

Stripper with a System

(Chapters 10-14)

Novus Peregrine

Disclaimer: Obviously, I don't own Mass Effect, which belongs to EA/Bioware. Though Rylia is entirely my own creation.

Chapter 10: Production

Rylia wiped her hands with a good old-fashioned rag, uncaring that she probably needed a full scrub, complete with sonic pulses, to get the various bits of grease and industrial lubricants off the rest of her. An engineer that was afraid to get their hands dirty wasn't much of an engineer, and despite her other life choices Rylia *was* an engineer. One that was riding high on satisfaction with her work as she looked smugly at the small production line that was now running smoothly.

Yes, the droids she'd purchased from the Marketplace had done the heavy lifting in getting everything set up to the specs she'd already designed. But the existing batch of labor droids, the ones she'd purchased from the Marketplace, weren't very good at fine-motor tasks. Seriously, she wasn't sure why the entirety of the Star Wars labor droid market was overloaded with three-finger droid models. It was damn near universal and *seriously* limiting to manual dexterity. Which is why she'd needed to spend the last several hours handling tweaks and adjustments to take the production line from 'mostly function but a bit janky' to 'smoothly operating.' Now that she'd done so, she was able to watch as the various conveyors, waldos, and more labor droids assembled...additional labor droids.

Specifically, the new model of labor droid that she'd adjusted to work entirely within the Mass Effect materials base, including swapping out a few bits that actually made them *better*. For all that Star Wars nominally had the superior tech base, its *cheap* labor droids, which Rylia had been using until now, had the aforementioned issue that left them lacking in the dexterity department. Even the more advanced ASP-19 that handled the testing of every new blaster suffered a bit in that regard. The only exception she'd been able to find were BLX models and *they* were...slow and somewhat problematic. Slow reaction times, slow movement cycle, and nearly as prone to developing personalities as the R-series, without frequent memory wipes.

It wasn't, of course, that the Star Wars universe *couldn't* make droids with more advanced manipulation abilities. Even something like a C-series protocol droid had better fine manipulation. It was just that their droid series tended to run either cheap-but-simple

or advanced-but-expensive. With the latter almost always having a full AI that could be regarded as sentient and, thus, wasn't a great option for monotonous labor. There was a *reason* that particular universe had suffered multiple droid rebellions. Something which had, in turn, inspired them to limit the intelligence of droids used for labor or high-danger tasks. The BLX honestly pushed the risk more than most were comfortable with, and only existed due to shipyards like Fondor and Kuat needing more capable labor droids. Even then, they'd been designed slow and non-threatening *on purpose*.

Rylia honestly agreed with the reasoning. Not to mention she had an additional incentive in the form of not wanting to get caught by the Citadel using full AI. Her small group of R3 slicers was one thing. Hundreds or thousands of labor droids or police bots having that level of intelligence was quite another. Which is why she'd simply taken the blueprints of multiple labor droids and, in the process of fully converting them to the ME techbase, also used principles *from* the ME tech base to solve the dexterity issue. Not to mention using ME Virtual Intelligences in place of the more robust and malleable coding from Star Wars.

While the LOKI mechs didn't exist yet, the basic tech that would eventually make them *existed*, and Rylia was a talented enough engineer it hadn't been hard to make *her* model of labor droids with the increased dexterity and decent VI capability. Really, the only thing that had kept the Citadel Species from using mechs more was the cautionary memory of the Geth. Well, that and the fact that it honestly tended to be a bit more expensive to buy good mechs than to just hire an organic to do the same thing.

Rylia simply didn't care about that part since she was both building them herself at cost, and more concerned about security than expense. Labor droids that never left her hidden facilities were far more secure for mass producing things she wasn't supposed to be making.

"Right. Now that I've got *this* production line running, I guess I need to finalize the combat bot design too. Well, at least the basic model. Still trying to figure out the personal shield for the commando bots."

She watched a few minutes longer, as the first few RT-1 labor droids were assembled and tested, before heading off to find that shower...

... ..

"Wooo! Get some, bitch! May the power of hot plasma compel you!"

Rylia's smile was huge as she enjoyed the wanton destruction every time she triggered another bolt from the cannon half the size of her, tracking it from side to side and

sending more bolts down range at the armored targets she was firing on. Not that the armor was doing those targets much good, as the thick bolts from the turret-mounted blaster canon reduced them to so much shrapnel after just one or two hits.

Momo, watching from one side, shook her head at the sheer *glee* in Rylia's expression as she obliterated the targets. Of course, she was also smiling at the sight, and wasn't about to pass up her own turn. She was quite familiar with how therapeutic exploding things with a giant gun could be, and they had droids ready to carry out another round of targets for *her* once Rylia had exhausted herself from over-cackling.

The entire event was happening under the Stealth Shield Generators Rylia had bought another set of from the Marketplace, specifically to set up a 'testing range' for the new and more destructive toys she'd been working on. The lasgun technology, which Rylia *insisted* on calling 'blasters' out of superstitious fear of the reality she'd gotten the blueprints from, scaled up remarkably well. They still needed to design, implement, and test each new scale, though.

There were increasingly advanced materials science involved at each new scale, which had necessitated setting up specialized facilities to manufacture. So far, the turret gun that Rylia was having fun exploding things with was close to the largest weapon they could make. Easily suitable for mounting on vehicles, mechs, heavy power armor, or even fire-support gunships. But not yet suitable for even shuttles or fighter craft.

Still, it was progress. Amazing progress for just two months, considering that Rylia had been working on the droid production lines at the same time. Her boss was, despite her...personality...a genuine genius. Momo herself was no slouch, but she was fully aware of the gap between her and people like Rylia, who reminded her of an unholy amalgam of Melissa Shield, Mei Hatsume, and *Midnight*. The genius of the first, the manic energy and out of the box thinking of the second, and the blatant sex drive and bold behavior of the third.

Not that Momo minded.

She'd gotten along well with Melissa, had enjoyed Hatsume's antics *most* of the time, and Rylia's version of Midnight's sex drive was flattering. That last thought caused her to blush lightly, despite her usual self-control. There had been a few...repeats, of the 'testing' Rylia had talked her into. Only, without the pretense of it being a test. In truth, the only reason she hadn't given in to making things more *personal* between them was out of an initial resistance to the idea of getting too attached.

Her contract here was only for five years, after all.

Yet, the more she'd evaluated Rylia's goals and the more she'd settled into the idea that she was literally trying to *save the galaxy*, the less concerned with that fact Momo had become. Even just the plans Rylia had cheerfully began to outline in fits and starts for how they could make the Terminus Systems *better*? Freeing slaves, uplifting populations, improving quality of life and industry, truly *making use* of all that potential that was being squandered? Even just that much, ignoring the Reapers if they were real, was still something that *called* to Momo.

She hadn't become a Pro Hero in a fit of teenage rebellion, after all.

...

...

Okay, she hadn't become a Pro Hero *purely* in a fit of teenage rebellion. There *had*, admittedly, been a measure of that involved. Her parents had sheltered her and kept her from interacting with the world much, and becoming a Hero had been a high-minded enough calling for them to agree to when she'd pushed hard enough.

Still, she'd been able to sell them on it due to the fact both of them actually *were* good people, and good parents. They'd raised her with firm ideals, and she genuinely *had* possessed a strong conviction to help people. Something they'd been able to see, which had convinced them to allow it. What they had really wanted was to protect her from a world that would have cheerfully exploited a Quirk like hers without a second thought or an ounce of remorse. It was a credit to them that they'd given in and supported her once they realized she really meant it. Something that had kept her relationship with them strong despite how little they'd been able to be around once she settled down in one place to attend UA.

The point though was that Momo had always felt a strong calling to *help*. Perhaps not to the same utterly self-destructive extent that Midoriya had. But certainly far more than the average teenager seeking glory, more than anything else, from a Hero career. Most of that type, including a few of her own class sadly, had fallen away as the wars with first the Meta Liberation Front, then a resurgent All for One, had gotten...ugly. Only those with a strong will to *make things better* had continued on and pulled Japan through the nightmare of those back-to-back wars.

Now she was faced with a *galaxy* where things worse than those wars were common place in the Terminus. Which didn't even account for the Reapers, assuming they came, which was something even Rylia wasn't one hundred percent sure would happen. It wasn't exactly easy to determine if things that hadn't happened yet, which you'd seen play out in a *video game* in another life, were coming for you. Though they *had* both put some thought

into how to do so and had one or two irons already in that particular fire. Figuring out how to sponsor the colony trip to Feros instead of ExGeni had been an interesting challenge. One that was still an ongoing effort, as Momo was doing her best to hide the funding via shell companies in human space.

Not the point, though.

The point was that she'd slowly come to realize that she wasn't sure she could bring herself to go back, even if her contract was up *right now*. The same part of her that had driven her first to be a Hero, then to *give up* being a Hero to make a bigger difference with Yaoyorozu Industries? It was firmly demanding that she take the chance she'd been given to make an even bigger difference, for an even greater number of people.

