

Stripper with a System

(Chapters 18-20)

Novus Peregrine

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

Chapter 18 – To Replace a Monster

May, 2168 CE – Nevos

“You want to use a *Batman* to replace the Shadow Broker?”

The incredulity in Kara's voice was thick enough to make her opinion on Rylia's sanity clearly obvious. Which was super rude! Also probably fair, depending on what her Batman had been like. Rylia suspected she was missing some context.

“Nope! I want to use a *Bruce Wayne*. An older one, in his early seventies, who's already long since passed on the mantle of *Batman* to someone else. His age is a bit of an issue, but his mind is perfectly sharp still, and even our current version of a regen treatment can bring him back down to his forties physically.”

Kara looked *very much* like that wasn't the relevant point here, though it was Momo who asked a question.

“Ah, sorry? But who is this Bruce Wayne/Batman fellow? What makes him a good fit, or a bad one for that matter?”

The surprised expression on Kara's face was pretty funny. Also sort of understandable, given how many worlds Batman existed in some form or another. Either as a real person or a fictional character. Still, Kara's surprise was useful, as it let Rylia press forward with her arguments and context for Kara, while also getting Momo up to speed. It's not like she hadn't expected *some* debate, and she *had* thought her options through.

“He's what you'd call a Quirkless hero in the multiverse Kara is from. No powers, no gene augmentation, no super soldier serum. Just high-level martial arts, tech savvy, and *extremely* good detective skills. He's got a high level of understanding of the underworld, unshakable morals, and experience helping run massive, sprawling organizations. Both corporations and, in this specific case, a large-scale hero organization”

Momo was nodding along, as that was obviously ticking a number of boxes that made sense to her. Kara had recovered at this point, however, and took the moment Rylia paused to interject her problem with this.

“The *unshakable morals* bit is the problem! He’s a ‘no killing the evil psychopaths’ sort! Hell, he had more issue with me killing Luthor than almost anyone else in the Justice League! If not for Batgirl being my ex and going to bat for me, he might have tried to *arrest* me!”

Trying *really hard* not to giggle at the unintentional ‘Batgirl going to bat’ joke, knowing that it wouldn’t help at the moment, Rylia pushed forward a datapad with Bruce’s information on it. She used the moment where Kara and Momo both looked down at it to get control of herself before speaking.

“N-normally, Kara would be right. I suspect *her* particular Batman might have been one of the more extreme ones if he talked about arrest for that, but pretty much all of them, including this Bruce, had personal ‘no kill’ rules. The *vast majority* of them don’t extend that personal rule to everyone else, though. They regularly work with people like Jason Blood and John Constantine, or even versions of Wonder Woman who still freely uses a sword. For that matter, most versions of Aquaman are rulers with an army that doesn’t exactly stick to tasers and tickle batons.”

Kara was *reluctantly* nodding at that, indicating that even her Bruce Wayne worked with some of those people. Though not Wonder Woman from the brief look of surprise at that idea. As she picked up the datapad, still looking dubious, Rylia carried on.

“More importantly, this particular Bruce Wayne was from a world where he *had* to be a bit looser and less anal about that sort of thing a bit. It had worse luck with a few major threats, some before he was even born. Which *did* cause tech to advance faster, but did so at the cost of being a bit more...violently dystopian. Not quite as bad as the Cyberpunk world we pulled some of our medical tech from, but bad enough that he had to *adjust* a bit. He held fast to his personal no-kill rule, but didn’t complain when the rest of the League didn’t.”

Rylia pointed to the dataslate Kara was now reading his file from.

“He even taught his successor it was okay to kill *if necessary*, he just held them to an extremely high standard of *necessary*. He focused on making sure they never let it become about *expediency*, much like your own Hero System tended to emphasize, Momo. Which is sort of what we need. The Broker Network can’t abruptly shift to squeaky clean or someone will realize a major shift happened. We need someone who can create the *justifications* to slowly shift to a ‘kill only when you *absolutely can’t* do it clean’ reputation.”

