be welcome on Omega. This *PHSSS* one speaks for the Merchant Guild, who rule Omega now. We are still *PHSSS* in the process of seeing to our own defenses and other things of that *PHSSS* nature, but we are in charge. You are cleared to enter *PHSSS* billet number five D. You should be receiving a *PHSSS* schematic of Omega shortly with the appropriate markers."

"Thanks. Is John and his team still here? Some of the slaves we rescued are humans from the alliance. I figure handing them straight over into John's care might be a good idea."

Emma nodded at that. She had been a civilian when she had been captured, but two of the other women had been soldiers captured by the pirates on a raid on the Human/Turian coalition's war into the Batarian Hegemony. While Emma and most of the other slaves would be willing to make lives for themselves on Omega, those two and a few others wanted to go home.

"Yes. *PHSSS* We of Omega Clan trust John of Clan Alliance and his team. We have not *PHSSS* welcomed other alliance members to our station, but they have been invaluable *PHSSS* in certain areas."

That was probably putting it mildly, Tali reflected. Ranma had told her what the mixed company of asari, human, Salarian and Turians had done for Omega. In a way, Ranma's complete and total destruction of the local blood pack chapter had simply been icing on the cake. It had been the money that John and his team had essentially stolen from Eclipse, Black Sun and the Blood Pack, which had been even more helpful in both giving the locals liquid capital to work with and in defanging those mercenary guilds.

"*PHSSS*, I must warn you, however. We of Omega are not in the habit of giving handouts to anyone, *PHSSS*, no matter how dire their straits. While you yourself are *PHSSS* owed something for your part in freeing Omega from *PHSSS* its former barbarity, your charges will have to *PHSSS* pay for more than simple medical aid," the volus warned.

Ranma glanced over to Emma, indicating with a wave of his hand she should start talking. She did so briskly, introducing herself, then telling the volus about the number of credit chits, as well as the painting. At the mention of the painting, the volus's tone, as picked up by the universal translator, changed, and he became extremely helpful suddenly.

"Really, that thing's worth that much?" Ranma mused, shaking his head. "And that pirate ass who had taken it as his part of the spoils just had it stuck up above his bunk."

“He was a drell, so it is understandable why he chose to keep it,” Tali interjected, drawing a blank gaze from Ranma. “You didn’t even notice one of the pirates was a different species, did you?”

“Nope. I noticed a few of ‘em were humans, but, eh, none of them fought well enough for me to remember them as more than simple obstacles,” Ranma admitted with a shrug.

“Regardless, yes, Ranma, that painting is that expensive. I’d wager if none of the locals want to buy it themselves but simply act as a go-beteeen we’ll still be able to get enough money from that to see to most of our needs, up to and including buying housing space here in Omega,” Emma answered with a chuckle. *Super soldier, cyborg or whatever he is, Ranma’s definitely got a one-track mind.*

John and several women from his team met the shuttle as it came in, along with a few dozen medical professionals, their time paid for by Emma before the ship set down. Those women who were suffering from PTSD and more physical ailments were quickly ushered away. Emma and Pa’lai quickly led the others off, already in deep discussion with a Volus. The other asari remained behind, guarding their cargo. Just because Omega was under new management didn’t mean that theft and graft, which had been so prevalent, was entirely gone after all.

The exceptions to this broad breakdown of the former pleasure slaves were the two sailors who saluted John and were put under the care of Sergeant Truss, and the two batarian women. Emma had told the locals about them, too, and they were met by several of their own people, including one who was easily the best-dressed example of that race that Ranma had ever met. *Not that that is a high bar to clear, considering how I’ve never met any before this who wasn’t a criminal or pirate. This guy though, he looks almost like a politician,* Ranma mused, staring at the batarian.

Whoever he was, the man left quickly with the two batarian women in tow, and Ranma turned his attention to John, who, after leaving the two sailors in Lisa’s capable hands, held out his own hand for Ranma to shake. “Ranma. I have to tell you, my team and I discovered who had kidnapped you and Herb, although where you wound up, I have no idea. Herb was on the citadel, turned in by Spectre Vasir on their orders, and then apparently was able to leave somehow. That’s about all we know about him. If the Citadel Council knows more, they’re not saying. But it was clear from the information we saw that Herb got away from them. But where did you end up? Vasir reported that a group of pirates under the Shadow Broker’s command had attacked your ship, but I’ve never been certain how much of that to believe.”

“What, you’re questioning the Council’s statement or their oh-so-special Spectres?” Ranma sneered.

“Hah, I think the Spectres are necessary, but I’ve never been blind to the idea that special agents who have little to no oversight but must produce results with little in the way of backing are a source of corruption just waiting to happen,” John snorted, gesturing Ranma to follow him, leaving sergeant Truss behind to continue to deal with the ex-pleasure slaves. “Case in point, your whole being kidnapped thing. And then the Council turns around and says that because you’re not a council citizen or an Alliance citizen you can’t be given the protection of such. That kidnapping you was no different than capturing a pirate in the act of piracy. But still, where did the Shadow Broker send you off to?”

Ranma snorted, biting back a temptation to continue on that topic and the fact that Saren, another Spectre, had apparently become corrupt just like Vasir but was working with the Geth. But he knew the evidence they had wouldn’t stand up to the Council’s scrutiny, or rather, Tali had said her word, and the stuff she had found in the Geth’s brains wouldn’t be enough to sway the council from believing the word of a Spectre. More importantly, Ranma wanted to find the guy himself, as did Tali for his connection to the Geth. *That, and check up on that whole experimenting on sentients thing*, Ranma thought. *Oh, and there’s the whole ‘can’t tell anyone the Shadow Broker’s dead thing, which would probably come up if I talked about Vasir.*

With all that in mind, Ranma instead told John the story that Benezia and her friend had come up with. “The Shadow Broker handed me off to these weird geneticist guys, mostly salarions with a few dozen humans and asari mixed in. They made the mistake of cutting down on the dosage of whatever gunk Vasir gassed me and Herb with. At that point, I broke out, and then, er, eventually, after killing and, um, taking over the base, I kinda found myself kind of trapped on this planet for a bit until the next scheduled supply run came in. At that point, they were jumped by pirates. Which gave me both an in with the transport crew and this clunker,” Ranma said, gesturing to the Trojan Horse.

John nodded, not asking for any details. By the shifty look on Ranma’s face, there was a lot more to it he wasn’t saying, but John figured it wasn’t any of his business. It wasn’t like Ranma was a soldier or in any way associated with the Alliance, after all, as much as a few of the Alliance’s higher-ups might think so. In fact, Admiral Hackett had passed on to John that there was a push for Ranma to be declared an enemy of the alliance, or at least a person of interest along with Herb after the multi-colored hair youth had turned the Council and Udina down so... provocatively. *Now I’m wishing I hadn’t ever seen those images again, damn it.*

Trying hard to redo his mental barriers to the horror of the ‘orgy’ Herb had staged in the Council room, something that was still a source of hilarity and queasiness nearly a month later, John looked over at the quarian woman walking beside Ranma. “I take it that is where you came in, miss?”

"My name is just fine, it's Tali," Tali replied, snorting. *Well, he's respectful, at least.* "The pirates had boarded our ship by the time Ranma was able to board them in turn, and after finishing off most of the pirate crew, he came across and eventually found me in the cafeteria holding off a few pirates at shotgun point." She elbowed Ranma in the side, causing two passing turians to scowl, then do the equivalent of frowning. Seeing a suit rat be so friendly with someone not of their race was highly unusual. "Where this one instantly went because he was starving like a rabid animal who had been stuck in a cage for too long."

"That's a little too accurate, frankly. The base didn't have many comestibles on it at any one time, and my body had used so much of its energy to deal with whatever that shit was that Vasir used on us that by the time I had finished dealing with the defenders, I barely had anything left. So, by the time Tali's ship arrived, I was pretty starving. And then I had to fight the pirates."

"He did so effectively that he terrified the rest of the crew I was a part of at the time. What did you say, 'Blood is one of those hard-to-clean stains' when you were blood-soaked up to the elbows and knees?" Tali teased.

"Hey, it was the truth," Ranma retorted while John was looking between the pair of them, shaking his head at their byplay. "Anyway, after the battle was over, I hammered out a deal with the surviving crew members, made friends with Tali, and kind of enlisted her help in taking the pirate ship and go pirate hunting, which is where Emma and the rest come from."

"My crew and I never really got along well, and that was before most of them were wiped out by the pirates. And after that experience, well, getting some of my own back, as Ranma put it at one point, sounded like a really good idea," Tali shrugged. "That, and frankly, killing pirates just seemed like a great idea after they came so close to killing me."

"Well, it sounds like you've had an interesting time of it. All we've been doing is hunting varren, dealing with local criminals, and essentially helping the Merchants Guild start to really take control of Omega," John said with a sigh. "It isn't ever going to be anything like an alliance or counsel planet, but the majority of the locals seem satisfied with the direction everything's going." Then he smirked. "Well, that and an attempt by a few Blue Sun branches to move in and take over before the Volus-owned destroyers arrived. That was fun. They had no idea what they were walking into, and my team and I had a lot of fun drawing them in, cutting them off from retreating, and then wiping those assholes out."

"Huh, I would've thought the Blood Pack would've been the ones to try that," Ranma mused.

"Thank goodness they didn't," John shuddered. "Fighting a group of krogan in close quarters would have been nasty. But no, the Blood Pack members that were here before still

are. Oh, and if one challenges you, try to keep the damage to the surrounding environment, please. They are concentrated on getting their honor back by challenging you.”

“Hah! Sounds like fun if any of them can put up a fight. Which... honestly they might be able to without my armor, drat it. Not much of one, but a few dozen krogan could at least make me sweat a bit,” Ranma mused. “But you were saying?”

“Yeah, the Blue Suns weren’t here for honor’s sake. They wanted to take over. Think about it. If they could take over Aria’s position, they would be made. According to the very few survivors we left,” and here, John smirked evilly, a hint of tooth causing Tali to shiver and realize other humans could be scary beyond Ranma. “A few of their local branch heads were willing to work together until the dust settled and they had taken over. Boy, were they surprised when they ran into my team.”

By this point, the group had reached the outermost district of Omega where people actually lived, and looking around, Ranma had to smile, beginning to point out some of the differences to Tali. There were a lot more people in this area than there had been previously, but instead of being here because they lived here, most of the newcomers were working on repairing the various maintenance issues that Ranma and the others had noticed scattered throughout the space station/asteroid fortress. Out here, those problems had been more extreme than in the deeper districts, like Kenzo or Doru, so it was really a nice sign that there looked to be several companies worth of people working on those repairs.

There were even groups that were painting the inside of the various tunnels they passed through. Those colors weren’t the ubiquitous gray or white they would be on a human space station. Rather, drab brown with streaks of other colors here and there. At one point, John led them by a mural of some kind that several asari were working on of a sunset over a river with a few asari swimming in the water or standing in the fields to either side of the river.

“Wow...” Tali hummed in delight, moving over to look at it in awe. “That’s amazing. See, this is what my people would think is a good use of art. No space taken up, but real beauty everyone can appreciate.”

One of the asari scowled at her and was about to shoo Tali away when Ranma moved up beside her, causing the asari to blanch and then turn back to her work. “U, um, thank you. I would have thought that you quarians would be more into space scenes or starships.”

Tali shrugged. She had noticed the other woman’s initial reaction to her but figured it had been an automatic thing rather than something directed at her personally, and by this point, Tali was far too used to such to care. “I suppose we all like to see something new and unusual or, in my people’s case, something we’ve lost.”