It wasn't helped by the fact she didn't have as much to go back to as she would have had when she'd first made the deal with the Marketplace. Her Hero friends were either dead or had drifted away when she semi-retired. Her parents hadn't survived All for One's war. Her ex-girlfriend had given up Heroing, though not until *after* the war in her case, and poured her heart and a considerable amount of PTSD into a music career. Momo had really only had her staff and coworkers, towards the end, not having wanted to get too deeply involved with anyone when she'd *known* she'd be away for five years.

Technically, she didn't even have the company any longer.

Oh, it was still *owned* by her as the last of the family, but she'd made arrangements for it to be looked after. There hadn't been any sort of guarantee she'd survive the period she was contracted for, after all. In fact, there still wasn't. This was all a *very* dangerous game they were playing. It might not even be the Warlords, Pirates, and Reapers that killed them either. She, even more than Rylia, understood that the various governments would try to kill her if they found out even a fraction of her plans. Though, thankfully, Rylia was aware enough that she'd been suitably paranoid from the start.

No. Increasingly, Momo was pretty certain she was here for the duration. Most likely until *at least* the Reaper War ended in either success or failure. Which would be more like fifteen years, not five. Assuming there was even an option to go home then, it would likely only be somewhere to *retire* to. Sure, she'd only be forty at that point, but she had a feeling she'd be a pretty *exhausted* forty.

With that thought central in her mind as she watched her 'boss' continue to cackle like a loon, firing the blaster cannon, Momo also had to consider what that decision meant in other ways. After all, if she was staying, then giving in to the other woman's flirting and compliments for more than 'a little mutual fun' might not be so bad, right?

... ..

“Huh. Four hundred and three attempted intrusions? I guess the medical tech we started leaking details about drew more interest than I expected. Any sign that anything got past you guys?”

The R3 unit that had become the nominal ‘leader’ of the group she had running her cyber security bleated a derisive negative, making Rylia grin. She originally hadn’t been sure how well the R3’s would stack up against ME programs, given the *appearance* of crudity to some of Star Wars’ computer systems. Thankfully, it had turned out not to be a concern. From what the R3’s had told her, that apparent crudity was just an architecture difference.

From what they’d told her, almost every terminal in the Star Wars universe was exactly that, a terminal. One generally connected to a mainframe that, even just on a single medium-sized ship, was more powerful than most Mass Effect supercomputers. Personal computing devices weren’t common within the Republic as they weren’t considered *practical* for anything more advanced than a datapad. Even non-hyperspace capable vessels required quite a lot of computing power, after all. Heck, apparently even *repulsorlift* vehicles needed more computer power than the average high-end omnitool possessed, as the repulsorlift fields themselves were computation-heavy to maintain.

Hence the focus on offloading complex tasks to a mainframe.

Droids were, in fact, the step between those two options. If you needed something done with mobile computational power? Get a droid. They, after all, could accept natural language requests rather than forcing you to hop through bunches of menus, requiring technical skill. Which, given the wildly varied number of operating systems and equally wildly varying level of education throughout the Republic, made an admittedly large degree of sense. Why try to teach an accountant the preferred OS and spreadsheet equivalent of 50,000 different species...when you could just load it all into a droid and the same accountant could ask the droid to track inventory for them?

Patting the R3 unit on the dome, Rylia returned to the topic at hand.

“Well, if you’re certain nothing has gotten through, then good job guys! Oil baths for all later!”

Rylia smiled at the enthusiastic binary that got from the entire cluster of droids, continuing on only once they’d calmed down a bit.

“Now, did any of the attackers seem majorly better than the others? Or was it all just the same middling probing from interested parties looking for an easy win?”

Rylia blinked a moment later as she was inundated with more excited beeps and whistles. *Extremely* grateful that it had been easy to add droid binary to her universal translator implant, she nodded along. Apparently, one of the probes had been far more advanced than the others, and back tracking it had led to what the R3s thought might be a Shadow Broker operation. Probably not the Broker himself, but at least someone in his network.

Huh. That was something to think about. It was a little cliché to storm in and take over the Broker's network. But that cliché answer to many people's question of 'what would you do if?' was a cliché for a *reason*. It was, after all, a potentially massive boon to any operation. All the more so if she could do it early so the Broker didn't sell out information on Shepard, if that time came and certain events ended up being fated to happen.

Hmm, come to think of it, Shepard should be, what? A teenager right now, right? And Miranda Lawson was just a few years older than that. In fact, there was a good chance Miranda hadn't gone on the run from her father yet. Snapping an extreme talent like her up *before* Cerberus got her could be a major boon. Which...damn it all, she hadn't even considered what to do about Cerberus, who were effectively an unknowing fifth column inside humanity for the Reapers, at least if Mass Effect 3 was to be believed.

Rylia sighed as she realized she was going to need to go over her memoirs in more detail and try to plan not just for how to build a better military against the Reapers, but also to see which events she could stick her fingers into. Either to stop them from happening entirely, or to take advantage of them to pick up additional talent and resources...

Chapter 11: Karma

"Hello, hello, my faithful minions! Thanks for checking out this new side-channel for the stream! It's thanks to interacting with a lot of you that I've become aware of just how little certain aspects of either Asari or Citadel culture are understood. Which, not to be *too* alarmist, is occasionally outright *dangerous*, rather than merely leading to embarrassing social faux pas. Thus, along with splitting some repeatable experimental projects off to the Tech Projects channel, I'm also going to cover some things the galactic traveler ought to know, here on this sub-channel!"

Rylia paused to let the title of the video 'Indenture Contracts of the Asari Republics' play, then brought the focus back to her. She was wearing a 'sexy secretary' sort of look, instead of her usual indolent casualwear or nothing at all. Just a little bit more 'professional' looking, while still giving people a *very* pleasant view.

“This first one is something Asari *take for granted*, and it was only when I recently spent a year on Illium that I properly understood that other species *don't get it*. Trust me, it took one hell of a mind warp to properly see it from someone else's perspective, which I think is also probably why there doesn't seem to be a lot of information out there on the extranet designed for other species.”

It had, in fact, taken *Hazel* getting shoved into Rylia's brain for the Asari to understand the problem. Indenture contracts had been baked into Asari culture for thousands of years. More like tens of thousands, actually. They didn't *quite* date all the way back to Prothean times, but they'd been developed long before Asari took to the stars. Which was, itself, something had happened over 2,000 years ago. They were considered *normal*, by Asari, as a result. To the point that no one really thought about them. Oh, not the exploitative versions from Illium, of course. Those were *heavily* frowned at, on any proper Asari world. But the more traditional ones that let the system exist at all were just...part of life, for any Asari.

“I'm sure many of you have heard horror stories of people arriving on Illium and ending up scooped up into contracts that are ‘effectively slavery.’”

Rylia included air quotes with that. Even if this was a serious topic, she was keeping her delivery light.

“So...sadly, that *does* happen. Before I get into why and how to avoid it, though, let's talk a little bit about what the Indenture System actually *is*, why it exists within Asari culture, and why *normal* indenture contracts *are not* slavery. So, a lot of this has to do with long Asari lifespans and our cycle of maturity. Starting there with a brief overview...”

Rylia continued on, making sure to throw in plenty of humor, deliberately sexy shots of her and other Asari, and other things that would help hold attention on an educational video. This particular channel wasn't *obviously* one of the ‘main’ splits she was doing with her stream. The Tech Projects channel was the first of those, with a couple more planned to eventually launch as well. Including an ‘Asari After Dark’ channel that would include more content directly related to the *Erotic Delights* product lines as they expanded.

Despite it not being *obvious*, though, this particular channel might possibly be one of the more important ones. At least, if it worked out the way she and Momo hoped it would...

... ..

Momo hummed thoughtfully as she looked over the numbers Rylia had passed her. Only Rylia herself could interact with the Omniversal Marketplace system, Momo not even

being able to see it, despite her own connection to it. This was more than a little annoying, in truth, even if it also made the system incredibly secure. As for what Momo was looking at, it was the extensive breakdown that Rylia had done regarding their attempts to map what granted her 'Karma' points. They were going to need more help eventually, even if not immediately, and other projects were going well enough that taking the chance to figure it out now had been deemed a productive use of time.

"I have to admit, Rylia, these numbers are confusing. I can see *some* patterns, I think, but I suspect I'm missing something. Thoughts?"

Rylia sighed, swirling a glass of Thessian whiskey in one hand. It wasn't all that common a drink, most Asari having a strong preference for wine. Yet Hazel had been a whiskey snob, and Rylia had gained some appreciation for it as a result of their merger. The content of the tumbler likely would have horrified a human whiskey critic, since the 'hints of fruit' in it were so strong even a layman could taste them. That, though, was simply the result of Asari taste buds running strongly to sweet things. The drink was something of a compromise between her two halves.