Kara was still frowning a bit as she read through the dossier Rylia had painstakingly copied from the Marketplace. Her expression was losing the stubborn incredulity as she read, though, which Rylia took as a good sign. Having largely said her piece, she leaned back as Kara finished reading and passed the secure slate to Momo to read in turn. Expression visibly reluctant, she spoke again.

“Okay, this Bruce *is*...different, than the one I knew. I also wasn’t super close with my Earth’s version or anything, so it probably won’t cause friction. I’m still not sure even this version can bring himself to be *pragmatic* enough to run the Shadow Broker’s network immediately. Maybe he could handle it *after* the overhaul. But I don’t think he’d be able to stop himself from changing too much, too fast. Even at the cost of parts of the Network breaking off.”

Rylia’s own expression tugged down in a frown at that, as that...wasn’t an unreasonable concern. Personally, from the exhaustive list of options she’d gone through, she thought he was the best *long-term* solution. Power corrupts very easily, and Bruce Wayne was one of the *very few* people in the omniverse that typically managed to avoid that. At least for the most part. He was still mortal and some of it crept it, but it was usually minor and he usually caught it himself.

They were going to *have* to give a great deal of operational leeway and authority over to whoever replaced the Shadow Broker. There just wasn’t any practical way to be constantly looking over their shoulder, given the scope of operations. Even with Momo, Rylia was still *somewhat* giving oversight to what she was up to, despite the fact that she now trusted Momo completely. While she would most certainly be involved with whoever took over from the Broker, she *couldn’t* spare enough attention to seriously check their work. Not in any detail. She, as well as Momo and Kara for that matter, simply had too much else on their plates.

That meant they needed someone reliably moral and resistant to corruption, yet who could manage some pretty dark dealings on a galactic scale. Sure, the intention was to steadily get rid of the darkest bits of the Shadow Broker operations, but the ideal was to do it in a way that made it look like such was just ‘good business.’ Increasing profits and reducing risk to the network by modifying operating patterns.

Which was honestly true. Truly successful organized crime tended to avoid the *really* nasty stuff, as such were the sorts of crime that attracted the most dangerous attention. Information brokering, racketing, bribery, extortion, and drugs? Barely rated attention from more than local cops. Trafficking was iffy, depending on *who* you were trafficking. Kidnapping, assassination, and terrorism were right out for most sane organized crime.

Getting a SPECTRE on your ass for manufacturing bioweapons was stupid. Which was part of why, so far as she knew, the *current* Shadow Broker actually didn't mess with that sort of extremism. Though he did go into kidnapping, trafficking and assassination, which weren't the best ideas.

"I believe you're both overlooking the obvious solution here."

Rylia and Kara both twitched, having been lost in their own heads, nearly having forgotten that Momo was still reading over the dossier. Curious, but knowing Momo almost always had good ideas, Rylia focused on her.

"How so?"

Momo set the secure dataslate into the equally secure holoprojector on the coffee table between them. Rylia hadn't bothered with it, since there were no graphics to display, just a text file which she'd transcribed from the Marketplace. Momo brought it up anyway, displaying Bruce's details, highlighting a specific section.

"It is obvious to me, looking over his history, that this 'Batman' is every bit as much a *trainer* as he is a detective or administrator. Even after he switched from being an active field hero to running the behind the scenes admin of both his own team and this 'Justice League,' he continued to mentor new heroes. Often ones with *troubled* histories."

Momo looked over at Rylia, lips quirked into a grin.

"I *know* you, Rylia. You make huge lists, then pare them down systematically based on pros and cons as part of your decision making loop. I'd bet heavily that we can find someone on your final sets of short lists that we can pair *with* this Bruce Wayne. Someone who has a more dubious background and can handle the shadier stuff, yet is young enough that 'Batman' will want to mentor them away from that. Have them work together, splitting the massive load that the Broker Network is in the first place, with Bruce mentoring the second person. By the time they adopt his morality, if they do at all, they'll have had time to adjust the network to something they can both live with."