That caused the asari to pause, subsiding, while a nearby quarian, working on a heating vent of some kind, nodded in Tali's direction, who nodded back. At the same time, she gave the man a hand signal, a series of finger clicks, that meant she would see him later. *If we are going to stay here a while, I can check in with my fellow quarians. I know that the Migrant Fleet received the information I sent them from the Shadow Broker's databanks, but I don't know if they've acted on it since. I should have asked about that before we went pirate hunting, but I was so busy repairing the Trojan Horse at the time I forgot.*

John smiled as he led the pair on. "Like I said, this place will never be like an alliance world, but the locals seem to like it. In particular, the Elcor and Salarians have enjoyed the fact the varren and other scum have been suppressed or wiped out, freeing them of the danger they'd face in more distant sections of the space station if they went there to take care of maintenance issues. The Volus and the turians are glad that the Merchant Guild agreed to purchase defense from the alliance and Hierarchy, real ones. They have not arrived yet, but they will. Hundreds of starfighters, along with simulators to train the locals and how to pilot them. Kinetic barriers and guns too. It's going to take years, given the size of this place and the fact that Omega has refused to join any specific government and so has to pay exorbitantly for everything, but... They prefer their independence," John shrugged.

"Hah, I would too if I moved out to the equivalent of the Wild West, and then the Old East tried to tell me they wanted me back," Ranma quipped.

"Not a bad analogy, really," John admitted. "Although, in this case, Texas was taken over by a mafia family."

"Okay, there, you lost me," Ranma snorted. "Don't mix analogies, dude."

As the two humans bantered back and forth, Tali's eyes flicked around behind her visor. Soon, she had counted at least three dozen quarians moving among groups of humans, Salarians and others. Each time she spotted one of her race, it almost seemed as if her people were among those giving orders. Which was, to be blunt, an amazing surprise.

During a break in the banter, Tali pointed this out to John, who nodded, showing no hint of the normal bias against her people. "Yeah, a lot of the newcomers that have arrived recently in Omega are quarians. They were scouted and had their trips paid for by the Merchants Guild. Those of your people who were already living here have also begun to be in high demand for their abilities with engineering. I can name several districts where they're actually leading the entire restoration project." He smirked over at Ranma. "Including down in Kenzo District."

"That's amazing," Tali enthused, smiling inside her helmet.

“Er, does that mean you want to stay and help with this project instead of coming with me on my asshole-kicking galaxy tour?” Ranma questioned, trying to keep his voice level. Yet the idea of Tali deciding to stay here rather than continue to travel with him hurt. *Well, of course it hurts, you idiot! Tali’s become basically her best friend. How could it not hurt?* He thought, even as he castigated himself for doing so. Tali was a free woman, and if she suddenly decided that helping her people become a part of this community in Omega that was obviously still in the process of change, Ranma would simply have to accept that.

Luckily, Tali had no such idea. “Nope! I told you, I want to see planets, the **surface** of planets, get out and about in actual nature,” Tali said, even as a few more quarrians that were part of a nearby work gang noticed her. “If we spend any time here, I’ll talk to some of my fellows, but I’m not staying here now. You’re stuck with me, Ranma.”

For a moment, she cocked her helmet to one side, her body language becoming what the watching John could only think of as almost shy and teasing at the same time. “Unless you no longer want to show me the ship you’re having built in Mostromos?”

“No, no! None of that. You’re still more than welcome aboard,” Ranma said with relief, smiling happily, not noticing John looking at him thoughtfully for a second. “And um, I, er, just like having you around, ya’know? You weild a mean wrench, a decent shotgun, and have good taste in movies, so what’s not to like?”

Okay, that, that sounded good, Ranma thought with relief. *Not like my first thought, which was ‘a mean wrench, a decent shotgun, and are easy on the eyes. That’d be way too much between friends. Which is what we are,* Ranma reaffirmed. *Nothing more, nothing less.*

“only a decent shotgun? Hah, does that mean I need to get some more practice in? We’d have to cut down on my hand-to-hand training then,” Tali mused.

“Oh, hell no!” Ranma retorted, causing Tali to laugh, and after a second, Ranma chuckled too.

Am, have, have I suddenly become a third wheel here? John mused, staring between them. He wasn’t the only one. But whereas he was simply confused and somewhat embarrassed, the nearby quarrians were looking on with concern.

Shaking his head, John got the pair moving again, leaving the quarrians behind before any of them could move to speak to Tali. One did signal her with a few hand gestures where to go to speak to them, but that was all before the group was past and heading on to the next district. “Asshole punching galactic tour? That’s kind of mouthy, and do I want to know what’s behind such a bizarre name?”

"I think we might want to wait until we're somewhere we can talk in private before I answer that one," Ranma answered.

John nodded and continued leading the group.

Soon, they were in the original merchant district, Doru, which had quickly become the center of Omega after Afterlife had been wrecked and the power of the criminal element broken. From there, Jon led the way into a series of apartments that his company had been given for their stay. Most of them weren't there at the moment, as John explained. Fire teams were always out and about hunting down varren or surviving vorchas that didn't belong to the Blood Pack. "The Blood Pack might be acting docile right now, but the vorchas are still around the place. But the Elcor **really** don't like them, and the members of the Merchant's Guild also don't want them anywhere on the station, so the elcor provide us with heavy firepower, and my team and I go after any sighting."

"They honestly don't really need us much any longer, and I am basically just waiting for a recall order. I can't say that I'm altogether happy with how the merchant Guild is going to run everything here, but since most of the locals seem happy enough not going to say anything."

An amateur historian, John thought that the Merchant Guild was almost acting like the merchant princes of Venice had in human history, and whether or not that was a good or bad thing in the long run probably depended on which direction you were looking. *A little too few rights, a little too many liberties, and far too much weighing of the wallets for me. But the changes certainly are for the better when you consider what this place was like before.*

Looking up from where he was working on his sniper rifle, Garrus nodded at Ranma. He the Salarian Voljei, the asari commando Livia and a single fire team were there, most of them doing the same thing as Garrus. "Oh, it's you. You're back, are you?" the turian stated nonchalantly. "What did the Shadow Broker try to kill you with? I'm curious."

"A whole lot of scientists, guns and nasty drugs," Ranma answered before sitting across from Garrus, nodding to the others. He watched with some amusement as, instead of sitting at the table where he and Garrus were, John settled into a bean back next to the asari commando. *Huh, what's her name again? I know we were introduced.* "It didn't go well for 'em. Don't ask me why they were so interested in me, though. I might have nightmares about needles and weird suction things for the rest of my life."

"As interesting as that is what kind of information didn't you want to talk about on the way here?" Jon interjected.

"I figure a, well, a piece of junk, in this case, is worth a thousand words, so..." With that, Ranma reached into his ki space, an act that didn't surprise anyone there. Ranma hadn't been secretive about his abilities when he had been in Omega before.

However, what he pulled out certainly surprised everyone, bar Tali, to the point where one of the troopers slipped off his chair, and another dropped his tool as they all stared at the Gith construct's head, which Ranma had laid on the table. John's eyes widened while Garrus leaned forward, poking the robotic head gently.

"That thing, that's a Geth infantry platform's head, isn't it? Where did that come from?! Don't tell me that scientist's place you are stuck in was out in the Perseus veil!" Garrus stammered.

"It wasn't, and I didn't pick this up at that station. Instead, Tali and I ran into some of these Geth when we took out the pirate base where he found most of the pleasure waves like Emma," Ranma answered.

From there, Ranma, with some help from Tali explained about the fight against the Geth, not hiding the fact that it had actually been kind of tough at certain points. Yet when it came to explaining where they would be going from Omega, he left off any hint of getting information from the Shadow Broker and the fact that Saren might be involved with the Gith. While he might've told John if they were alone, especially given the other man's words earlier, there were several of the Council troops there, along with Garrus himself. Since Saren was a Turian, Ranma had to wonder if Garrus would believe the idea that a turian Spector would be involved with the gift, let alone everything else.

John listened intently, asking a few questions about the fighting styles (IE, their guns) of the various platforms but mainly staying silent, frowning pensively when Ranma finished. He then turned to look over to Garrus, one eyebrow rising speculatively. Garrus looked back, confusion on his own face. Before he could ask, though, John turned back to Ranma. "And so you think the Gith are on Noveria. That's some very flimsy evidence."

"Maybe, but it's enough for me to be interested in going looking for more. I'm not saying I'm going to be going around punching people in the head until they give me their secrets, but once I'm on the ground in Noveria, maybe you'll find some more information there that'll point me in the right direction." Ranma shrugged his shoulders, not having realized until he'd voiced aloud with all the bits about the Shadow Broker taken out that it really did sound like he was chasing rumors.

"Maybe, but your particular skill set lines up far more into the hole-punching thing than anything else," John snorted. "And no offense Tali, but do you have any background in espionage or of any kind, let alone corporate espionage? Noveria is a corporate-owned world

whose regulations and laws are going to be significantly different from anything in Council space or the lawlessness that's out here in Terminus Space. The locals will not be on your side, and the moment you cause trouble, they'll bring the big hammer down far more than even the Blood Pack could."

"No, but computer systems are computer systems. Get me access, either wireless or hard copy, and I'll figure it out," Tali growled, gesturing down at the Geth head. "You might say I am properly motivated."

It always amused John how many species did that, but he set that amusement aside for the second, shaking his head. "That's all well and good, but getting that access might bring down more enemies on you, more enemies than even you can handle, Ranma, who will attack in ways you can't defend yourself or Tali from. Or maybe just enough enemies to hold you up until the Geth leave. I think you might need some help. And Garrus here can help you."

"What, how? And why? Also, no offense, but I don't think you'd be allowed to just order one of your soldiers to go along with a civilian like me to do anything, let alone operate on a corporate world. You just said it's out of Council or Alliance jurisdiction," Ranma stated, crossing his arms.

"Normally, you'd be right. But Admiral Hackett basically told us that our team was going to be split up. The asari and the Salarian specialists are going to stay here for a bit longer, or maybe indefinitely, considering all of them were volunteers in the first place. My company is being pulled back to earth for rest and refit. To be built back up into a full company. And my orders will probably be sending me to N7 school."

That last was stated simply, without any of the amount of pride John had felt when he first heard that., Knowing that Ranma probably didn't even know what that meant, let alone Tali. *Although I think I'd toss aside that chance to be involved in a fight against the Gith and root out anyone working with them.* "All that will leave Garrus here to go back to the front lines. Instead, he could maybe help you."

"Still wondering how you'd be able to cut that kind of order," Ranma murmured, brows furrowing.

"All right, I think I can speak for myself at this point. Thanks, John," Garrus said, rolling his eyes a little. "The fact of the matter is, I don't exactly get along well with most other turians. I'm the best sniper you'll ever see, including Mr. Future N7 here. But I'm also far more of a freethinker than they like to see in low-ranking soldiers. General Arcturus new I was too good to not use, but I would make trouble if I was put in any line unit. If someone on Noveria is working with the Gith, that is a blatant breaking of Council law, as well as a security issue, which the Hierarchy will want to follow up on. Once the general is informed of that, he'll want someone

like me to go along with you, or maybe even to somehow get in touch with one of the Spectres to have them meet you on the planet.”

“Yeah, no,” Ranma nixed that idea instantly, the reason quite obvious in his mind given what he knew about Saren and Vasir, although he kept the whole Saren thing to himself still. “I don’t like the Council, and since Herbie was handed over to them, I don’t think I need to explain why. Normally, I’d take people as they come, but Vasir’s definitely soured me on Spectres in general. If there’s even a chance of that, I don’t want you to say anything to your higher-ups.”

“And you still haven’t told us how you would be able to help us,” Tali added. For some reason, the idea of having Garrus around bothered her. Not nearly as much as the idea of keeping some of the slave girls around would have, but it was still there. As if he would be butting in for some reason.