"I'm almost certain I've figured out the rough formula, actually. As we suspected, *deliberately* going out to earn Karma Points negatively impacts the rate they are gained. The system is clearly designed to prevent you from just, well, *farming* Karma."

Rylia paused long enough for Momo to nod at that. They'd both expected that might be the case. Rylia had gained her first large batch of Karma entirely unintentionally, when she'd rescued a bunch of people from shitty and unethical indenture contracts.

"I noticed two major variables, which I think account for the bulk of the variance. First, the less directly and personally I'm involved, the less karma I get out of doing something. Simply donating a few hundred thousand credits to a charity netted embarrassingly small returns. Then again, we suspected it wasn't going to be quite that easy. It's *supposed* to be a measure of your nature, after all, and such donations are almost more a business transaction to the wealthy, than they are anything meaningful."

Momo nodded again, as it was one result they'd expected from the start. If it was *that* easy to convert credits to Karma, there wouldn't be much point in having the Karma points separate in the system in the first place.

"With that in mind, getting involved with volunteer work *personally* produced significantly better results. Nevos isn't the *best* place for that sort of thing, but there's still enough call for it that I was able to figure out that I *can* earn noticeable amounts of Karma by putting in the time and sweat directly. Doing so was also, however, what clued me into the second limiter."

Rylia took a sip of her whiskey, enjoying the pleasant burn and taste of adju berries. Very nice, smooth and well-aged. which it ought to be considering Asari tended to consider a hundred years a reasonable time for even lower-tier whiskey to age, and this *wasn't* a low-tier whiskey. It had, in fact, been laid down on September, 2 1945CE by the human calendar. Rylia had recognized that as the official day World War II ended and had figured it was a very appropriate date to lay down whiskey for aging. She'd bought two dozen bottles after sampling the first she'd tried. They weren't even close to the oldest in her possession, but they were a great sipping whiskey.

"Specifically, how much I *personally care* or am *enthusiastic* about something? It matters. A lot. More even than putting the physical blood, sweat and tears in. When I volunteered to help with a 3-day Bioti-ball camp and got really into helping the young Asari that were learning? *Waaaaay* more Karma, way faster, than virtually any of the other time I 'donated' towards causes. Even ones that objectively seem more 'worthy.'"

It had legitimately been fun, too. Enough of her was still Rylia to love Bioti-ball, and teaching a bunch of twenty-something Asari kids a few tricks had been immensely enjoyable.

"Which is where I came up with the idea of the channel split, which you can see has spiked the Karma income *far* more than anything else. Less than if I was personally teaching every person about the topics, I'd guess. But I got a *lot* of Karma for the video I did about the Indenture System and how not to get screwed by it, no matter if you're an Asari or not. I'm still getting a steady trickle more from that one video, too."

Momo nodded, looking pleased. She was still a bit uncomfortable with that system, even if she could logically agree that it made sense...for the Asari. Her chief minion was of the opinion that it ought never to have been extended outside the Asari at all, which Rylia couldn't quite agree with. There were, for example, something like fifty Quarians on their pilgrimages that she now had 5 to 15-year contracts with.

Those contracts were more than fair, with the pair of fifteen-year contracts in particular rewarding the two Quarians jointly involved in it with a *ship*. Not just a shuttle, but future market-value of a small frigate. The contract would easily award them with the equivalent of around fifteen million credits...each. That sort of money wasn't something a normal person could earn, even working solidly for fifteen years. The two Quarians in question were immensely talented, and absolutely worth it as far as Rylia was concerned. Both of them would return from their unusually-long pilgrimages in a position to *start their own crew* among the Migrant Fleet. A huge status jump for the pair that *they* considered worth the time too.

Contracts like that were ones she considered perfectly acceptable, even with non-Asari, whereas Momo just flat out wasn't comfortable with them at all. Educating the rest of the galaxy on such contracts, how they worked and why, was something they'd *both* agreed on. Asari took them so much for granted that they were barely talked about, and most of the *existing* literature, at least for humans and Quarrians, consisted of very dry government-issued explanations that could bore a thresher maw into taking up knitting as an alternative to reading the details.

"I have enough Karma after the various experiments for another Tier 2 summon, but I think we should hold off for now. I'm honestly doing fine with the scale-up for the blaster weapons on my own, the medical Think-Tank doesn't really need help just yet, and most of the other industrial capacity we have right now on the hidden side of things is working on the new droid production lines. I already adjusted the models we're making now for the tech base we have, so those can run purely on auto for a while."

Momo hummed, then nodded.

"I agree. There are certainly plenty of places we still need people, but most of those are on the public-facing side with *Erotic Delights* and the new *Maiden's Mercy* Medical Group. We can recruit entirely normally for both. Until we decide on what the next steps are, exactly, for your plan to become Empress of the Terminus..."

Momo's lips quirked. Rylia *might* have used that overblown title one or two too many times. What? Even as Hazel she'd been a little bit dramatic, and original-Rylia had been worse. It wasn't actually ego, as she was *really* leaning towards the idea of propping someone from the Omniversal Market up in that role, rather than being the figurehead herself. In her defense, the whole idea was sort of 'Go Big or Go Home,' so she felt she was entitled to a little bit of melodrama!

"Right. Well, I suppose we really should actually...plan for that. You know, instead of just winging it and heading in that general direction like I've been doing. Maybe we need someone to do the planning?"

Momo, surprisingly, shook her head instantly at that idea.

"No. The loyalty from the Omniversal Market contract might ensure they don't stab *you* in the back, but the very type of person best at handling conquests tend toward being...pragmatic. Unfortunately, that pragmatism also tends to express as ruthlessness. Much better to hand such a person *specific* objectives and limitations and let them argue you around if you're too far off base, than to let them set everything themselves."

Rylia frowned, finishing her whiskey and she considered that. Momo...wasn't wrong. She certainly intended to find a moral individual to fill the role. Yet, that was almost more frightening than finding a monster to do it. 'Demons run when a good man goes to war' was a quote that came to mind. A pragmatic but good man might well decide that a brutal atrocity was the fastest way to take over a world. If that method was how you got the fewest casualties, shouldn't that be what you went with?

Hell, there were still debates about the ending of the very war she'd thought appropriate to sip a whiskey from the end of. Strictly speaking, the numbers still said that more people would have died taking Japan conventionally than had died in the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Something like 1 million versus under a quarter of that number. Yet, that quarter of a million had been *ninety percent civilian*. Making the debate a horrible quagmire with no true definitive answer, only lots and lots of philosophical arguments.

Would, then, a good but pragmatic man (or woman!) orbitally bombard a city, if the calculation said it would lead to the lowest total number of casualties on both sides? If Rylia was to take events of the Mass Effect games as plausible, and the DLC was real, then Shepard would be faced with that very choice regarding the Alpha Relay.

Which, she mentally noted, was probably something she should look into doing something about. Either a method of disabling the Relay, or creating a convincing reason to evacuate that planet. Something about that thought tickled her brain and she made a note of it. If there was some way to disable Relays, it might just be a major key to both buying time before the Reapers showed up...and not having to fight them all at once. Given that they'd arrived *eventually*, they presumably had more robust non-Relay FTL systems than the Citadel Races. Yet, forcing them to constantly use them? That might let them chop the fight up into smaller pieces.

Shaking off the odd string of thoughts, she returned her attention to Momo.

"Well, that's true enough...but this conversation is *waaaaay* too serious! Have you seen the initial advertisement suggestions for the Neurostimulator product line? I bet there's a lot of people out there who will *squirm* at the thought of a chastity belt equipped with a neruostim system! It's a bit niche, maybe, but it looked pretty fun~!"

Huh, Momo going beat red was rarer these days than it used to be. Wait, was *she* one of the people that squirmed at the thought of it? Hmmm, it could certainly be a fun diversion if she was into the idea, though that was a bit of a far off thought. She was still working on getting Momo into the Unlimited Headpats zone, after all! She was certainly responding more positively lately. Maybe she should push for an actual date or something?

Eh, a thought for later, when she was less likely to just blurt it out...

Chapter 12: Overwhelmed

Rylia stared at the Marketplace options with bleary eyes and a fuzzy mind. Faintly, she realized that she was starting to get a bit overwhelmed. Realizing she wasn't going to get anything more done tonight, she marked her place and closed the System Menu. Leaning back in her sinfully comfortable chair, letting it adjust itself so she was partially reclined, she rubbed at her eyes and just...let herself do nothing for a few moments. Unfortunately, there was a reason she hadn't allowed herself to *stop* much, not since waking up as an amalgam of two people on Illium. Doing so now, her mind soon drifted in other directions, ones she'd been trying to avoid.

Specifically, to her concerns about the fact that she had *absolutely no clue what the fuck she was doing*.