Kara was *staring* at Momo with her mouth a little agape, even as Rylia's mind immediately called up those final short lists. Momo *was* right about her methodology, after all. No one came to mind off the very final list, since it had been filtered heavily for the unshakable moral stance thing, but the one before that...

"You want to *trick* Batman using his mentoring instincts?"

Ah, Kara had gotten over her surprise, though Momo was quick to deny her thoughts.

“No. Mr. Wayne is clearly the sort of man that would see right through that. We’ll be entirely up front about why we’re doing it, complete with our concerns that some of the initial work won’t be compatible with his morality. Possibly even with a file handed to him on the individual he’ll be working with.”

That comment instantly made the choice obvious. There *was* someone who’d made it at least close to Rylia’s final cuts, and whose background was *exactly* the sort of ‘tragic past’ that would likely pull on Batman’s mentoring/found family instincts *hard*.

“Lucyna Kushinada. Much better known as simply Lucy.”

Rylia reached around to remove the data slate, taking it in hand and quickly accessing a keyboard feature. This would be faster with an omni-tool, at least one of *their* omni-tools, since they’d modified them all to project keyboards *out* so you could type on them with both hands. You know, rather than leaving them on one arm like seemingly every other dumb fuck in this galaxy.

Yet, none of them trusted anything locally sourced with *anything* related to the Marketplace. The secure data slate was a military model purchased from a Star Wars universe. It didn’t use *anything* recognizable to local systems. Not the architecture, not the programming language, not even the *keyboard* language. Given it would thus take her a few minutes to move the basics of Lucy’s profile to the data slate, she spoke up to give them the basics verbally.

“Lucy *is* from the ‘Cyberpunk’ universe we’ve gotten some of our cybernetics and biosculpting tech from. She was, until she made a deal with the System, an Edgerunner. Essentially a mercenary that performed jobs for ‘Fixers,’ a combination of information broker and middleman for merc contracts. Lucy herself is an elite ‘netrunner,’ a cybernetically enhanced hacker capable of keeping up with an AI. She has a lot of underworld knowledge, originally a corporate family background, and her being a netrunner left her with more *general* knowledge of how large scale ‘corpo’ operations work.”

Momo hummed, nodding and already putting two and two together.

“I take it you ended up eliminating her from the list both because she wasn’t quite solid enough on the moral side *and* didn’t have the same degree of high-level administration experience? Compared to someone like Mr. Wayne, that is.”

Rylia nodded, even as she continued typing.

“Yes. Technically, Brucie boy actually falls short on the pure multitasking and admin side compared to a few others. Dragon, a full-blown AGI who acted for decades as a heroine, beat him like a drum in that respect. She lacked his familiarity with low-level crime

operations, has the same moral issues only worse, and might be vulnerable to Reaper tech. So he beat her out. Our ex-Batman has the closest to the right *combination* of characteristics, yet Kara is right that he might have problems all on his own.”

Rylia finished her high-speed typing and slotted the data slate back into the table. It projected a much more basic file, since she hadn’t had time to transferring *everything*. Still, it held the highlights of her pros and cons for Lucy, along with some basic general info about his skills and experience. She could fill the rest out faster by talking.

“Lucy is actually pretty solidly moral by Edgerunner standards, but those standards are sometimes low enough that the devil uses the bar as a limbo pole in hell.”

That comment got a surprised snort out of Kara, causing Rylia to grin.

“Thing is though, Lucy *hated it*. Hated the corps, hated the way her world was. When she showed talent for netrunning, she was railroaded into working for a megacorp called Arasaka as a kid. Thrown into an extremely dangerous type of netrunning before she was even a teen. Their group of talented kids was *literally* put up against rogue AIs in the Deep Net, getting killed off one by one, before managing to rebel.”

Momo and Kara both looked *appalled*, as they should. They were getting the cliff notes version and it was *so much worse* the more you dug into it. Even the abbreviated version would give them a decent idea, though.