“While I agreed to sign up for another term in the military after my mandatory term was done, that was only because of the rising war with the Batarian Hegemony. I fully intended to leave the service once my mandatory time was up and pursue a career in Citadel Security. That was something I had been working my way towards for most of my life, wanting to follow in my father’s footsteps. I know investigation, I know law, I even know what passes for law on corporate worlds. I know how to read people’s tells, even humans, how to follow clues, tracks and trails. I could be useful, Garrus said with a shrug. “And to put it bluntly, this sounds like a lot more fun and far more important than being simply another sniper on the front line against the four eyes.”

Ranma and Tali looked at one another, and Tali saw some of her own hesitance in Rama’s expression as if neither of them wanted someone else along. But eventually, they couldn’t think of a logical reason to ignore an offer to help like this. Not without bringing up the fact that Saren might be involved. “That, well that sounds like it might help, I guess. And honestly, I think that spending a few days here until your superiors give you the okay for that kind of thing might be a good idea anyway. Vasir stole my armor, and I need to make more of it if I’m going to start running into larger Gith platforms. So long as they don’t share it with the Council or your general’s higher-ups, anyway. If I see a Spectre, I’m going to punch them and wonder who they are afterward.”

“In that case, let me call the merchant guild, and they’ll set you up with a place,” John said, smiling happily. *If I can’t go along, at least Garrus gets to have some fun.*

OOOOOOO

As John had implied, getting a place to stay for a few days in Doru District was surprisingly easy despite the fact that space in that district was going for a premium price. Although Tali got the impression that at least a few members of the merchant Guild would’ve

preferred to charge the pair for their stay, they seemed a little too leery of Ranma to go through with it.

While Tali headed back to the ship and brought along what few creature comforts the pair of them had gathered since she had left her original crew, Ranma went in search of what he needed in order to create a smithy. At first, Tali didn't understand what he was talking about. She had never heard the term blacksmith before meeting Ranma, and although she had heard the word 'anvil' before, she'd actually never seen a representation of one. So when she came back into the small, two-room apartment (with the second room being a bathroom) and saw him carrying what looked like a large weight of some kind into the apartment ahead of her, she simply blinked, staring at the thing. "What is that?"

"An anvil. It's how you traditionally make armor and bladed weapons. Not mass-produced ones, ones that are made by hand," Ranma explained, setting the thing up in one of the corners. Which was probably a good thing, considering most of the room would be taken up by the pull out beds at night. Currently, they were both up, hidden away behind panels to either side.

"How exactly does that work?" Tali asked, moving to lean around Ranma, reaching out a clawed finger to tap the metal. *Huh, it's solid.* "You've explained some of your metallurgy skills to me before, but I can't remember you mentioning something like that. Looking at it, I presume it's just a surface of some kind, right?"

"Got it in one," Ranma agreed with a nod. He held out a hand, and from his ki space, a hammer appeared, something else he had picked up earlier that day, which, much like the anvil, he'd had to have made to order. Ranma then made a motion as if he was holding something on top of the anvil with one hand before bringing the hammer down on it. "Occasionally, I'll use my own fists instead of the hammer, but to start with, I'll use my offhand to heat the metal while the hammer does the shaping."

Tali nodded, remembering that Ranma had said that one of the key portions of his esoteric style of working with armor and weapons was to infuse them with some of his life energy stuff as often as possible. That sounded fascinating to her, and she was eager to watch. "That sounds interesting. How long do you think it will take you once you start?"

"Once I start, I'll be at it until I finish. I should work faster at it this time since I know the proper composition of the metals I want to use, as well as the shape I'm going for. The helmet will be the trickiest part because it's got to also have a built-in radio and a connection to my omni-tool as well as controls I can interact with via my eye movement. That's insanely finicky work, which took me weeks to get right. And I still don't actually understand all that electronics stuff, just how to work with it," Ranma grumbled before looking over at Tali thoughtfully.

For once, as his eyes traced down her suited frame, it was for reasons other than because he couldn't control them. "I think I'll start on the breastplate first, but how would you feel about wearing armor over your suit?"

"It would depend on how heavy it is, I suppose. While I know I'm stronger than an average human of my size, that doesn't mean I've got enough strength to move around normally if I'm wearing any kind of weight," Tali shrugged. "Although the idea of being as bulletproof as you said your armor made you is a really nice one."

"We'll see what we can do on that score, then," Ranma decided.

"Good. Just remember, we might be operating under a time limit. If those geth we destroyed were supposed to be in contact with their fellows on Noveria on a schedule, we don't know what the geth there will do when their fellows are out of contact for too long," Tali warned. *Unless we've already missed that check-in, considering how long it took us to get to Omega. But given that these are geth operating within Council space, if not on a Council World, it would still be worth following up on even if we knew for a fact that the geth themselves had moved on.*

She said so aloud, and Ranma nodded, as that was something they had discussed before this. "Gotcha. I'll work round the clock to finish our armor and sleep on the way to Noveria. I should be done with at least a pair of chest plates by then."

Those chest plates wouldn't be anything fancy, and Ranma wouldn't paint them or anything like that. They would be as strong as the pair that Ranma had made himself and Herb originally, however. That was enough.

"Given how much faster we'll be able to go in that direction thanks to the mass effect relays, yeah, that should be okay," Tali agreed, then she brightened, her eyes gleaming a little more noticeably behind her visor. "By the way, I found some of those movies you mentioned to me about artificial intelligences going rogue that your people made in the past? Including two Terminator movies, one and two." She cocked her head quizzically then. "I read some mention of other movies, but apparently, they aren't as well thought of."

"I only knew of the first two," Ranma snorted. "But isn't that always the way? Most of the time, sequels suck, and they suck more the more you move away from the original movie. Do not get me started on Star Wars."

"That one I know!" Tali chuckled. "Warrior monks with plasma blades?"

"A true classic," Ranma agreed with a nod, forcing down a familiar pang of loss as he thought about Kasumi's favorite science fiction fandom. For some reason, though, that pang was far less noticeable than it had been when Ranma thought of the girl he'd had a crush on

back on Earth. *Weird.* “Although, given the fact that we are looking to find some geth to smash, I think Terminator would be better. Heh, we could call it research material.”

Soon after that, the two of them split off again. Tali headed out to find her people, heading back to where they had first met to start. Ranma went in a different direction, intent on getting his hands on the various ores and metals he needed.

Of the pair, Ranma completed his task the quickest. He was still something of a celebrity here on Omega, and beyond two krogan eyeing him up before deciding that even they weren’t that stupid, he was able to purchase the various ores he required quickly enough. With the various metals in hand, he headed back to the room, determined to start quickly.

Tali on the other hand, did run into some trouble. At first, this was simple casual racism. Sneers directed her way from people who didn’t realize how many of her folks were helping to repair Omega or were just basically mean-spirited and wanted to sneer at someone whose life was harder than their own. Quarrians were easy targets for that kind of thing. There were such people everywhere, and a place like Omega would have a disproportionate number of such. Tali ignored them beyond giving one the finger when they called her a particularly nasty name loud enough for her to hear.

However, she did run into real trouble at one point. After passing through several districts, Tali had left behind the districts that had already been somewhat orderly and well-maintained before the fall of Aria and the rest of the crime syndicate that had run Omega. This area also wasn’t the focus for repairs or cleaning operations like the districts leading out to the hanger bays. Instead, they had been the site of the fights against vorchas and varrens.

That didn’t mean they weren’t occupied. They were actually kind of crowded, mostly with middle-aged men and women, with a scattering of older folk for some reason. There weren’t any bodies or anything like that, though, which was a plus.

“Here now suitrat, you’re new! Bet you got some glitters for us in that hump o’ yours, righ’? Pay the toll, or turnaround,” a turian growled, coming out of an alleyway and moving into Tali’s path, waving a long dagger in Tali’s face. He was lanky, thinner than most other turians Tali had seen so far, and there was something sickly about his face. Two other men moved behind her, a batarian and turian pair. A fourth, a batarian, stayed in the alleyway, blocking any escape that way.

Not that Tali was all that eager to look for an escape. *Keelah, they all look like they’re sick and stupid at the same time. I’d feel sorry for them except they’re trying to threaten me.*

“Really? I would’ve thought the Merchants Guild would be stomping on people like you. Or is it that your little group here is so far down the totem pole that they haven’t quite gotten to

you yet?" Tali snorted, her eyes flicking. *Ranma might think the controls he wants to install on the inside of his helmet are trouble, but he's never seen mine!*

At her nonverbal command, Tali's ever-present drone began to slowly move down from where it had been hiding among the pipes that lined this district's roof area. It had been following her ever since she'd left the apartment, staying out of sight above everyone's head, hiding in the shadows.

"Accosting random strangers like this is certainly going to get you moved up their list. Why don't you back off, and I can say I never saw you?"

Even before running into Ranma, Tali had something of a pugnacious personality. She would take being sneered at, names tossed her way or taunting and simply batten down and go along with things. She'd quickly learned that a quarian on her own needed to have thick skin for that kind of thing. But when it came to physical threats, that was where Tali drew the line. And it was a line she guarded via shotgun.

"Some new suitrat thinks yas can talk to us like that! All you new suitrats, ya needs ta learn your place," one of the batarians growled. "Just because we can't kill yous, don't mean yer safe!"

How he managed to slur in common, Tali didn't know, nor did she care, because, at that point, one of the ones behind her tried to give her a hard shove. Instead of stumbling, Tali moved with it, one hand grabbing at the bag over her shoulder. Her shotgun came out of that bag quickly in a move that Ranma had helped her train with, calling it, "The gun equivalent of an I-ai," whatever that was.

Bringing it forward at the tip of her lunge, the stock of Tali's shotgun slammed into the stomach of the man in front of her. The sickly looking turian went down, and she twisted around him, bringing her rifle butt down again on the back of his head, causing him to drop onto his face like a sack of rocks.

Doing this gave Tali some space from the other three, who now found her pointing the shotgun back at the two who had been behind her. Before the batarian in the alleyway could decide what to do, Tali's Fastpaws were there, zapping him with enough force to cause the young batarian to scream, convulse, and collapse, still twitching to the deck underneath them. "Now, if you still want me to try to pay you, exactly how much are your lives worth in mass effect rounds?"

"Oh crap, is that group of drug-addled idiots at it again?" Another voice said from one side. From out of another alleyway came another man leading a few others. It was obvious they were a work gang of some kind, although they were wearing aprons stained with grease rather

than a belt with tools or something similar. They paused as he looked at Tali, taking in her suited form, then looked at one another before shrugging and moving forward.

"You didn't kill any of them, did you?" The man, a human, spoke in a neutral tone, not kindly or overly aggressive. It was evident he didn't care for a random quarian, but he also wouldn't attack her either. Still, Tali would take that over outright hostility.

"No. I might've broken a few of this one's ribs," Tali answered, kicking the backside of the turian who had been doing the talking. "And the other one will probably be dealing with electrical spasms for the rest of the day, but nothing permanent."

"Good. I rather doubt these idiots will be able to pay the fines as well as medical bills. Damn druggies. There are far too many of them around still. These punks are young yet, so if they can finally finish rehab, they might actually turn themselves around. Miracles have been known to happen, particularly these days."

With that, the man gestured for Tali to keep moving, then walked over to stand in front of one of the men who had previously been behind Tali. The younger turian had already been looking fearful and now looked as if he was ready to bolt. "Honestly! You idiots still haven't gotten it into your thick skulls, have you? If you need your fix, find honest jobs. The merchant guilds don't take kickbacks for looking the other way for people like you."