Yes, she had a plan. Or, at least, she had 'part of a plan.' Possibly even eleven percent of a plan, as Peter Quill had so infamously claimed and been infinitely memed over. Though, given the scale she was working at, she wasn't even sure she could claim that high of a percentage. Sure, she'd made an amazing amount of progress since waking up as the fusion of Rylia and Hazel, but the Reapers? Hell, Reapers nothing, even just the Terminus Systems...

She was so far out of her depth it wasn't particularly humorous.

She was also self-aware enough to know that part of the reason she'd immediately started *doing* rather than *thinking* was a cover for panic. So long as she was *doing something*, being *productive*, making progress towards a possible edge over the onrushing doom, she could at least *pretend* to be okay. Summoning Momo had helped a lot, since at least *she* actually *did* know what she was doing.

Within her limited sphere, at least.

Which was the problem. Rylia was a genius engineer, Momo was a genius CEO and industrialist. If the goal had just been to make the galaxy a better place and get rich in the process? They'd have been in *great* shape! Unfortunately, existential threats to all higher-order organic life in the galaxy were...a bit beyond that. Beyond even Momo, who had at least been a professional Hero.

Rylia had just been a Stripper.

Hazel had just been a plucky artist.

Now, aside from possibly Shepard if the game series hadn't been completely full of shit, the new combination of those two souls was *somehow* the greatest hope against a threat that had wiped out countless civilizations. A threat whose parameters she could barely define, since even the games had been...inconsistent...on the Reapers' numbers. Nazara, or Sovereign if you preferred, had claimed that the Reapers were numerous enough to 'Darken the sky of every world.'

But what did that *mean*?

The Protheans had held out, fighting back, for *centuries*, at least if the DLC including Javik was to be believed. If there were hundreds of thousands of them, the way some had assumed based on that line, then that shouldn't have been possible. Not even if the Reapers were slowed down by the need to harvest each species to create more Reapers. Likewise, it didn't mesh with the Turians having been able to at least stall the Reapers from taking Palaven.

How much of that was Reaper arrogance, committing only the resources they thought each cycle needed? How much of it had been Nazara simply blowing smoke? Were there 'merely' thousands of Reapers? With only a few hundred Dreadnaughts and thousands of smaller units? Or was the number something so truly insurmountable that the bullshit of the Crucible was truly and genuinely the only option?

So many questions, so few answers. Who the fuck was *she* that somehow she believed she could be a roadblock to the hell that might well be coming for them all? Who was *she* that she even believed she could conquer even the more achievable end of taking over the Terminus systems? Would doing so, would forcing an arms race, even *matter*? If there were too many Reapers coming, what would making a few guns that could hurt them do?

Rylia took a deep, bracing breath. Focusing on a simple meditative exercise from her life as Hazel, she sucked air in, imagined all the bad thoughts, all the doubts, as simply *bad air*. Then she pushed it out, sending the thoughts out with her breath and leaving her mind, if not exactly at peace, at least not racing toward a cliff to dive into the abyss of panic lying beyond.

She could only do as much as she could do. *Someone or something* had given her the Omniversal Marketplace with an eye to fighting what seemed to be the inevitable and impossible. She was not alone. Momo was with her, and there would be others in time. Others from the Marketplace, and others that simply called this reality home. There were trillions of Asari, hundreds of billions of Turians, tens of billions of still other species.

They could fight back.

They *would* fight back.

Rylia would give them the best possible tools she could to do it with. It didn't matter that she might not be the *best* person for the job. It only mattered that the job was *hers*. One she'd taken up willingly and wasn't going to abandon now. Not when so many lives were riding on it. Not when they'd barely even begun. Still, despite the fact she had no intention of losing, a previous thought from her first days with the Marketplace came to mind.

Perhaps it was time to put some thought into the backup plan. Into how to *hide* a sufficient population of each race so thoroughly that the Reapers would miss them if the worst should happen. It would, she thought, make her feel better as a hedge against the possibility that there truly were hundreds of thousands of Reapers.

Tomorrow, though. She would do it tomorrow. Tonight, she was going to find some hot chocolate, some whiskey, and then a bed. Hopefully a little sleep would do her mindset some good...

... ..

"Okay, Rylia, you can do this. It's not like the fate of the galaxy and trillions of lives are riding on it...oh wait, yes it is."

Knowing letting herself say that aloud had been a mistake, she pushed the thought away and focused down on her notes and the sprawling map of the galaxy being projected in fine detail above her living room coffee table. The projector wasn't a Mass Effect model, being one she'd bought off the Marketplace. Not because ME tech *couldn't* do what she needed, but simply as another security feature. She was busy transcribing events from her memory and notes onto the holoprogram, information she felt she was *justifiably* paranoid about. The fact this holo was *meant* for military planning, and was thus biometrically secured, helped her feel better. As did the fact it didn't use any architecture or language found anywhere in this universe.

It was also nice that it had features intended to be used with campaign planning, which let her set up a timeline. In this way, she was creating a much more visual representation of past, current, and future events and where she might be able to prevent, leverage, or otherwise utilize them. Given that Hazel had been an artist, it was no surprise that she had an easier time processing what she was seeing in a format like this, and even the part of her that was still Rylia found it useful. The problems were so *big* and spread across so much space, that trying to hold them all in her head was migraine inducing. Trying to stick to that was also a fantastic way to miss something important, or to fail to share that important thing with allies. So this should be well worth the effort.

Even barely a tenth of the way done, she was already spotting issues with the decisions she'd made so far. Like, just as one of the more irritating examples, the location she'd chosen as her company headquarters. Nevos had been *perfect* for what she needed in the short-term. For that matter, it still was. Relatively remote, with minimal oversight since the corporations here did a lot of their grey market research on planet and didn't want people poking at that. It even had exactly the sort of light-industry which perfectly fit her initial manufacturing needs.

What it *wasn't*, showing that she hadn't thought every detail through, was anywhere remotely near the Terminus. Illium was in the Crescent Nebula, right on the border between the Attican Traverse and the Terminus Systems. Nevos was still a great place to do *Research and Development*, but it absolutely was *not* a great place to launch their eventual strikes to take over the Terminus from. It also didn't have a shipyard industry, so building anything *big* was going to be very noticeable.

In some ways, that was all fine. It would actually make it easier to separate *Erotic Delights* and their new medical company from their Warlord campaign. In other ways it was...less than ideal, as it meant they'd need to operate from two wildly different and distantly separated locations. Not to mention that any war industry they set up *here* would eventually have to be moved elsewhere, lest it be discovered and the connection between the company and their efforts be made *anyway*. With employees and assets seized if they upset either the Council or Asari Republics enough.

That was just one major failure of planning so far. One she was trying not to let get her down. Nevos *was* and *had been* a solid option that still came with big advantages. She *knew* there probably hadn't been 'one perfect solution,' but as she detailed out the map, she was fighting the increasing feeling of being out of her depth.

"No! Focus you stupid bitch. Now, where is the Broker in all of this mess. Let's see...Hagalaz is in the Hourglass Nebula. That's well and truly into the Terminus. Huh, it's actually technically a garden world, if a second tier one. Didn't realize that. Originally had a bunch of mining operations, but those were abandoned when worlds with less violent climates were found that could be exploited more easily? That's promising, potentially. Palladium, Platinum, Iridium? Lots of metals that could be used for shipbuilding, and using droids would solve most of the environmental issue..."

Brightening at that idea, she scribbled down notes, before moving onto the next issue.

"Let's see, Cerberus is a *known* entity, but only just barely. The only public incident was them attempting to steal antimatter from the SSV Geneva in 2165. The R3s picked up

some indications they are recruiting more heavily now that they are known, but do any of the facilities I know about exist yet?”

Realizing as she puts in the locations that she has no idea when most of them came online, she groaned. She’s going to have to investigate a *lot* of the information she has, isn’t she? Does that mean she needs to recruit a spy or something from the Marketplace? Or can that wait? She still needs a lot of help in the R&D department too, and the R3s and some probe droids could probably put together a lot without spooking anyone or drawing overt attention.

Wishing she had hair still, just so she could pull it out, Rylia continued to give her attention and best efforts to mapping everything she knew...

... ..

“Damn it!”

Rylia kicked the omni-gel printer with annoyance, then yelped and hopped on one foot as she’d forgotten she wasn’t wearing shoes. Hobbling backward, she flopped into a chair at the desk with her prototyping workstation resting atop it. Omni-gel was an amazing material, almost as much as medi-gel.

Frankly, as far as she could tell sharing *either* of them should have gotten Humanity elevated farther and faster than they had been. Unfortunately, realpolitik was at play. None of the current powers that be wanted an upstart gaining influence barely ten years onto the scene and had done their best to brush off arguably two of the greatest technological gifts given to the galaxy since the Citadel was discovered. Something made all the more insulting by the fact it *wasn’t* a Prothean tech rediscovered, but a genuinely new development by Humanity.