“Lucy’s own father was the one to throw her into the program. Something he did because a 7-year-old Lucy hacked his terminal and found out what sort of monster he’d been working for Arasaka. She was a genuinely good kid and turned rebellious after having that image of her father shattered. She tried to run away repeatedly, but kept getting brought back, until he threw her into the program. Thing is, even after everything that happened to her, she held onto a solid general decency pretty well, even after becoming an Edgerunner. Yet...”

Kara, actually knew more about the particular world in question than Momo, since she’d been interested in where the advanced cybernetics came from. She grimaced as it was *her* turn to put two and two together.

“I remember that world. Casual murder and *insanely* low cultural value of life. Even if she’d fundamentally decent at the core, you’re afraid the very environment she was raised in, combined with the things she had to do, would make her prone to Slippery Slope Syndrome.”

Expression twitching at *hearing* the capitals in that name and *really* wandering how that had become official nomenclature for Kara, Rylia forced herself not to ask. Not now, at least. The descriptive name certainly got the concept across.

“Pretty much. I think she’d likely have been fine in the short term, but wasn’t so sure in the long term. Combined with her high-level management of groups being lacking, she got cut two rounds back. She made it that far on all her other skills, though. Hell, she’d probably even make an insanely good field operative if Bruce needed one, after some training by him.”

Mentally picturing Lucy in a tight-leather Batsuit both made Rylia grin *and* feel even better about this idea!

“Anyway, you understand Bats a bit better than me, do you think...?”

Kara snorted at having that question directed at her.

“Oh, she is 120% *exactly* the sort any hero-side Bruce wouldn’t be able to leave alone. Doubly so since it looks like she’s barely twenty and had to start running from the corps at fourteen. She’ll absolutely get folded into the BatFam, no matter how hard she protests. If you think she’ll work to cover the morality issues up front? Which, going by her kill count, I’d have to agree with I think. Than this...might actually work. Momo is right that Bruce will see right through it, but that doesn’t mean he’ll fight it. Particularly if we’re up front about it.”

Shaking her head, Kara’s face twisted into a wry smile.

“Actually, I suspect it will make him legitimately respect you for covering the bases and manipulating him in a way he’d agree with. Given that I can’t *wait* to see his expression when he finds out where our funding is coming from, that initial respect might just be important, too.”

As she tried to imagine that herself, Rylia couldn’t have stopped the laugh the mental image drew from her if she’d tried. She was going to get to tell *Batman* they were funding a plan to do galactic conquering for the good of the galaxy by selling *sex toys*! This was going to be *awesome*!

Chapter 19 – Creeping Changes

April, 2168 CE – Arcturus Station

“So you see, these little exercises are *super* useful for biotics of all species! To be honest, from talking with our guests, it’s become clear that such is likely even more true for non-Asari. Would you agree with that Petdoria?”

Jane Shepard watched the as the Turian guest on the stream considered the question for a moment, flanges moving in a way she was *pretty sure* indicated careful thought.

“I can’t say for sure, of course. I admit I can see the value, though. I hadn’t even *realized* that I could do things like that with my implant offline. I mean, I knew super minor telekinesis was possible. Doing that on accident is usually how biotics are identified in the first place for most species, right?”

The Turian, female from the voice if nothing else, frowned and looked at the common mechanical puzzle device that Rylia had been showing the use of as a control exercise. Taloned fingers reached toward it, twisting, and the pieces shifted. The Turian shook her head and looked a little...awed?

“I always thought *control* required an implant. That I didn’t have enough juice to pull that off without it. But I *know* I couldn’t have done that before you walked me through the control exercises with my implant *off*. The amp spikes too much power into the biotics...or so I thought. Spirits, just a few reps and my control is better than I thought it ever could be. I’m going...I’m going to have to tell *someone* in a command position about that. Hell if I know who though.”

The Asari, who Jane was pretty certain was now her new favorite streamer, was seemingly unbothered by the fact that she’d apparently just blown her guest’s mind. She grinned impishly at the camera.

“See! Now even the Turian Hierarchy Cabals might end up watching my stream! Well, the ones that don’t already do so for the ~fun~ bits!”