Which doesn't mean that they don't take kickbacks It just means that that lot can't pay it, Tali thought, looking to one side a few seconds later as a group of more heavily armed toughs marched briskly down the hallway. They all wore similar armor and had a dark green stripe and an image of a turian dagger on their shoulders, marking them out as a mercenary band of some kind. *That kind of makes me wish I'd researched more about mercenary groups when I had the Shadow Broker's network at my clawtips, but no use worrying about spilled lubricant.*

More than a few of them glanced at her disdainfully, but they didn't impede her progress or even say anything, which was a marked improvement. *Omega might be changing, but not all that quickly. Although, thankfully, Lawless doesn't mean it isn't without rules,* she thought, smiling slightly inside her helmet as she passed a huge billboard stuck to the side of the building. On it, a series of advertisements flashed, then were grayed out before being replaced by a list of rules.

On order of the merchants Guild, obey the following rules on threat of fines, enforced servitude or deportation.

Tali wondered what they meant by deportation, although the others were at least clear. *I don't like the connotations of enforced servitude, but I suppose if it's organized and, er rationed, I guess it could work? Seems a bit too much, though.*

The rules, though, she had little trouble with.

No gunfire is allowed. The first person who fires a gun will be the one fined, regardless of reasons. Any deaths will mean immediate servitude or deportation via an open airlock into space rather than on the next ship to another Terminus System.

Destruction of public property in the way of lights, signs or defacement of bulkheads will face fines.

Attempts to destroy power runs or add malware to Omega's operating system will result in immediate deportation regardless of the age of the miscreant.

Do not get in the way of the various repair gangs, attack or otherwise bother them. Our engineers are here to make Omega better for us all.

Be respectful to the space station in general. Leave no trash outside your domicile, and keep your drug use inside rather than outside. Public drunkenness will be fined, and public drug use will be a mark toward deportation or enforced servitude.

A demand that everyone obey all safety regulations was the last rule. Which, Tali was amused to note, would be listed on a separate notification. There were also a few notices to be on the lookout for specific individuals, as well as to report any sighting of vorchas or varrens.

Shaking her head, Tali moved on, continuing to follow the directions the last quarian she had seen had given her.

Entering a new district by going down a series of rickety stairs, Tali found one of her folk waiting surreptitiously behind another large billboard, although this one hadn't been fitted so well to the wall behind it. A portion of the billboard stuck out, allowing someone to hide behind it from the direction Tali was coming from. The man only became visible to Tali as she moved around it, whereupon he spotted her at the same time.

"Welcome. I'm Old'renos Nar Vass," the man said, holding up a hand in greeting.

Noting mentally that the Vass was part of the Heavy Fleet rather than one of the primary colony ships, Tali did the same, finding that she had been about to hold out her hand in the human greeting of a handshake. *Darn, but human mannerisms are really easy to assume, aren't they?* "I'm Tali'zorah nar Rayya," Tali respectfully responded. "I'm about nine months into my pilgrimage. You can call me Tali."

"Three years for me," Old'renos. "And you can call me Renos. I thought for certain that I was on the trail of someone who would be willing to sell us the human medi-gel in bulk, enough to refill the medical stocks on three or four of our ships. But it never panned out."

“There are many paths, and some of them will always lead to dead ends,” Tali answered philosophically, quoting an oft-repeated homily among the Migrant Fleet. “But I take it you’ve found work here on Omega?”

“Yes, the man who I thought was the source of the medi-gel was based here. However, by the time I was able to get an interview with the man, he had gotten on the wrong side of Aria. Apparently, he tried to sell her cheap knockoff medi-gel. The same type he’d probably have tried to sell me. Aria knew the difference. I wouldn’t have,” Renos admitted, lowering his helmet and raising his hands, tapping his clawtips together slowly above his lowered helmet in a gesture of shame before going on. “Obviously, Aria had the man killed.”

“Harsh but fair. You don’t screw with medical equipment or supplies,” Tali answered firmly. The man nodded, and the two of them fell silent for a few moments as they wound through a series of alleyways. This area was just as crowded as several of the other areas that Tali had passed through in Omega so far, but there seemed to be more family units around rather than work gangs or pedestrians, as had been the case outside of Doru District. Despite the ramshackle nature of much of the environment, it was also clean, all the lights were working, and there was a general air of well-being.

Soon, they came to an area that might have been left empty originally between larger buildings but had since been covered by simple metal slats and then further broken down into separate rooms by similar material. In one such room, which was smaller than the one Tali and Ranma were sharing, Tali found several other quarrians.

There were six men and two women. Looking at them and judging by how close they stood to one another, Tali felt there were at least two couples here. Further, examining their suit types, Tali could tell that only one of them was her own age, while the others were in their middle ages or maybe a little older. Certainly, at least one of them had a suit type that was from two or three generations prior to Tali’s own, although all of them looked less new than her own, causing Tali to feel a little self-conscious, even if several of them were sporting new bits and pieces scattered around their suits.

In contrast, Tali’s suit had been brand new when she left on her Pilgrimage, a gift from her father when Tali had become an adult. Rather than be there personally to see her off like Auntie Raan, he had simply splurged on the manufacture of a suit for her. That process had been both annoying and time-consuming as well as resource-consuming for the Rayya, which, like every other ship in the Migrant Fleet, was always strapped for resources.

The other young quarrian moved towards her, his steps hurried, talons clacking noticeably as he moved a little too close to Tali before raising his hand in greeting. “Greetings! I am Alinovoï’Vas’Dreya! It’s always nice to see another helmet. Call me Alino.”

Ooh, either he hasn't been away from the fleet for very long at all and doesn't know what other people consider as talking distance, or he's feeling the effect of being single around two couples, Tali thought, even as she rolled her eyes inside her helmet at the joke that probably had not been funny when it first been thought up centuries ago. With space at a premium among the migrant fleet, the quarians normally talked to one another from far closer than other races, although not from within touching range unless they couldn't help it.

Taking a faint half-step backward, Tali held up her hand, introducing herself. There were no effusive greetings, no touches to the shoulder or physical closeness here. Quarians just did not go into that kind of thing, not with how easy it was to pass on diseases. That was how Tali had grown up, and it should have felt like a return to normalcy for her. Yet instead, Tali suddenly missed Ranma's effusive body language and the light teasing touches he'd gotten her used to over the past few weeks.

Tali shut that off taking in the other quarians around her in more detail. As she had noticed a second ago, portions of their suits looked as if they had been recently replaced. Tali pointed this out, adding, "I take it the locals are paying well?"

"A few of the Volus try to cheat us occasionally. They don't like quarians much. But the other merchants don't look down on us, and they respect our abilities." The one who spoke up on that score was the one that Tali thought was the oldest one there. He didn't introduce himself, instead studying Tali carefully, his helmet slightly moved forward from his neck, his arms crossed over his chest. "We are all used to doing a lot with a little, and our work is always above standard. Given how many hundreds of thousands of little maintenance issues had been left to fester across Omega, that is a skill which is in high demand."

"The Merchant Guild has sent out a call for more quarians," one of the women said, her voice reminding Tali nostalgically of her aunt for a moment. She had the same mellow timber to her voice as Auntie Raan, although this woman didn't seem to have the confidence that Auntie Raan had. "They're determined to make Omega better than it was in every possible way."

"At first, we were worried they'd allow the Council to take over here entirely, which would mean forcing us out or working us like varren for scraps. But they're not. There's still a lot of stuff flowing in and out of Omega that would be highly illegal in Council space, and they have allowed a lot of the smaller mercenary guilds to purchase space here. Slavery is still being hotly debated, as well as a lot of other stuff, but it's pretty obvious the Merchant Guild wants Omega to continue to be its own power here in the Terminus Systems," the older man agreed.

"Which is a good thing for us, but not so good for the Migrant Fleet as a whole, considering it's moving in an entirely different direction than the Terminus Systems so can't take advantage of it," the last man, one of the ones in a relationship with the woman who hadn't

spoken up yet if Tali was judging their body language appropriately said, his tone surly. It was a surly tone that seemed more to be a normal tone rather than anything specific, though, and he introduced himself solely as Gretu.

“Did you hear?” Alino asked, his foot clapping down excitedly in place. “The Migrant Fleet, somehow they acquired rights to several mineral-rich planets out beyond asari space! And the Republics aren’t going to try and take them over!”

“Really? That’s incredible!” Tali said enthusiastically, and she was very happy about that news. Even though she’d been the one to get that ball rolling, she actually hadn’t heard back from the Migrant Fleet about it, as she had belatedly remembered earlier that day. “That will be a tremendous boon for the fleet as a whole.”

“It will, although...” the older man stared at Tali thoughtfully. It was all Tali could do to not squirm under that visored stare, once more reminded of her auntie, and this time not in a good way. More ‘I just caught you putting a shock stick on your toy drone’ sort of way. “Why do I get the impression, young one, that you had something to do with that?”

Called out like that, Tali could only admit the truth, to a certain degree, anyway. “I may have made a deal with the Shadow Broker. A short-term one, but with big-time gains for the Migrant Fleet. I won’t say more than that.” *Simply because the story that Benezia coached me and Ranma in didn’t have any details*, Tali admitted.

Thankfully, none of her fellows questioned it, although Alino’s body language did seem to shut down a little bit. Thankfully, most of them knew all too well how low their people occasionally had been forced to go. And the payoff in this instance was huge, to the point where Renos said, “You know, if that is the truth, you could head home now. It’s not a new bit of technology or a ship, but if that really was you, and you can prove it, you just achieved more for the Migrant Fleet as a whole than any pilgrimage has since Visto’kah Nar Triyo came back with a sample of that fungus that quadrupled the amount of air our botanical sections were able to create.”

To his surprise, Tali simply shrugged her shoulders. “I might be able to. But I don’t have any plans to. I’ve been away less than a year. There’s so much of this galaxy to explore. And I have a friend. You saw me arrive with him, Ranma, and I’m traveling with him for now.”

“The super soldier. I’d be very interested to know how you came to be within his circle of influence, but instead of prying, I’ll simply warn you. I saw recordings of his fight against the Blood Pack, and if you have any plans to try and follow him into similar battles, I would strongly suggest you think again,” the oldest man, who still hadn’t introduced himself, said warningly. “People like him? They are always searching for the next fight, the next thrill. And that is not a place for any quarian to be.”

"It might not be, but, well, I've already survived several firefights alongside Ranma and continuing to travel with him just sounds far too interesting to give up on," Tali answered.

It came as something of a surprise to Tali that this was the case as she thought of it now. The idea of heading home, of seeing her father and aunt, basking in their praise should've been a very attractive one. But it wasn't, and not just because Tali had a bit of wanderlust to her. No, it was the idea of leaving Ranma behind that made that idea unappealing. *Oh, Keelah... I think I've got it baaad*, Tali thought, as she realized what direction her mind had been going there for a second.

Alino was now looking at Tali in some surprise judging by his body language, while the others all had cocked their helmets to one side or the other, looking at her thoughtfully. The second woman, the one who hadn't spoken yet, then made a strange gesture, tapping her chest as if tracing a line down the front of it. "You don't, you're not... interested in him, are you?"

"What? Where did you get that idea?" Tali asked before cursing herself, knowing that her voice had just been a little too high there. Before any of the others could say anything, she went on hurriedly. "Okay, yes, he's physically attractive. But I know there's nothing possible between us. But looking is fine, right?"

The woman laughed, some of the tension leaving her at Tali's last words, while the others all looked at Tali as if she had suddenly grown an extra helmet on her shoulder. "So long as you look and remember that you can never touch, girl, that's fine by me. Keelah knows that I've seen a fair few attractive humans. Just remember, it's not worth popping your suit for."

Tali nodded firmly and made no move to share the fact that Ranma was training her in martial arts or that he wanted to see if she could somehow access her own life energy in order to help her body's immune system. It was up in the air if she would ever be able to use ki, let alone use it like she and Ranma hoped.