Well, unfair or not, *Rylia* certainly appreciated how much easier and faster it made prototyping her altered designs from Marketplace blueprints. It wasn’t practical to produce items from omni-gel at industrial levels, not even with an industrial omni-gel printer like the one she was using. But it was *immensely* useful for prototyping. Unfortunately, as good as it was in most ways, it was proving inadequate for her current needs. It just didn’t have the precision required for making advanced components from other tech bases. Particularly ones with materials science that hadn’t been taken into account by the people who made either omni-gel or the printer. Something that had resulted, in this particular case, in the printer getting so gummed up it might as well be a brick at this point. It might legitimately be faster to scrap the thing and buy a new one, instead of trying to clean it up.

“Fine. This is fine. I can look on the marketplace for a better prototyping tool. I still have a decent number of credits, even if I probably need to arrange for another mass sell-off.”

She groaned, adding *that* to her ‘to do’ list as well. Yes, technically she could just *buy* things with in-universe credits to then sell off to the Marketplace, but it wasn’t terribly efficient to do so. Not to mention that it might cause flags to pop up for people and groups that she’d rather not notice her other operations. If mass amounts of omni-tools, guns, or other bits and bobs, just *vanished* once she got ahold of them, *someone* would notice that fact, sooner or later.

Maybe she could look into larger salvaging operations? For things like old ships? She didn’t think there were any such places on Nevos, but there had to be orbital yards or groundside facilities like that out there. It was yet another thing she would need to somehow find the time for, though. Sighing and rubbing her eyes, trying to force back her exhaustion, she opened the Marketplace and determinedly started looking for some sort of fabricator that could handle what she needed. One she could hopefully get without utterly breaking the bank on her remaining Marketplace credit by being too far above the local tech level...

... ..

Rylia smacked a folder full of flimsiplast, an Asari paper-equivalent that was more environmentally friendly, down on Momo’s desk. That desk, made of local woods in fine quality, was occupying the C-suite of their office building floor...which had previously not really been in use.

Rylia had, prior to Momo, mostly worked out of her Penthouse. She’d visited the testing labs and production facilities, but hadn’t bothered much with the office space which held much-dreaded departments like *HR*. Admittedly, their staff for things like HR was still fairly thin on the ground, but Rylia still did her best to hide from them. Her past life as Hazel hadn’t left a good impression of *those people*, even if she intellectually knew Asari HR departments were usually less...condescending. Also that they weren’t as likely to complain about her doodling naked women in her cubicle.

Particularly since she was the boss.

Past life HR trauma aside, Rylia just hadn’t seen the need to use the physical office space that technically belonged to her very often until Momo came along. Her chief minion had gently lectured her about that, though, explaining that a certain number of physical office hours was good practice. If for no other reason than so that your top minions knew when they could safely approach you. Annoyingly, she’d been *right*, several of her many

relatively new department heads having been anxiously waiting for a ‘good time’ to ask questions. Some of which had genuinely been important.

Thankfully, she had Momo to wrangle and herd all the other minions now, so Rylia herself still wasn’t suffering too many office hours. That said, Momo ran a tight ship, and there was almost always time in her schedule, like now, for Rylia to bring up various topics. Strictly speaking, *this* was one that she’d have preferred to do a bit later, in the greater security of either her penthouse or Momo’s apartment. It was, however, potentially time-sensitive.

She’d taken the time to look into Henry and Miranda Lawson, and discovered that Miranda had *just* fled her father. As in, within the last few days, basically the moment Miranda turned eighteen and gained a bit of legal wiggle room as a result. Rylia, assuming her knowledge from the game was correct, knew that she’d *eventually* approach Cerberus for protection from her father. Yet, she didn’t know *how long* that ‘eventually’ would take. Had it been days after she fled her father? Months? Years?

Back to the present, Momo merely quirked an eyebrow before picking up and opening the dossier Rylia and smacked down on her desk. One that was written in the Galactic Basic they’d both gotten brain uploads of from Star Wars. They used the language routinely as an extra security measure to protect any information regarding their more long-term plans...or that Rylia had from her life as Hazel.

Seeing it here caused Momo’s eyebrows to rise, and she quickly reached under her desk to activate unobtrusive security measures against someone trying to listen in. Even an entirely different language wasn’t proof against enough brute forcing by a VI, so extra precautions were just common sense. Thankfully, such precautions were also common place in Asari C-suites, so their installation hadn’t raised any eyebrows.

“I take it she’s important? Wait...Lawson. Didn’t you mention her as one of ‘Commander Shepard’s’ companions?”

Momo’s quirk enhanced her memory, though not quite to the extremes Rylia’s own Asari physiology had. Living for a thousand years without a *very* good memory would be all sorts of suck. Thankfully, by either nature, someone’s tinkering, or just as a side effect of their Bullshit Nervous System of Doom, all Asari had eidetic memory. Not perfect, and it sadly hadn’t affected her memories from Hazel, but fantastically good by most standards. Knowing that Momo’s Quirk let her come within spitting distance of that same level of memory retention, Rylia let her think for a moment. It only took those few heartbeats for Momo’s expression to shift, as she obviously thought back on the extensive, hand-written notes Rylia had given her about the games.

“Oh! The woman in charge of the Lazarus Project! As well as one of the higher ranking agents of Cerberus. You think she hasn’t been recruited yet?”

Rylia hadn’t been able to include *every* detail in what she’d written out for Momo, so she nodded and explained.

“I’m almost certain she hasn’t been. She originally went to them for protection for her and her sister, after they ran from Henry Lawson. There’s some risk of drawing Lawson the elder’s attention if we pick her up and shelter her...but he honestly doesn’t have much reach into Asari space. Given how deep into said space we are, if we’re careful it could take *years* for him to even figure out where she went. By which time we’ll be set up enough that it shouldn’t really matter.”

Momo pursed her lips, then nodded. Nevos was in the Silean Nebula, just about as physically far into the rim of the galaxy as the Citadel had explored. There were *multiple* Relays between it and even Inner Council Space, and the Arcturus Relay to Human space was clear on the other side of even that chunk of Council territory. The planet Nevos itself was also notably unimportant, mostly a resort and corporate world that *strongly* discouraged people poking their noses into business here.

Henry Lawson might be an influential businessman by *human* standards. But Nevos was ruled by *Asari* corporations, who’d been keeping everyone, up to and including the Salarian STG, away from their secrets for thousands of years. The chances he, or even Cerberus, had any penetration of Nevos was incredibly low.

Cerberus *might* have one or two minor agents looking into the bigger and more important corporations here. But even *they* probably weren’t paying an attention to a *sex toy manufacturer*. Even their branching out into medical applications was unlikely to draw immediate attention from anyone other than the Asari medical sector. Doubly so given how new that branching out was and the fact they hadn’t released any actual products yet.

Momo nodded again, not protesting the idea, but bringing up a pair of practical questions.

“How are you going to convince her you want to help, and what will you do with her if you can convince her?”

Thankfully, the questions were ones Rylia had already thought through. In fact, she sort of needed Momo to play along with one of them, which is why she’d brought them to her at all rather than acting immediately.

“For convincing her? I figured we can hit two birds with one stone by telling her we have reasons to hate Cerberus, and that she drew our attention since Henry Lawson is one

of their larger contributors. So far as I remember, that much is actually true, and it will likely turn her off joining Cerberus even if she turns us down. I don't think she ever knew about that little detail, with Cerberus having chosen to invest in her and ditch Henry Lawson as a backer in the process."

Momo hummed, considering, and proved just how smart she was, *again*, by realizing why Rylia was bringing this to her.

"You need me to be the injured party. An Asari business owner operating mostly within the Asari Republic, and with your former profession, wouldn't have any reason to be at odds with Cerberus. But since you set *my* identity up as having spent the last few years working for businesses in the Terminus Systems, it's extremely plausible that I have crossed paths with them and made enemies."

Rylia smiled and nodded enthusiastically, pleased that Momo had gotten there on her own.

"Yep! The fact you're a successful human businesswoman who had been operating in the Terminus makes you a highly probable target for their recruitment efforts. The fact that you *do* have issues with their methodology and want to annoy them even has the benefit of being true. Even if it's a more intellectual issue, rather than having had a run in with them."

Her chief minion snorted at that. Given the horrible shit Cerberus had gotten up to, or *would* get up to if they hadn't yet, any sane person would have an issue with them. Let alone someone who had been driven enough by a strong sense of justice to become a professional Hero.

"And the second part? She's only just barely eighteen. What are you planning to *do* with her?"

To that, Rylia shrugged.

"Honestly? I figured we let her sell her own usefulness. It will make the whole thing more believable, I think. We offered a chance to escape just to annoy Cerberus, but any help she wants us to give beyond that requires her to be useful to us. That's not how I honestly see it, of course. Given the background and paranoia she's coming from though, it will be *believable* to her. More so than the idea that someone just wants to help, at least."

Momo visibly thought that one over for a moment, before nodding. She glanced down at the dossier again and shrugged.

“She’s already a trained biotic with an advanced education. Certificates that easily equate to a Bachelor’s degree at eighteen, combined with biotic and firearms training. There’s a dozen places we could use her, and we already offer continuing education resources to our employees. Letting her pick a focus and convince us she’s a good fit should work. At minimum it denies her future expertise to Cerberus, with a good chance she’ll end up with a useful focus for our long-term goals, becoming a significant asset.”

Her face shifted into a grin as she got to the heart of the matter.

“Besides, you get to help her this way, and I recall you liked her in the games you played. What was it, that she’s ‘Badass, snarky, and has the ‘best ass in the Mass Effect series?’”

Rylia grinned, completely unrepentant as she nodded in enthusiastic agreement to that statement...

... ..

Momo frowned as her ‘boss,’ really more a friend at this point and possibly something a bit more, left her office in a rush. Rylia...hadn’t been looking great, despite putting on a good show. It wasn’t obvious. Not just because of the species differences either.

If Quirks had done one positive thing for her version of humanity, it was helping most of them evolve a far greater ability to pick up on emotional cues that didn’t rely on appearance. Just in her own class at UA, for example, they’d had someone made of rock, another with a raven’s head instead of human standard, and Tsuyu whose facial muscles had been far less mobile than normal. Nor had they been truly exceptional outliers. Mutation Quirks came in all shapes and sizes, and a couple of centuries of acclimatization had resulted in people adjusting.

No, Asari were downright easy to read compared to a lot of Heteromorphic Quirk holders. Even the Matriarchs with their supposedly-legendary poker faces were relatively easy for Momo to pick up cues from, though part of that was her own training. No, Rylia, fortunately for their goals yet unfortunately for others noticing when something was wrong, was something more problematic than merely ‘alien.’ She was a gifted *actor*. In truth, whether Rylia realized it or not, the stage had probably lost a once-in-a-century genius when it came to raw talent in that area. Something she’d realized when she dug into Rylia’s stream and realized just how *good* the woman was at drawing in her audience. All without the slightest bit of training.

It had explained a lot about how she’d gotten this far, honestly.

A normal Asari, even one that had merged with a human, likely wouldn't have been able to successfully hide all her operations to date. Whatever Rylia thought, she *hadn't* slipped below the radar of the people in power on Nevos. She'd just done such an insanely good job of acting out the role she was putting on, that of a tech genius Maiden that had hit on a good idea, that the attention had slipped back off of her. Virtually every Matron and Matriarch she'd approached for manufacturing deals or private investment had already known *exactly* who Rylia was. Her friend had just, almost unintentionally, pulled off a masterwork of acting that had them all firmly thinking they'd figured her out.

It wouldn't hold forever, of course, not once Rylia started broadening her scope.

That wasn't the point for the moment, though.

No, the worrying point *right now*, was that Rylia had looked rough around the edges *despite* how good of an actor she was. While part of that might be her feeling comfortable with Momo...she suspected it was far more a sign that her boss was beginning to crack a bit under the pressure. She had certainly seen the same sort of signs with people like Izuku, the sorts who were terrible at asking for help. For that matter, she'd seen it in other Pro Heroes and faced it herself, if to a lesser degree, when she'd first taken on the CEO mantle at Yaoyorozu Industries.

Given what they were up against, and the long slog they had if they were going to deal with it, something was going to have to be done about this. She was genuinely convinced that Rylia had the vision to help save the galaxy, but that wouldn't happen if she cracked under the pressure first. Pulling up her calendar, she blocked out the entirety of the next two days. Rylia was far more important than any of the meetings that she'd had scheduled...

Chapter 13: Relaxation and Planning

Rylia was bemused as she enjoyed the view. Not the spectacular view of the ocean they had from the private beach. Though that was also nice enough, too. No, she was significantly more interested in the fact that Momo was fully onboard with the fact Asari typically swam nude and was currently providing a glorious view as she walked away from Rylia over to their cooler. While Momo's boobs were one of the first things you noticed about her if *you had a pulse at all*, the rest of her was just as delightful. Including a toned ass you hated to see leave but loved watching walk away.

The fact that it was currently completely uncovered by anything but sunscreen only made the view more amazing. The fact she could *remember putting that sunscreen on it* made it even better.

Given the minimal to borderline nonexistent nudity taboo her species has as a general rule, and the fact they were a semi-aquatic species, swimming 'au naturel' was simply the norm. Momo, who had surprised her by picking up on Rylia's stress and aggressively insisted they 'take a day off,' hadn't so much as batted an eyelash at the idea of skinny dipping. For that matter, she'd barely blushed when she'd asked for Rylia's help 'doing her back,' with the sunscreen. Nor had she protested Rylia's hands...drifting a bit, in the process.

She supposed a lot of that might be due to the handful of 'encounters' they'd had while 'working on the product line.' Their initial 'testing' of the Nerostimulators 'for human use' had turned into a series of extremely charged mutual masturbation sessions as they 'tested new iterations and products' together. The excuse transparent, so much as the whole thing came off as an aggressively charged form of flirting, which only hadn't turned into more due to some level of hesitance on Momo's side.

Hesitance that seemed to have vanished when she wasn't paying attention, if the way *Momo* had flirted with *her* periodically today was any indication. The fact that said flirting had been done casually in the nude only reinforced the idea that it probably *wasn't* their 'encounters' that led to Momo being so comfortable sans clothing. Much more likely, Rylia thought, was that she was either effectively a nudist or, plausibly, a bit of an exhibitionist.

Possibly both, though she was leaning toward the latter, honestly. She'd seen the other girl preened a bit at attention more than once. Not obviously, not even seemingly *consciously*, but she'd certainly done it.

Honestly, it was a very Asari-like mindset.

Which was, of course, why Rylia had directed them towards a *private* beach. Momo hadn't seemed to even consider that she'd have been drowning in Maidens if she went naked to any of the public beaches. Humans were still the latest craze for younger Asari, given they'd only popped up on the galactic scene in the last decade. A human that was utterly gorgeous, even by Asari standards, with seemingly far less of the 'silly prudishness' of other races?

Poor Momo would have been *swarmed*.

Which Rylia would not tolerate! Momo was *her* Momo, at least until Momo said otherwise! Those other hussy Asari could stay away! Particularly when she was finally starting to properly respond to flirting with more than blushes! Hmmm, come to think of it, they'd already kinda done a lot of the typical 'date' ideas while she was familiarizing Momo with the galaxy at large. Just how was she supposed to properly ask Momo out, when that was true?

Puzzling over that conundrum, Rylia leaped back on the beach towel and watched Momo *bounce* as she lightly jogged back over with a new set of drinks for them both. Huh, hadn't Momo also been the one to set up the cooler? Somehow, Rylia suspected the unexpectedly sneaky girl hadn't set it up so far away from them for no reason...

... ..

It turned out that Rylia needn't have worried about how to ask Momo on a date, as the other woman had beat her to it by asking Rylia to join her at a theater production she'd wanted to see. She'd even, seeing Rylia's uncertainty, blatantly stated that 'yes, I mean as a date.' Rylia had been poleaxed by the bluntness, frozen for just a moment, though Momo's small grin at having successfully caused Rylia's brain to crash had gotten Rylia.exe to reboot rapidly. Blushing for the first time from something *Momo* had done, instead of making Momo blush, had been unacceptable!

So she'd kissed her.

What? It had been a panic reaction! One that had worked, too, since it got the blush back on Momo's face instead of hers, where it belonged!

Momo had asked on their way to dinner, which had been a romantic private table for two that told Rylia the entire thing had been planned from the start. The theater production that had followed had been immensely enjoyable as well. It was something that would have, a decade ago, been an extremely unusual choice of entertainment for a Maiden. Yet, in the last several years a number of Human musicals had been adapted for Asari audiences, and *many* of the more famous productions of the 21st century and beyond had proven wildly successful with Maidens. *Wicked*, for example, once adjusted a bit for Asari culture, had been a smash success due to its themes. As had other 'classics' like *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*.

Thankfully, Shakespeare, the utter hack who had only gotten popular due to appealing to the lowest common denominator of his time, had not done well with anyone but the Elchor so far. Rylia, or more accurately Hazel, deeply approved of her fellow Asari having better taste than that. 'The Bard's' work was an insult to actual competent playwrights through the ages, after all. Sadly, she knew the works not doing as well were

mostly the result of Asari having their own equivalents of his tragedies. It was the *Musicals* that were a bit out of the ordinary for Asari, having drawn in a much younger crowd than the Matrons and Matriarchs that had previously dominated Asari theaters.