Thankfully, the other woman gently steered the conversation back to other things, introducing herself and explaining why they were all there on Omega. A few of them had lived here for several years, finding a place here where they could stretch out a little more than back in the Migrant Fleet, which, considering the disreputable manner of the area they were currently in, was somewhat damning to the current state of the Migrant Fleet.

However, she firmly stamped on Alino's offer to put in a good word for her with his overseer if she wanted to stay on Omega. "No chance. I told you. I want to keep traveling. I want to see planets. I've only seen space stations so far, and Omega's just a big space station, which isn't all that different from being on a ship! I want to see snow, rivers, mountains! I want to see a sky that isn't artificial and doesn't have borders," she said enthusiastically.

This, too, incurred some very strange looks. Despite that, the conversation continued pleasantly, although Alino's body language indicated hurt for some time.

It was pushing well into nighttime by the time Tali left the little group, heading back to the apartment where she and Ranma would be staying for the next few days. Entering, she paused, staring. Ranma had taken off his shirt, hanging it on the table, and was currently using one hand to heat a chunk of metal larger than Tali's torso until it was red-hot in one hand. Holding it against the anvil, he brought his hammer down rhythmically several times as Tali watched

Sweat was dripping off of his body from the heat and effort. Watching the muscles of his back move, the ripples in his side muscles, in his arm as Ranma brought down his hammer was about as hot as a generator going nova to Tali. For several minutes, she simply stared, a little whine leaving her lips, thankfully not loud enough to be picked up by her helmet's communications equipment.

Eventually, Ranma looked up from his work, and waved the hammer at her for a split second before going back to pounding on the metal, and Tali moved into the apartment, the door iris shut behind her. *Yep, I've got it bad for a human. It should be illegal for them to take off their shirts like that! It's too damn lewd!*

With that, Tali shook her head, and moved over to sit on one of the inputting her Army tool into a TV screen that took up the upper portion of a nearby wall. "A, aren't the neighbors going to complain about that noise?" She asked, needing to raise her voice a little to be heard over the clamor, which thankfully let her speak without squeaking.

"They've already been around, but for some reason, they took one look at me and left," Ranma said with a shrug, most of his concentration remaining on the metal that he was slowly heating with his life energy, imbuing it with his ki as he worked, while nearby, several strips of other types of metal were waiting, slowly cooling from where he had already been heated them to the near melting point. "I figured that in a place like Omega, the rhythmic pounding of a hammer isn't exactly the worst kind of noise you could hear."

"True, but it's still annoying. Would you mind if I turned on the TV and watched some of the movies I found?"

"I'm going to be at this stage for a long while, so go nuts," Ranma said, setting down his hammer and grabbing up one of the strips of metal, touching it to the larger piece of metal that he had been working on. Both pieces were so red-hot that they started to melt together, and as Tali watched, Ranma literally began to work the red-hot metal as if it was clay, grunting with the effort.

“Wouldn’t a kiln or something similar work?” Tali asked, frowning a little inside her helmet in confusion. “I remember you mentioning those.”

Looking up, Ranma saw Tali’s eyes were still on him and he shrugged. “With only the anvil to work with and not a full blacksmith set up, I need to do the metallurgy bit on my own. It might actually result in being able to retain more ki within it than my original armor, but it is seriously hard and slow. As for a kiln, it’d take me hours to build one, even if we had any kind of ceramics for it. And surprisingly, ceramics aren’t easy to come by here on Omega.”

“Maybe not, but there has to be an easier way of doing that,” Tali said, shaking her head, forgetting for a moment the idea of settling down with a nice movie for the rest of the night. “Give me a few examples of kilns and furnaces. Maybe I can figure something out.”

It turned out that she could. What Ranma really needed was a way for the metals to be heated up to a point where they would all mix together into one new type of steel. Eventually, Tali was able to find online what one of the locals called a metallurgy table, essentially a portable table the size of Tali laying out, with a single large ceramic bowl in the center. She purchased the thing via one of the bank accounts that Benezia had set up for them via the Shadow Broker’s network, although returning with it was a bit of a slog.

Yet Ranma’s grateful smile at Tali made it worth it when he dumped the metal in, set the thing to the appropriate heat, and stood, staring through the specially treated glass down into the pool for a moment, watching as the metals slowly started to melt even further than they already had under his hands. “That will speed up the process a lot, although I’ll need to add my ki into it at intervals. With this I can definitely make both of us chest plates. And maybe a simple helmet for me. I’ve decided to not try and work a radio into the darn thing, I just can’t do that on top of two chest pieces in so short a time frame.”

“Excellent. I need to have to find a nutrition bulb, and then, I think I want to check out those Terminator movies of yours,” Tali announced.

OOOOOOO

Noveria was a blue-green marble from the distance, dark blue in this case, with a hint of purple and was thus easily the bluest planet Ranma had yet seen. There were literally no lights to be seen from orbit, a startling thing in comparison to Mostromos and the other asari planet he’d seen before this, although it did remind him of the monastery world. Like Crastus, Noveria also didn’t have any kind of local self-defense force, although Garrus, sitting in the spare seat of the bridge of the Trojan Horse, was quick to point out that the planet had some fixed defenses on its surface.

"If you look for the signatures, you can spot them well enough. They're situated around the main port city in a hexagon. They probably even have kinetic barriers as well, although frankly, from what I've learned in the past few months, fixed defenses on a planet really don't amount to much against an intelligent opponent," Garrus opined.

He paused then, then shrugged. "Although the fact that most of the planet's population is buried underground probably does."

"And is situated almost entirely in the capital city behind those defenses, right?" Ranma asked, looking over at Tali and Derek alike, shifting a little in his armor. The armor didn't sit on his body as well as the first set he'd made, which kind of annoyed him, although seeing Tali wearing her own chest plate made up for that discomfort.

A small part of Ranma, a portion he'd carefully tried not to feed over time, also was a little sad that that chest plate of Tali's obscured her upper body more than her suit did. But that was a very small part of Ranma's mind indeed. The rest of him was just happy that she had some real armor.

"Port Hanshan's essentially the only **real** city. They've got some tourist attractions along the equator, but they're neither really important nor all that interesting, apparently," Tali answered.

"Actually, that isn't quite the case. Those vacation sports are interesting for people who like specific types of sports. But they are also expensive, and there are cheaper options out there for people who like snowboarding, skiing and so forth," Garrus said, shaking his head. "Believe me, after I was given the go-ahead to join you on this little jaunt, I looked up that information and a lot of other stuff that I could find on this planet. The price of a few days at one of those resorts had me cursing for minutes. It's the equivalent of several weeks' worth of pay for a Citadel Security officer!"

"That's either too expensive, or the Citadel Council needs to pay its people more. Guess which one I think it is," Ranma quipped, shaking his head as he also went over what they knew about this planet in general.

Noveria was entirely owned by the Corporation of the same name, which was headquartered in Port Hanshan. Like other corporate worlds, NOveria was allowed to exist because the Council was remarkably pragmatic in certain ways. Herb would approve, but Ranma for sure as hell didn't, although he could understand why a government would be willing to look the other way about this kind of thing. Planets like this produced a lot of new scientific breakthroughs and equipment, but they made those breakthroughs in ways that weren't exactly legal in Council or alliance space.

Specifically, Noveria Corp was a joint Volus/Turian Corporation and was known for experiments in mass-effect guns and miniaturization. They also sold out laboratories to other corporations, which probably included the one Saren and the geth were working with. *And geth or not, if this company, or some other company on this planet, really is experimenting on sentient people, regardless of the race, I'm going to kick someone's head in. Lots of someone's.*

It was only when the Trojan Horse finally came into orbit that they got a call from the local space control center. "Unidentified ship. Be aware that this is a corporate world. We allow unidentified ships to dock at Port Hanshan, but any attempt to deviate from the official course to the port will have you be fired upon."

"Roger that," Garrus replied for them, something that the three of them had agreed to on this journey. A journey that had, much like Tali had said, taken far less time than the shorter trip from the pirate base to Omega. The mass effect relays, as weird as they made Ranma feel, certainly sped up travel time tremendously. "Prepare to receive coordinates."

Soon, the root of the locals one of them to take popped up, and Ranma guided them along it, heading down into the atmosphere. Lower atmosphere, and they saw what looked like a mountain ahead of them, half of its side having been carved flat, allowing for several different entryways. One of them blinked open, the lowest and widest one of them all bar several on the ground itself. Via the video cameras that allowed the Trojan Horse to see out, it had been a pirate vessel after all, not a luxury liner, Tali could see down to the planet's surface around the foot of the mountain, where several train tracks let out into the distance. "I gather those are heading out to the various labs?"

"Probably. Noveria doesn't rent out hydroponics gardens or let the labs build them. They control the food and make any of the corporations who buy lab space pay for it on top of renting the lab in the first place," Garrus chuckled, a strange sound coming from a turian with their mouth flanges, and in this case, not an altogether humorous noise either. "You have to admire how dedicated they are to squeeze every bit of profit they can from any opportunity that comes their way."

"Yeah, well, some opportunities can come with hidden costs. And the cost of working with the geth is going to be my boot up their ass," Ranma said, substituting the word for the androids for the whole experimenting on sentients thing. Personally, he was ambivalent about the geth. Yes, they'd attacked him, but if that was enough for him to make Ranma hate someone, Ranma would've left a pile of bodies back on Earth and probably wouldn't have wound it up here anyway because Pig Boy would've been one of them. He just didn't know enough for certain about how the conflict between the geth and the quarians had begun. He

was inclined to take Tali's word at face value, but Ranma understood enough about the Migrant Fleet and how things worked that what she knew might not be the entire story.

Still, that was neither here nor there. The Shadow Broker had picked up hints that someone on this planet was experimenting on sentience, and that was enough for Ranma. And if they did find the geth, they'd already proven they could put up a good fight, and if they were connected to Saren, that was also unacceptable to Ranma.

The hangar bay door ahead of them finished opening, and the ship slowly entered, where they found a turian gesturing them to the side with two glow sticks. The ship continued on its repulsors for a few seconds, then touched down in an empty space while the doors of the hangar area closed behind them.

"Do you think I should put on my helmet?" Ranma asked thought occurred to him, looking over at Garrus. "It's not like the original model, but I'm uncertain whether or not that would make me more noticeable or less or if my own face would get me recognized after Omega."

"It's been several weeks since your little riot on Omega, and I doubt the news of that traveled this far. There'll undoubtedly be a few corporate types here who dabble in the underground..." Garrus paused as Ranma let out a loud snort at that, doing his species' equivalent of a smirk in agreement with the odd human. "All right, probably only a few corporate types here who **aren't** connected in some fashion to the underground or illegal activities. But that doesn't mean that they will know you have a bounty on your head or anything similar. Still, you might want to change your hairstyle if possible. Wearing a helmet when you don't have to will get you noticed."

Ranma nodded and exited the bridge, heading back to his quarters on board the Trojan Horse. That wasn't saying much, obviously. It was a pirate vessel, and he had no desire whatsoever to take over the captain's quarters. But it did have a small refresher station, and with a bottle of water, Ranma went to work, changing into his female form for a moment (after removing his chest plate) and then going through a few hairstyles.

Eventually, he settled on a simple one, a long ponytail which came down one side of his chest once he transformed back into his male body. Tying the dragon's whisker back into place quickly, Ranma cut off a few inches of the resultant growth and still had hair that fell just beyond his armpit for a moment. Ranma didn't particularly like the look, but it would separate Ranma from any kind of bounty poster or video that the locals might've seen.

Back on Mostromos, I didn't care because the locals very obviously didn't care much about the videos already circulating about Herb and me from our fight on that asteroid base.

Here, well, not only do I need to blend in, but the locals probably would care about a loose cannon like me showing up.