Pleasingly and somewhat fittingly given their own entrepreneurial bent, Momo had picked an adaptation of *The Greatest Showman* for them to attend. Another musical whose Asari adaptation deeply appealed to Maidens and had gotten rave reviews, capturing much of the energy of being a young Asari. It had been incredibly well done, as might be expected of a species that went big into the arts, and the pair had deeply enjoyed the show.

Now, as a negligee-clad Momo shared Rylia's bed, she had to admit she felt massively better from the day off. They hadn't done anything *physical*, as it were, despite the fact they were sleeping together. Yet there was a *contentless* and monetary peace in having Momo curled up in her arms that bled away her stress. Cuddling was, she idly reflected as she drifted off to sleep, honestly far more intimate than any amount of sex. Even better, there was a *lot* of Momo to cuddle, in all the best ways.

Not that she was going to say no to sex with Momo if things developed to that point! And she was pretty sure they were now firmly drifting that way...

... ..

The next morning, after Momo's intervention left her feeling at least a *little* less overwhelmed, if still more than a bit anxious deep down, Rylia faced the proverbial music about what had been causing the stress in the first place.

Of course, the fact that she was 'facing the music' to a Momo who was wearing nothing but a Thessian Silk robe that clung to every curve made it a little easier. As had been the somewhat humorous discovery that Momo could manage to burn toast when she'd earnestly tried to help with breakfast. Apparently, cooking wasn't a skill the wealthy girl had ever picked up, always having had a staff to cook for her. Something that was true even now, as the high-end luxury section of the archology they lived in had kitchen services that would deliver a wide array of freshly cooked food. Much like a high-end hotel, really, despite the fact they were permanent residences.

Thankfully, both as Rylia and Hazel, she herself had been a half-decent cook and had managed to save breakfast without needing to make use of those services. It had been enjoyable watching Momo intently study what she was doing, even if the end result after they'd finished the meal had been her...new girlfriend? Hopefully her new girlfriend. Even if the end result had been said hopeful girlfriend pinning her down about what had been bothering her. Gently and without accusation, but firmly. Rylia, having desperately *wanted*

to talk about it, in truth, had folded almost instantly and spent the last three quarters of an hour pouring it all out in a barely half-coherent babble.

“So, I guess I was just...overwhelmed by the size of what we’re doing. I’m not really anything special and I have no idea why the Marketplace chose me. There’s just...*so much to do*, you know?”

Momo nodded, thankfully without showing the slightest trace of judgement. Not even after the babbling and a few embarrassing tears.

“I get it, that sort of Imposter Syndrome was extremely common in the *better* Professional Heroes, and the task before us is far larger than anything they ever had to face. Yet, I will point out a flaw in your logic. Specifically, you *are* something special, Rylia. Perhaps not in your background, but certainly in your adaptability. The number of even my fellow Pro Heroes who could have taken in the scale of what they faced and effectively *hit the ground running*? Tiny. There were perhaps one or two in my entire graduating class at UA that might have been able to pull something like that off, and I certainly *wasn’t* one of them.”

Rylia leveled a look of pure disbelief at Momo, but the other woman only smirked and shook her head.

“I wasn’t. Not at that time, at least. After running Yaoyorozu Industries for several years? Perhaps. Even right now however, as I am, I would have lacked the other important spark you’ve brought to this. Lateral thinking. I likely would have aimed to either alert the powers that be and hoped for the best, or built a more traditional military-focused industry.”

Momo shrugged, which did distracting things to her silk-covered chest and threatened to split the deep V in her robe. Yet, despite her eyes following that enticing motion, Rylia was still riveted by Momo’s words and the utter sincerity behind them.

“At absolute best, I might have tried to reproduce something like the Hero System and gambled that creating Heroes would be a force multiplier on top of everything else. Instead of any of those things, within just *days*, you came up with and executed the start of a long-term plan that allowed you to build up while staying successfully staying under the radar. A plan which I genuinely believe stands a *very* good chance at manipulating the entire galaxy into preparing itself for what’s to come, whether it wants to or not. That’s *incredible*, Rylia.”

Blushing at the slight awe in Momo’s voice and admiration in her expression, Rylia tried to speak, failed the first two attempts, then tried to demur.

“It...wasn’t *that* crazy. I mean, I just put together the pieces that were already there. Original Rylia’s engineering talent and profession, and the outside-context knowledge and tech I and the Marketplace brought to that. Anyone could have done that...”

Momo’s head shake of denial was *firm*. As was the finger that ended up pressed against Rylia’s lips and Momo leaned forward and silenced her.

“No, they couldn’t have. Yes, *some* people could have, but certainly not ‘anyone.’ That sort of lateral thinking approach to a problem is *far* rarer than you seem to think. Combining that with someone who *didn’t panic* and simply threw themselves into creating a solution? The Omniversal Marketplace was obviously given to *you specifically* for a very good reason.”

Seeing Rylia visibly trying to come up with a counter-argument, Momo firmly chopped a hand across the attempt. The fact that leaning back to do so finally caused her robe to give up and allow a nipple slip failed to detract from the moment.

“The rest? Logistics, expertise, and material? *The Marketplace provides those things*. Including people, as evidenced by yours truly. They chose someone who had the sort of off-kilter thought process required to envision a path to victory, then gave you access to the tools and *people* to make it possible to execute it. So far, you’re doing a stellar job, from everything I can see.”

Soundlessly working her jaw for a few long moments, Rylia took a deep breath and soaked in how serious Momo was about that. Maybe...just maybe...she was right? With another deep, bracing breath, she did her best to accept that. Solidifying the thought just a bit shakily, she pushed forward with determination. Maybe Momo was right. But if she was, then it was time to be about doing something about the situation again.

“Alright. I’m not *entirely* sure I believe that. But I’ll trust maybe there is something to it. In that case, though, there’s a decision we need to make. We *clearly* need more help, and I’ve got enough Karma points banked now to summon another Tier 2 helper. So, let’s go over the possibilities and figure out who it should be...”

Momo smiled in clear approval and nodded, bouncing a little in a way that made Rylia’s eye track downward and lock onto that errant nipple. Momo followed her gaze, then rolled her eyes at what she saw. Much to Rylia’s disappointment, she close the robe up again. Oh well, probably better off not being distracted, with the seriousness of the topic at hand.

“Okay, lay out what you think we need most and I’ll try to help you sort through the options.”

Rylia nodded and flexed her biotics, pulling one of the high-security and *not-native* datapads she'd started inputting details into during her crazed attempt to map everything. In some ways less efficient than an omni-tool, she'd started using them for the same reason as the non-native, high-security holo display she was still working on completing. The very fact that the architecture was so alien to anything the locals used added an extra layer of protection, as did inputting everything in Galactic Basic which only she, Momo, and the droids understood.

This particular datapad contained a number of dossiers she'd copied from the Marketplace, with exactly the idea of getting Momo's input on the people in question. She still hadn't found any way for Momo to directly see the Marketplace screens, so it was the best alternative she'd been able to come up with.

"Right. There's a *bunch* of stuff we need. But I think additional help in Research and Development or someone to start running clandestine operations are the two biggest. I've got shortlists for both, along with a few other options that would be generally useful and possibly cover multiple angles. Both of us could really use a reliable personal assistant, for example. Though that might be a job better fit for a droid of some sort."

Momo was the perfect audience, focused and asking insightful questions, as she and Rylia worked their way through the shortlist dossiers...

Chapter 14: Second Summons

"Relax, Rylia. We spent hours going over the options, then had a week longer to think about it in further detail while you got an identity set up for her. I doubt there's any such thing as a *perfect* choice, and she covers a wide breadth of skills we can seriously use."

Rylia nodded jerkily as she waited for the final minutes of the timer on the 'Help' summoning door to run down. Apparently, it wasn't *actually* twenty-four hours from the side of the person they were summoning. It was something that had come up in idle conversation with Momo, who had experienced the other side of things. Momo had been given an two entire weeks to prep, not a mere twenty-four hours. There was apparently some time compression shenanigans going on.

Which, given that the current years were in no way matched between Momo's reality and this one, made a lot of sense. Likewise, the options of people she could choose from ranged pretty wildly over a spectrum that covered thousands of years. It made her feel considerably less guilty at pulling someone away from their life, knowing that the

Marketplace at least gave the summoned person time to put their affairs in order. Though it *did* make her a little curious why there was a wait timer at all. She'd poked around in the system and not been able to find any sort of answer, having eventually been forced to give up despite considerable curiosity over the reasoning.

"I'm just still not completely sure it was more important to get more help on the tech and science side than it was to get a shadow operations expert. What with the possibility of taking over the Broker Network on the table. As well as Cerberus to look into."

Momo nodded, far calmer than Rylia was, sitting and sipping tea while her boss paced.