While Ranma was doing that, Garrus and Tali were shutting the ship down. Tali also went over a few files that she'd added to her own, Ranma's, and Garrus's omni-tools, giving them all fake identities with a little help from the people back on Omega. With Garrus's help, she had created a background cover for the three of them. The trio were mercenaries looking for work, something that was extremely understandable across Council space given how the Blue Suns and Eclipse had collapsed once their operating funds had been taken away. Lots of little groups like theirs were out looking for their next paycheck.

Meanwhile, Garrus reflected on his time aboard the ship so far. It'd been less than two days thanks to the mass effect relays, and Ranma had spent most of the time sleeping, tired from his efforts at his anvil. But it'd been highly unusual to have an entire ship like this to themselves, just the three of them. Tali had been somewhat welcoming but also a little standoffish, creating a semi-awkward atmosphere. Strangely, that feeling wasn't based on her being a quarian and resenting turians for their part in the Council treating her race like lepers as that feeling had grown once Ranma had woken up rather than decreased. At that point, he began to wonder if the two of them liked one another. On the one hand, that was somewhat romantic. But also doomed to fail.

He'd also trained with Ranma in hand to hand twice, once when he first came aboard, and once after Ranma had woken up. Each time, Ranma, unarmed, had faced Garrus armed with his sniper rifle and a few other weapons of choice and had schooled Garrus. There just wasn't enough space for Garrus to really play with aboard the ship. And once within grabbing range, no turian was going to last long against Ranma. The man was just a monster when it came to physical abilities.

He was also very much a bull in the china shop kind of person, a phrase that, like so many others, had spread from humanity out into the Council quickly because it was so useful and descriptive at the same time. This was why Garrus made a point of holding up his hand for attention when Ranma joined him and Tali at the landing hatch.

Outside, Garrus knew that there would be some kind of welcoming committee. Either port authorities demanding they pay for the use of the dock, or the local security forces making sure of their identifications and so forth. While Noveria was not a council world, it did have its own rules and regulations. "Now, I want to remind you, **Ranma**, to be on your best behavior. We need to keep a low profile for now until we have gathered more evidence to point us to where we need to go."

Ranma rolled his eyes. "I'm not a cop. I don't need to prove guilt in court. I just need a direction. Enough evidence to point me in the right way. That's all."

"But gathering even that will take time, and we can do better in that area when the locals don't have their backs up about us and aren't looking to get rid of us for being troublemakers. On a planet like this, don't cause trouble is a rule unto itself. Please? This is why John thought I would be able to help you all. Let me do my thing and just go along with it for now, okay?"

At that, Ranma nodded. Not only did they, and not only did they need some more evidence to point them at Saren and the Geth, but they needed to know the lay of the land down on this planet in its entirety. "You've made your point. I'll let you do the talking with anyone who looks official. I'll just be the dumb muscle in the background, and Tali here can be the cute computer tech."

The word cute came out of his mouth before he could stop it, and Garrus snorted while Tali danced in place for a moment, her species equivalent of fidgeting in embarrassment. She also resolutely did not look towards Ranma, wondering where that had come from but also enjoying it. "Well, good. Let's get a move on then."

Unfortunately, Ranma's decision to do the talking for them took a hit the moment the hatch opened. One of the locals, another turian, scowled the instant he saw Ranma and Tali. "What the? Another human and a quarian? We've got enough humans around here as it is, and we don't need suitrats here either."

Garrett could feel Ranma starting to step forward and hurried his steps, nodding to the group of locals. This included a human woman, who wasn't exactly looking all that happy at the motor from her companion and looked as if she was a few steps away from pistol-whipping the idiot. The two of them and two guards standing behind them all wore marks on their chests, the letters ERCS on top of a mountain. Behind them, two massive Loki mechs stood, their guns trained on the Trojan Horse's hatch. "That is enough out of you, Torik! Your antihuman bias has gotten you in trouble before. Should I add mouthing off to a superior officer? Would you like to spend some time as a lowly orderly?"

Noting idly that she hadn't said anything about his anti-quarian bias, Garrus held up his omni-tool and made to speak.

Torik, however, had seemingly had enough. "You do not get to tell me what to say! You were promoted past me because you opened your legs to get that promotion, nothing more! You humans, breaking Council law, dragging the hierarchy into your war with the batarians, you all should have been humbled by the first contact war!"

"I said that's enough!" The woman said, pulling out her pistol with decent speed, following through with Garrus's earlier thoughts, pistol-whipping his fellow turian across the face. He staggered back, but when he went for his own gun, he found his two fellows grabbing his arms, restraining him. When he did, the woman leaned in, sniffing the air, then groaned. "You're drunk on duty again as well. That's two strikes on top of the other strikes you've had before this. Screw getting you demoted. I'll have you out of ERCS by morning."

The woman turned back to Garrus, shrugging her shoulders. "Sorry about that. That confrontation's been boiling over for a while now. When I saw the rotation was going to put him in our little welcoming committee tonight, I decided to take over."

"Good thing you did. If Torik had given us any more of that lip, it would've been his blood on the docks instead of simply his dignity," Garrus answered, holding up his arm again and activating his omni-tool once more. "Names Garrick, this is Renzo and Milla. We're former Blue Sun, and we're kind of..."

"Looking for a job. You're not the first group of mercs looking for one of those, though with only three people, you're definitely on the small side. But I have to ask, where did the ship come from? It's obviously a former pirate vessel," the woman said crisply, holding out her own omni-tool so it could connect to Garrus's. "That's why we were down here."

"They tried to board a liner we were on. Between us and the ship's security, we were able to beat them off," Garrus explained. "Instead of taking a cut of the typical pay for such, we decided to take the ship since we knew we could repair it."

"Hmm, because of the suitrat, right?" The woman gestured Ranma and Tali forward, scowling a little at Tali. "Since you've been part of a mercenary group, I'll presume you don't have as much thieving tendencies as most of your people do. But if you're caught stealing anything, be it something physical or in data form, you'll be executed on the spot. This is a corporate world, and we take our security very seriously."

Before Tali could respond to that insulting remark (as if she would ever get caught), the woman turned back to Garrus, presuming he was the leader of the trio. "I might have one opening soon, but not three. Elanus Risk Control Services doesn't hire groups, even if there are only three people in a group. No prior loyalties. Now, do you have enough money to pay to use our docking area? You'll also need to pay to access our services and pay to retain a hotel room."

"Even before we know if we're going to stay or not?" Ranma asked in confusion.

"Obviously. If you don't stay for twenty-four hours, you can get your deposit back, but you need to make that deposit in the first place in order to show that you can at all pay," the

woman, who had not yet introduced herself, shrugged her shoulders. "I take it that none of you have been on a corporate world before?"

"I passed through one before I joined the Blue Suns, oh but I wasn't in charge of the group I was with at the time," Garrus answered glibly. "And yes, we do have sufficient funds for that. Not much more, and we might eventually need to sell off our ship unless we find employment in the next week, but we're good for now."

"Good. If you couldn't, we'd have impounded the ship at the very least." With that, the woman gestured to another one of the locals, who stepped forward with his own omni-tool, quickly taking the payment for use of the docking area. He was then replaced by another, who apparently was part of the local hotel corporation, who ran all of the various hotels. He blandly informed the trio that they were now booked at a room in a hotel on Green Lane off the Plaza and helpfully uploaded a map of Port Hanshan to the newcomer's omni-tools so that they could find their way there. With that, he and the other man walked off, satisfied.

The woman took a moment to look Ranma up and down, still ignoring Tali, then looked back over at Garrus. "Like I said, ERCS doesn't hire whole groups. But if you can keep a civil tongue in your mouth, you're an upgrade to the person you'll be replacing. You're free to look around the city, maybe inquire at a few of the local bars and other things of that nature if they want to hire bouncers and so forth. I'd recommend looking around in the promenade first. There are a lot of small-time businesses there, and if you three come cheap and don't mind physical labor on top of actual mercenary work, several will hire you on the spot. Or even some offworlders who are shopping could notice you three and offer you a job on the spot."

"Thank you," Garrus answered, nodding, before adding, "And who should I tell them to send their kickback to?"

"Hah! I get paid enough without that. This isn't some kind of lawless planet after all," the woman said, waving that off and still not introducing herself. That was most rude in Garrus's opinion. "Now, just one more thing. Whatever you might think of that little display a moment ago, we here on Noveria a simple rule: 'Don't rock the boat.' As long as everything is peaceful, I'm happy and so is Elanus Risk Control Services, and as we're happy, you will be, too. Understood?"

Without waiting for a reply, the woman marched off, the two Loki Mechs following her. Turning to his companions, Garrus gestured them to follow. There was, after all, only one hatch leading from this hangar bay deeper into Port Hanshan. "Come on, let's get this show on the road."

Garrus tried to ignore Ranma, whispering to Tali. "Don't rock the boat, huh. Do ya think sinking it counts?" Nor was he in any rush to join in Tali's laughter at his words.

As they walked, Garrus slowed his pace for a second to stand beside Ranma, the trio then moving forward as one. "So, was there any more information you were able to get from the Geth that may point us in a specific direction now that we're here? You were awfully reticent to share any details, you know."

Garrus knew that all too well. That had been a sticking point for General Arcturus in giving Garrus leave to follow a civilian like Ranma, no matter how dangerous he was. The general hadn't been willing to ignore the fact that the Geth had apparently been operating among pirates and possibly other criminal elements beyond the Perseus veil for who knew how long, but also hadn't liked the fact that they really didn't have any specifics to what the Geth was providing security for on Noveria. Garrus had also taken the opportunity to talk to the Salarian tech specialist about the video clip that Tali had shared with them. He had glibly told Garrus that the video had almost certainly been clipped at some point. Not added to, but something was removed before Garrus, John and the others with them at the time had seen it.

"..." Tali and Ranma exchanged a glance, and Ranma shrugged. "We actually don't have much more than that to go on when it comes to Geth activity. However, that laboratory I was stuck in? It belonged to Binary Helix."

That was the name in the files the Shadow Broker had on the Corporation that may or may not be doing testing on senti and beings. The Shadow Broker had attempted to discover what was going on, but other than the rumors on that score and the fact that those tests were being conducted on Noveria somewhere, he hadn't actually been able to discover much. That was because that rumor had been remarkably new by the time Ranma had removed the original Shadow Broker. Ranma had asked Aethyta to follow up on it after she had arrived and begun reconstituting the Shadow Broker's network, but several strands of that network had not come back together, and none of them on Noveria had any idea about what Binary Helix was up to.

"... Okay." Garrus took a moment to process that, then shook his head. "Okay. So this mission to Noveria isn't just about the Geth, it's also about you getting revenge? I'm not going to help you if that's the case," he warned. "I'm here because any corporation that is blinded enough by greed to work with the Geth is a clear and present danger to the galaxy as a whole, as are the Geth themselves. But I'm not going to go along with some kind of personal vendetta. How do you even know if Binary Helix as a whole was involved in that, or if it was just that one laboratory, which had somehow been suborned by the Shadow Broker?"

"I don't. And, okay, I might've played up the idea of me going around punching people in the head, but I can be more circumspect than that," Ranma admitted, shrugging. "It's just in the past, I haven't needed to in this weird galaxy. So if Binary Helix as a whole hasn't done anything

else wrong, fine, I'll give it up. But I figured you should know that we're not just here to hunt down the Geth."

Garrus groaned, one hand coming up to cover his face, but he was actually using that as cover to give Ranma and Tali the side eye for a moment. It was very clear that the two of them were hiding something further. The laboratory that Ranma had been taken to by the Shadow Broker's people was one thing, but it didn't have any connection to the video recording from the Geth trooper that mentioned this planet, which had been spliced before they had shared it with John and the rest of the team. If it did mention Binary Helix, why wouldn't Ranma have brought that up in the first place?

No, there was something else that they were hiding here. *Something they can't prove? Or something they think will upset me?* After a few moment's deliberation, Garrus decided to set that aside. If it came to it, if he felt that Ranma and Tali were pursuing personal vendettas here, he could simply walk away. Garrus would be extremely dismayed in doing so, as Ranma really didn't see the type for that kind of thing. If anything, from the way he treated the krogan after beating up the Blood Pack, he was a little too easygoing about threats to his life. But Garrus would still walk away if that happened.

He told the pair this, by which time they'd begun to hear the noise of a crowd through a hatch ahead of him. The woman from ERCS and her Loki mechs had taken an industrial lift to one side, heading down, but this looked to be the only hatch the group could use to head deeper into the city.

The hatch let out into a wide cavern area, far wider and taller than the corridor leading to it from the hangar bay they'd landed in. Garrus could see in the distance that there were other entrances on the same wall as their own and elsewhere, while only a few led deeper into the mountain. The majority of the cavern looked almost unfinished like the locals hadn't bothered to finalize any of the changes here. Hundreds of construction lights hung from among stalactites above, and the walls of the cavern were rough-hewn rock. Most of the area looked like a bazaar, full of temporary booths surrounding a few permanent ones, with an equal number of scattered security posts.

Checking the map, he nodded. "This area is the promenade. It says here it's mainly small-time companies and things being sold directly to individual offworlders who are just stopping rather than staying for any length of time. We should start listening for information here. All more important, large scale business is done deeper in, in the Plaza."

Nodding, Tali looked around, then gestured the trio over to the side of a stall that had been set up there to sell what looked like brochures of some kind. The person standing there was already haggling with someone, but Tali still asked the other two to engage in a loud

conversation to cover her activities for a second as she crouched down, activating her omni-tool. There, she was hidden between their bodies, the corner of the booth, and the shadows therein.

While Garrus loudly expounded on the virtues of a few turian-only sports to Ranma, who replied that soccer was the best sport ever, Tali powered up her drone. The little robotic critter floated out of her backpack, its appearance shifting to match the area around it before shifting further, hugging the wall behind them as it raced upwards to lose itself among the stalactites and the lights above them.

She signaled she was done by pushing between the two men, groaning allowed. "Enough about sports, boys! We're here to look around. Let's get to looking."

"You just want to shop," Ranma teased, shaking his head. "Of all the things that can be universal across species, why does it have to be the fact that womenfolk always like shopping?"

"It is a universal mystery," Garrus agreed, extremely pleased at how well that had gone despite the fact they hadn't planned it out. He knew how many features that little drone carried, being an almost autonomous infiltrator unit all on its own, something that had deeply impressed him when Tali explained what she had done to her Fastpaws or whatever its name was. Even better, the ruse had completely worked, a few of the locals having noticed the conversation and steered clear of it, while others now snickered a little, despite Tali still getting a few glares her way. "Still, it's best to go along with such whims in the interest of keeping the peace."

Soon, they were moving through the kiosks and emporiums, looking at the wares on sale. A lot of these were weapons, and Garrus shuttered more than a few times when he noticed certain individuals who he could pick out from the crowd as criminals buying weapons that were better and more advanced than the majority the Turian Hierarchy gave their infantrymen. But he knew Elanus Risk Control Services wouldn't care worth a dam, and this planet was very pointedly outside of citadel control. The weapons were extremely interesting on their own. Some were very high-tech, and he began to peruse them excitedly, almost forgetting what they were there for.

He was not alone in this. Ranma and Tali also started to lose themselves in some of the items on sale. Ranma found himself drawn to a booth that apparently offered complete VR immersion into old movies, the person at the booth expounding on the technology needed to make the transference from old 2-D to 3-D, while also trying to avoid looking at another booth where another man was selling altogether different VR experience. Why the hell **that** was out here in the public, Ranma didn't know. He was just very thankful that there weren't any youngsters around.

For her part, Tali was more fascinated by the animals. Several booths sold various types of local wild animals, or posters of said. In particular, she found herself fascinated by a kind of fish, which was said to be able to live on very little and to be perfectly happy with little to no natural lighting. They were perfect for the space fairer who wanted to add a bit of color to his or her cabin aboard a ship or space station.

"I like them," Tali hummed she straightened up from one such display, moving closer towards Ranma so that her shoulder touched his arm lightly in order. "But I hate the fact that they need to be in those globes or in any kind of display, really. I'd rather see them out in the wild. Just like most of the other animals here. I have to say, I don't...well, I can see a bit too much of my people's issues with our suits in such things, if you understand what I mean. Able to look, but never touch, never **feel**."

"That's just because their owner has to have them in the cage or in the container. Most of these animals would be able to survive in the wild," Ranma said, acting for a second as if he didn't understand Tali's point. But then he added, "Although I would say that you and the others like you on pilgrimages are like animals that have already been let out of your cage. The Migrant Fleet'd be the globe, and you're doing a damn good job of living beyond its borders. Your suits may prevent you from experiencing everything that the galaxy has to offer, but you can still experience enough."

He lightly patted her shoulder, and Tali found herself almost leaning into the contact, reveling in the warmth of that hand without thinking about it for a second. Just then, more than anything, she wanted to feel more of it, wanting to feel that contact on her skin rather than through her damn suit, even as she smiled inside her helmet at Ranma's words. "And in others, well, we've been working to get your ki up to a usable level for a reason, you know."

Staring up at Ranma, even though she knew that her expression couldn't be seen through her helmet's visor. "I don't want false hope, Ranma. It's been weeks since we started, and I've made no progress."

"I don't give false hope. I told ya I don't know if it'll work. As for it being a few weeks, hah! It took me months ta figure out how ta use ki when Master Vulkan taught me about it, and it wasn't easy, let me tell ya. I told ya, I'll help ya anyway I can to get to the point where ya can take that suit off," Ranma said, smiling down at Tali. "I promise."

At those words, Tali's body language changed, and she nodded, moving against his side, one arm coming up almost as if she was about to give him a side hug before Tali realized what she was doing and forced her arm to drop back down. "Th, thanks." With that, she moved away quickly, as did Ranma, both of them looking at different things for a moment.

Garrus stood nearby, having been talking to one of the weapons dealers, another turian, who had also turned away from their conversation to look at the byplay. Neither of them could hear a word that was spoken between the pair, but despite the two being of different species, some body language was easy to interpret. "My condolences," the gun seller intoned solemnly, a solemnity ruined by how his flanges twitching in amusement. "To you and to them. Hopeless love is harsh, but being a third wheel is worse."

"Thank you for your sympathies," Garrus answered dryly. "But you were saying?"

"Oh, yes. I don't need bodyguards or anything here. But if you find Lorik Qui'in, he might be more helpful. He is the local head for Synthetic Insights, and is..." The other man paused, thinking of how to phrase it so that a newcomer would understand.

"In a power struggle?" Garrus guessed.

"Something of the sort, yes. Unfortunately, Lorik's target is well above his own rank, and no one thinks he has a chance to prove the Administrator in question is truly criminally corrupt. Still, one has to admire his ambition."

"What does Synthetic Insights do exactly?" Ranma asked, coming over behind Garrus. "And why would a power struggle inside a company imply that someone needs bodyguards?"

"They are a major programming and computer electronics firm. There's rumors that they might even be one of the few corporations allowed to investigate AI," the local said, not noticing how Ranma stiffened or how Tali was suddenly no longer interested in the fish that she had been looking at. "And it isn't a power struggle within Synthetic Insights, as it is with a local administrator. Apparently, Synthetic Insights had bid on the use of a laboratory but had been shut down without any further reasoning given, and the lab given to Binary Helix at far less than the going rate. I don't know much more about it, but there was a kerfuffle a few months back on that score, nice term that one. I like human idioms. They can be so interesting."

"Anyway," local continued, while Tali moved over to join the other two. "The rumor is that the administrator took a major kickback, one far beyond the normal size. Then, when Lorik tried to protest and go over his head, instead of trying to go through proper channels, Administrator Anoleis simply sent one of his toughs to 'speak' to Lorik. Hence why he might be in the market for a few mercenaries."

"And where might we find him?" Garrus asked. He glared over at Ranma when he made to open his mouth, shaking his head lightly to indicate he shouldn't push on the Binary Helix angle just now. One thing at a time.

“He likes the Mezaninin, the original bar at the far end of the Plaza. You can’t miss it. Lorik himself...” what followed was a description made of things that only another turian would know, which Ranam and Tali ignored, instead turning their attention to the crowd around them.

When the gun seller was done, Garrus nodded over to Ranma, then Tali, twitching his head sideways through the crowd, leading them deeper into the bazaar toward the other side. “I haven’t found much else, but given how this place is set up for short-term visitors, that was pretty much a given to start with. Once we reach the Plaza itself, where the real local businesses have their buildings, we’ll start to hear more. Although I’ve already gotten at least one other contact. Another turian down on the surface garage level. That man back there might not be willing to pass on rumors, but Lilihierax is always willing to talk to anyone so long as they can pay and be discreet.”

“Not bad work for what, an hour and a half?” Ranma nodded. “Nice job, Garrus.”

“Just remember, if we don’t find anything about Binary Helix that’s incriminating to the company, I’m going to stop helping you with that aspect of your reasoning to be here. The Geth are my priority,” Garrus warned. “Although this idea of Binary Helix getting a lab over Synthetic Insights is rather strange.”

Ranma shrugged, stating that the Geth were his priority too. “It’s just that being here is pretty much like killing two birds with one stone.”

“Why would you want to kill birds? Unless they’re those chicken things I’ve seen occasionally,” Tali began, appalled, before adding more in a more normal tone of voice. “They look remarkably stupid.”

Rolling his eyes, Ranma explained what the phrase really meant. This carried them through the last vestiges of the crowd and then they moved on through a few more corridors dug out of the rock, the area around them changing quickly as they did. Whereas the large cavern that made up the bazaar had something of a wild nature to it, this hallway led into the areas of Port Hanshan where the corporations that were headquartered here existed, along with their workforce, and thus was far more finished. Metal panels lined first the hallway, then the cavern beyond, which blossomed widely ahead of them.

This cavern, the plaza, was far larger than the previous area, without any of the stalactites or the temporary stalls. Instead of those, there were hundreds of scattered sitting areas and walkways for pedestrian traffic, all situated around a few true roadways marked out here and there.

Around the sides of the Plaza were mezzanines, some of which were carved out of the rock leading deeper into other areas or created with glass and metal to spread over the lower

territories of the plaza. Dozens of entryways and signs denoted various businesses, both large and small. On the first floor, Ranma's omni-tool pointed out a series of walkways that would lead them to their hotel, while other buildings were denoted as being off limits or needing security clearances to access. Others indicated they were open for business, and several had simple plaques about above the doorway announcing that they were bars or cafés.

Ranma took it all in, whistling lightly, although he did notice that there weren't nearly as many people actually walking around here as back in the first cavern. Barely a few hundred, in point of fact. He pointed this out to Garrus, who laughed quietly, something that Tali joined in. "That's proof positive that you haven't gotten used to traveling around the galaxy just yet, Ranma. It's actually around eleven at night local time. Most of the people who actually live in Port Hanshan are probably asleep."

"Does that mean we should take a break, head to the hotel for the night?" Tali asked.

"Maybe. Let me..." For several minutes, Garrus fiddled with his omni-tool, his feet carrying him after Ranma and Tali as they continued deeper into the Plaza, taking in the sights, as well as the few locals who were still around. Several looked like security officers and looked back at the group of newcomers warily, while several couples were around the area as well. There were also Asari dancers who apparently were coming on for their shift, judging by one conversation Ranma overheard.