"I understand. As you, yourself pointed out though, a lot of initial data gathering can be done by cloaked probes and such, and nothing has come close to beating the R3s on the data defense side. She's got the experience with small craft and robotics development, *including* probes, to help with that part of things. She also has experience with helping against galaxy-spanning threats, even if not in the tactical or strategic sense. We both agreed that bringing her in early would be a case of a snowball rolling down hill, which is exactly the sort of thing we badly need."

Rylia nodded and forced herself to stop pacing, knowing Momo was right. Besides, there were only thirty seconds left! Best to put on a strong front! Slapping her cheeks with both hands, she put on her best smile and turned to face the door hanging in midair. After a few agonizingly long final seconds...it opened with little fanfare and a gorgeous five-foot-eight blonde, appearing to be in her early twenties, stepped through.

"Hello, Kara! Or do you prefer Doctor Zor-El? Or one of your aliases? Whichever you'd prefer is fine! I'm Rylia, the person who got your contract from the Marketplace. Momo's the one sipping tea! She's like you, someone I summoned through the Marketplace to help stop a race of horrible, run-away A.I.s that have been culling organic life in this galaxy for hundreds of thousands of years!"

Kara Zor-El blinked, seeming taken aback by Rylia's statement, even as the door behind her faded.

"Um, Kara is fine? I'm not big on formalities, really. You...do know that I'm not a front-line Hero that can punch galactic scale problems in the face, right? That's more my cousin's thing..."

Momo chuckled, putting down her tea and interjecting before Rylia could say anything else.

“She knows. The Marketplace gives a pretty solid overview of anyone that has a contract with it. The threat is, hopefully, at least a decade and change away. We need your R&D and scientific expertise to help build defenses, not someone who can punch their way through all their problems. That would be worse than useless given the spans of space involved.”

Kara’s shoulders, which had tightened a bit at the information deluge, relaxed. Rylia, realizing she’d perhaps jumped the poor woman with a bit too much information too fast, hastily backtracked.

“What Momo said! The crisis isn’t immediate and I shouldn’t have rushed! Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty of time, and your first week or so will just be settling into a new legal identity we have set up for you. There will be plenty of time to cover the scary stuff and challenges later. For now, a tour and basics!”

Recentering her thoughts and kicking herself for not going with a more calm lead in, Rylia tried again.

“First off, as you might have guessed, I’m not human...anymore, at least. Bit of a complicated case that, but for now just know I’m an Asari. You’re on the Asari colony world of Nevos, in the Earth year 2167 CE. Humanity *is* around, by the by, not just Momo. They are pretty new on the galactic scene, but not nearly as much so as the version of Earth you most recently resided on. Krypton, I’ve afraid, either never existed here...or might have been wiped out in an earlier cycle by the Reapers.”

Rylia winced at that, given it could very well be true and could be a sensitive topic for Kara. She quickly steered away from it.

“Anyway, we have plenty of briefing material for you, and an entire day to get you oriented a bit. After that, I’ll still be available and you’ll mostly be working with me anyway. Momo is a bit busy running the company we’re using to fund our efforts...”

Easily looping an arm around one of Kara’s, Rylia channeled her best extrovert energy and guided the slightly-bewildered looking blonde to a seat. They had time, stuff to go over, and snacks to do it with! Time to get started bringing the newbie onboard!

... ..

The last few days had been a bit of a wild ride for Kara. Which, given her life so far, *was* saying quite a lot. Saying goodbye to what family and friends she still had back home had been a bit rough. As much, admittedly, because of how stilted some of those goodbyes had been. Clark had never quite forgiven her for making the deal she did with the Omniversal Market, feeling that even bringing him back from being controlled by Darkseid

hadn't justified making a deal with 'an Eldrich Power.' He persisted in always trying to protect her, despite the fact that she was originally meant to protect *him*.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad, if that piece of Gold Kryptonite hadn't lodged in her ship on the way to Earth. With years of exposure to it before she'd ever arrived, there had been no chance of her developing the powers her cousin held. Something which had, much to her frustration, caused him to treat her like spun glass. It was extra stupid, in her opinion, since *she* was the normal one by Kryptonian standards, not him. The House of El had always and ever been *scientists*, not warriors. Kal El was something of an aberration that likely would have horrified many of his ancestors.

Nor, unfortunately, had Clark been the only one she'd had a bit of a *strained* relationship with. Barbara had been more than a friend for years, and catching her sleeping with Nightwing, even if she claimed it had been under the influence of one of Ivy's drugs, had caused that relationship to fracture. It had broken down completely when Kara had taken *drastic* measures to deal with some of Superman's villains while he was under Darkseid's control.

Drastic measures which had also soured much of the Justice League on her, given that she hadn't hesitated to have the robot versions of her cousin she'd created kill some of the worst repeat offenders. She *still* didn't know why they were upset she'd killed Luthor, given how many problems he'd caused. Lobo, she could admit she'd killed mostly for her own satisfaction, thank you very much, even if it had been very hard to figure out how to make sure he'd *stay dead*. Given the massive list of intergalactic crimes he had, she was very off put that they'd taken issue with her doing that either, though.

Well, most of them had taken issue with it.

Diana and Hawkwoman had been fully on board and were much of the reason the League hadn't tried to arrest her or some other idiot idea afterward. The fact that they had seriously considered that as *an option at all* was why she had a very poor opinion of the League as a whole, and had generally stayed away from them. Something which, in turn, had soured a few of her other friendships. She'd never quite gotten good at interacting with normal humans, so with the majority of Heroes shying away from her, the last several years had gotten a bit lonely.

Yet for all that her few goodbyes had been very awkward, she had to admit that the last few days had been their own special kind of odd. Not bad, just a bit surreal as she adjusted to her new reality. The big threat they were up against was certainly serious, and would have been even back home. Yet it was the sort of thing she was used to considering, even if she'd rarely been the one people leaned on for solutions to such things.

No what had her feeling a bit off kilter was the differences between this reality and the one she'd known. It was just...*different*...in so many ways that she had trouble knowing where to start. Some of them had rather horrifying implications that she wasn't sure Rylia and Momo were quite able to grasp from their own frames of reference, too.

For example, the galaxy was much emptier than it should have been.

The total number of worlds and races in this 'Mass Effect' universe was *far* too low. Part of that might be that they really only had access to a small percentage of the galaxy via the Mass Relays and a rather limited form of FTL used to move in the bubble of systems immediately around each one. Yet, if the space outside the Relays wasn't mostly empty, then other races should have developed enough to *find* Citadel Space. Personally, she was horrifyingly certain that one of Rylia's idle musing was probably true.

That the 'Reapers' *moved* the Mass Relays between cycles, to focus them on those species who were most likely to reach spacefaring levels within a set number of Harvests.

Doing that would explain why only a few lost civilizations at a time were ever noticed. There *should* have been far more than just the Protheans, Inusannons, and one or two more minor powers. At least, based on the model of commonality for life-bearing worlds which Kara was familiar with.

For each of those bubbles that currently had a Relay, she was distressingly sure there were *dozens* more that were currently off the Relay network. Victims of previous harvests that the Reapers moved the Relays away from so that the ruins of so many civilizations didn't give the pattern away. That *might* present some opportunities, along with the horror. But that remained to be seen.

Other things about this universe bothered her too, of course. Absent a group like the Guardians of the Universe, the overall level of civilizations here were far more barbaric. Life was cheaper, with even the more peaceful races like Asari disregarding loss of life on scales that would have horrified most of the civilizations back home. Not all, of course. Monstrous empires like The Reach would have slotted in quite well with the Batarians. Though the mere fact the Batarians were allowed to behave like that while nominally being part of Citadel Space was disgusting. Never mind the levels of depravity apparently common in the Terminus.

Kara was fully onboard with the plan to take *that* area over, even if the Reapers proved not to exist.

Bonus points if they did away with the Batarian Hegemony too.

All of which made Rylia's flamboyant personality and the fact that they were currently funding the effort to save the galaxy with a *Sex Toy Empire* induce a *very* surreal aspect to the last few days. Though, admittedly, she *was* intrigued by some of those toys. She'd only been seventeen when Krypton had gone boom and hadn't ever worked up the nerve to try some of the more *exotic* options that her own people produced. Nor had she quite been able to bring herself to make some of them, despite more than a little interest. It had seemed like too frivolous a use of her knowledge of Kryptonian technology, despite how fun it likely would have been to try some of them with Barbara.

Well...maybe she could suggest a couple, in order to expand their catalog?

Blushing at the thought, Kara shook it off as she finished tweaking the Rapid Learning Device that Rylia had purchased from the Marketplace via trade. It hadn't been a *bad* design, but it was a bit kluged together, and Kara knew how to make better versions. Just tweaking this one for now, so she could absorb more information and get up to date faster, was enough. Though, in the future, she'd suggest they redesign a better option themselves. Both for bringing more people up to speed, and possibly trading back through the Marketplace for other things they needed...

<<End of Current Content>>