One of those asari paused, staring at Ranma for a moment, her eyes wide. She unobtrusively pointed two fingers at him. If anyone else had been close enough to hear it, they might have heard a faint click. This was followed by a faint smile appearing on her face before she hurried along on her own business for a moment. *Now, isn't that interesting? I wonder what Ranma the human super soldier, is doing here? And what he can do for me and my mission?*

Eventually, Garrus finished whatever he was doing, shaking his head. "The local who is willing to share some rumors with people for the right price is not on duty right now. We'll have to go down to the garage level tomorrow morning to speak to him. Similarly, Lorik is most likely asleep, and while he is willing to meet with people in his downtime, he's not taking any appointments. We'll need to find him in the evening."

"So... hotel," Ranma shrugged. "Whatever"

"A whole room to myself, that will be interesting. I don't actually know if I'll be able to sleep like that. This place... it might look more like a space station than even Omega does, but it's silent and quiet. I don't know if I can get used to that," Tali said, her helmet shifting from side to side as she pranced in place for a moment nervously as if the lack of background noise bothered her.

Garrus blinked, wondering why she thought that he and Ranma would share a room, before deciding to put that down to a female thing. He simply shrugged his shoulders, and the three of them moved quietly through the local night, watching as a few of the large lights set into the ceiling of the cavern above them started to wink out one after another.

Entering the hotel, they found it was a completely unmanned one, except for a virtual intelligence that popped up, demanding the trio present their omni tools and the agreement showing that they had already paid for rooms. A second later, they were given two room numbers and told where to go, all without seeing a living person.

"Is that normal?" Tali asked, shaking her head. "I've never stayed in hotels before this."

"On a planet like this, it probably would cost more to have someone there around the clock than it did to construct a virtual intelligence to run the front desk," Garrus said, just as the lift ahead of them, which would take them down to their rooms, opened. Within the elevator were five thugs, who were already pointing guns in their direction even as the door opened.

Garrus had a split second to notice that they were the kind that shot webs of glue, capture weapons rather than regular guns before he was diving to one side, as Tali found herself launched sideways by a shove from Ranma. Faster than the attackers or either of his companions could track, Ranma was in the air, bouncing off the ceiling above.

The first few blasts of glue gunk sped through where they had been standing a second ago, and Garrus barely had time to pull out his holdout handgun before Ranma was in among the toughs. Two of them quickly went down before several other doors opened, probably leading into maintenance shafts or more high-end rooms directly on this floor. Nine more gunmen stood there, two in each doorway. They fired and moved forward, covering one another as they came out of the rooms, showing a marked amount of experience or training.

Grimacing, Garrus rolled behind a sofa set into a small sitting area across from the virtual intelligence. Using it as cover, he shifted aim to one of the closest attackers, putting a round through his thigh, causing him to topple over with a scream. His fellow took two shots to his armored chest, causing him to stumble, before Garrus caught his arm with a fourth round, causing him to drop his weapon.

Meanwhile, Tali had rolled with the momentum of Ranma's shove, finding herself near Garrus in the small sitting area, ducking under a stone table there. This proved its worth as a defensive position a second later as several of the attackers switched to their normal guns. But unlike Garrus, she couldn't return fire for a second.

This ended as Ranma grabbed one of the unconscious attackers from within the lift and hurled it at two of the attackers who were firing at her from the right. The attackers hadn't tried

to fire at him with anything but glue guns, but the glue had never hit. Now, as fire slackened from that flank, Ranma launched himself in the opposite direction, landing among several of the other attackers, causing Garrus to hold his fire.

Behind them, Tali stuck her head out, lining up a shot with her shotgun at one of the last two attackers to their right.

The round took the man in the side, the large caliber mass effect kernel slamming into his shoulder slower than smaller projectiles but with intense destructive force, nearly ripping the arm off out of his sockets. If he had been a human instead of a turian, it would have, but as it was, it crushed the armor plate there and caused his arm to go completely dead from the shoulder down. It also caused him to scream. Staggering sideways into his fellow, he tripped them both, sending the two attackers to the ground. The next moment, the pile was added to as Ranma kicked another man so hard that he flew across the welcome area. The human slammed into the pair, sending all three skidding into the wall next to the door the pair at the bottom of the pile had come out of.

That marked the end of the fight, and Garrus slowly pushed himself out from behind his makeshift cover, thankful that none of the attackers had time to line up a shot on him. *I rather doubt this sofa would have done nearly as well as cover as the stone table did for Tali.* “Well, if I had any thought that you needed my help in an actual flight, which I will note I did not, this would’ve put paid to any such impressions.”

“Feh. Who are these morons?” Ranma asked, looking at a glue gun thoughtfully, before it disappeared into his item space, then picking up one of the men who was groaning the loudest, shaking him like a ragdoll.

Neither he nor Garrus noticed Tali sitting down again in the sitting area. Her omni-tools display flared into being on her arm, where she quickly went to work.

“So, which brand of idiot are you? Locals trying to take advantage of offworlders? People with axes to grind against humans like that idiot we met when we arrived? Some kind of test to see if we’re strong enough to join your mercenary group? Or are you here for a more personal reason?” Ranma inquired, his tone light even as he held the man several feet above the ground without any apparent effort.

“We, just... Paid! Paid to capture... face ... you!” The man, a human, gurgled, staring down at Ranma through wide, terrified eyes. A person shouldn’t be able to move as fast as Ranma had or hit as strong. A team of seventeen professionals had fallen like so much wheat, and it was terrifying.

“Ranma, he can’t talk to you if you’re choking the life out of him,” Garrus said, holding up a hand and pushing at Ranma’s wrist, falling into the good cop portion of this impromptu interrogation easily. “Give them a chance to breathe, and I’m sure we can get to the bottom of this.”

Growling, Ranma released the grip a little so the man, a salarian, could at least breathe. “Repeat what you just said.”

“You see how out is, friend,” Garrus said, shaking his head a little. “My acquaintance here doesn’t really like being attacked out of the blue, and we haven’t exactly been on Noveria enough to make enemies. So this seems highly unusual. If we can clear this mystery up, I’m sure I can convince him to let you and the rest of your companions go without any further trouble. I understand that you were being paid for this, and it wasn’t anything personal, after all. So why should there be hard feelings between two groups of professionals?”

Garrus’s soothing words seemed to do the trick, along with being able to breathe, and the salarian quickly began to babble, which, considering his race, was saying something. “We, we’re part of the local mercenary group. We used to be Blue Suns, just like you three, right? We started to work for the administrator here, but recently, he had to lay us off because someone was poking around his business, and the account that he was using to pay us came up in the discussion. But we were approached a few hours ago by someone who wanted to pay us good money, enough money to get us all off-planet and to one of the Blue Sun’s normal training worlds in the Terminus Fringe, where we could link up with more of our folk. I don’t know what you three did after the Blue Suns started to disintegrate, but it was enough to put a bounty on this one’s head,” the mercenary said, gesturing with a weak hand toward Ranma.

That implied that he didn’t realize who Ranma specifically was, which, Ranma reflected, spoke volumes about the man’s basic intelligence and how much connection to the larger rumor network he and his fellows had. *And here I thought all salarians were supposed to be smart. That’ll teach me to not listen to stereotypes.* Still, it was enough for Ranma to allow Garrus to convince him to let the man stand on his own two feet.

“And do you know who paid you, or was this all done clandestinely as per usual for such things?” Garrus asked, still keeping his tone commiserating and understanding.

“Clandestine. We didn’t even see the face of the guy who hired us. We met at one of the local bars. He gave us two-thirds of the money upfront. Can you believe that? Well, after this I suppose it makes sense if you knew what we were running into,” the salarian babbled, shaking his head.

“Can you tell me anything about him? You obviously didn’t see his face, but surely...” Garrus led the man on and was rewarded a second later.

“He was human, for sure. The tone, the body language and the shoulders. All of it pointed to a human. A man, not a woman either, I’d have noticed that too,” the Salarian answered firmly. “It wasn’t a voice I recognized, so it isn’t someone important around here who’s been in the news or anything like that. And the fact we met in a bar, well while a lot of dealings get done around here in bars, particularly the Mezzanine, an operation like this? If a local corporation was behind it, they’d have done so behind secure doors, even if those doors might not have been their own. And they could simply pay the hotel corporation to let us access your rooms, flood them with gas or put some stun juice in the water supply.”

“Good points. I understand that you and your fellows were a little desperate for this, and there are no hard feelings between us. Is there, Renzo?”

Garrus didn’t even need to try and wink or otherwise nudge Ranma in the right direction of an answer for this one. “Nope. You tried, and it’s not your fault you were given bad intel. Your ambush was actually pretty darn good,” Ranma said, his earlier growl having completely abated. “You chose a proper place, spread out your troops and didn’t fire wildly or anything, and none of us were ready for an attack when the lift doors opened. Good stuff.”

“That does make this one feel better, although it is some comfort to the amount of wounds and injuries we took, to say nothing of our dead comrades.”

“I didn’t kill any of them. You?” Ranma asked, looking over at Garrus, who shook his head.

“I didn’t either. The one I shot might need surgery to get any motion out of that arm,” Tali said from where she was sitting down, not even looking up from her work on her omni-tool. “Beyond that, they’re all still breathing.”

“Tell you what, friend. You pick up your companions and head back to wherever you’re living currently. Hopefully, two-thirds of the money you were supposed to be paid will get you off this planet along with the medical bills. We won’t inform ERCS about this. I don’t think either of us wants any more scrutiny from such, right?”

So relieved was he that none of his companions had died and that he kept his head and only had light bruising to judge the complete beat down they’d just taken, the salarian nodded quickly. He quickly began to go around, giving out tiny tabs of medi-gel to those who needed it, rousing those companions who were already groaning while keeping a wary eye on Ranma and Garrus as they moved over to join Tali.

“What are you working on, Tali?” Ranma asked, keeping his voice low so the recovering mercs wouldn’t hear.

"I thought this attack had a fifty-fifty chance of being something directed at Ranma, but if so, whoever it was had to be a complete moron to think an attack like this would matter at all to him," Tali answered bluntly, not looking up from where she was working. "So I figured whoever was staged it for some reason. And if so, they might be close enough to somehow view the battle. There was a small camera drone outside. Chicki's trailing it now back to its master. I've already begun to hack into it."

"I thought you needed to physically connect to something to hack into another system?" Ranma asked, frowning a little.

"Nope, my drone's loaded with well beyond military-grade hacking software and equipment. Trust me, the only reason I'm not already in control of the drone is that finishing the process would be obvious. Instead, I'm having my baby trail after it," Tali said.

Ranma looked over at Garrus. "What do you think, is this good enough to go after?"

"Certainly. It might not lead us to either of the two reasons we're here on Noveria, as I'd expect the Geth to do a much better job of ambushing us. And for Binary Helix, if they really had been the ones to experiment on you, I would assume they would know precisely how dangerous you were. But removing a threat to us is always a good idea regardless of where it's coming from," Garrus stated firmly.

With that, instead of heading to the rooms, Ranma and his companions left the groaning attackers behind them, with Tali directing them along.

End Chapter

I'm sorry if this feels like another segue chapter. I got kind of hung up on stuff in Omega, for which I apologize. However, the plot of the story is going to start moving much faster now, as you saw in what happened in Noveria. Also, yes, I know I changed the interior of Port Hanshan. I do these things.

I also have to warn you all that the whole experimenting on the Rachni thing that ME players run into in the original game will not be nearly as far advanced here as it was then. We're still years ahead of where those events start to occur, so the Rachni will not have broken containment or anything similar just yet. However, other plots can start moving along even faster than in canon because of Ranma's actions and will do so as Ranma and company make more trouble for themselves in the future, while dealing with the problem in the present, Tali finally gets to see snow in person rather than through camera, and doesn't find the environment entirely to her liking due to incoming fire.