That startled a laugh out of the still-amazed looking Turian, and her flanges moved in what Jane was almost certain was a Turian grin. Of course, *she* was a bit busy blushing too. There *might* be more than one reason that this Rylia woman was her new favorite streamer. She hadn’t quite been aware she was *into* girls before she’d seen some of that *other* content. Did Asari count as girls? She didn’t know, and it was something to deal with later, not now! She was looking for tips on Biotics!

“Well, I’ve got a few more exercises like this, and I’ve even found a human biotic to test some of my exercises! Though they don’t want to appear on stream, more’s the pity. Anyway, look forward to a few more videos on the subject from me! I know there isn’t a lot

of information out there on this, since we Asari take it for granted rather than teaching it, and other races all get stuck on the idea of needing implants which you can't get safely until you stop growing. Hopefully, this helps some of you out there!"

The stream quickly ended, with the usual entreaties to like and subscribe and such. Something Jane did without hesitation. Though she made sure to only do so for the Biotics and Tech channels in case her mom looked later. Not the...other stuff. Blushing again, she shut down the streaming service and thought about the lesson, as well as about where she could find a similar puzzle cube.

Ironically, she'd found the stream because she'd been researching *implants* and *amps*, rather than looking for tips on learning Biotics. She'd only been exposed to more eezo in that accident a month ago and was still stuck on Arcturus while they made sure there were no complications, rather than traveling aboard ship with her mom. Or, you know, no complications beyond fairly strong biotic inclination manifesting in a way the docs were sure was permanent.

She'd known from her mom's stories that she'd been exposed in utero, and showed signs of biotics as a baby that had faded. Apparently a *second* exposure had done the job of making them stick, though. Which was *kinda cool*, and *kinda terrifying*. It wasn't like humanity had a lot of experience with Biotics yet, or treating those that ended up with them either. Which is why she was stuck on Arcturus, since it was one of the only places with dedicated docs for that.

She'd been doing her research since they told her it was going to last, and frankly what happened to some of people with L2 implants was horrifying. Supposedly, the new L3 was going to be a lot safer, but when reading what little she could find on it that wasn't classified, she'd stumbled across mention of *another* new implant.

The MM-1 was an *Asari* designed implant meant for humans, which had taken her completely by surprise. She knew from some stuff the docs had let slip around her that the Alliance had struggled to get help from Asari companies for anything Biotics related. Apparently, implants and amps were actually somewhat *rare* for them, even if they were the absolute best at making them. As a result, the handful of major companies that *did* make them weren't interested in the 'minor market' of human biotics.

Of which there admittedly were precious few so far, so that was kinda understandable?

Following down the rabbit hole she'd found, Jane had been able to find out *much* more about the MM-1 than the L3, or even the L2. The Asari company, *Maiden's Mercy*, was a pretty new medical R&D company that was apparently making waves in everything

related to the nervous system, including advancements in cybernetics. If kinda tracked that they'd be interested in something niche like a human Biotics implant, and even sort of made sense that they were being more open about how it worked and what it could do.

They were a civilian R&D firm poking something of little value to them, not an Alliance-backed military project. Why would they care if you knew the general details?

Using what they'd freely published in academic journals to learn more about implants in general had resulted in looking into the company. Which, in turn, had her looking up the company's fascinating founder. Which *in turn* had led to discovering that said founder was apparently a *streamer* of all things. One with super popular (317 million followers!) channels that covered everything from gaming and tech...to sex toys and biotics.

Super, *super* weird combination.

Also, however, *super* helpful if these exercises worked out. Jane had thought she'd need to wait until she had an implant to do much with her new abilities, and that would be at least two years away. Possibly as many as *five*, depending on when the docs decided she'd stopped growing. Sure, girls normally stopped growing significantly around 16 instead of the 18 that was more average for boys. But Jane had only just turned 14, so she'd thought she wouldn't be able to do much for a while.

Now?

Now, she needed to find one of those puzzle cubes! As well as watch more videos from Rylia! This was exciting! Also, a *great* way to focus so she could put off a possible bi-panic until later! Though, watching more of Miss Rylia might not be the best way to put that off, come to think of it...

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May, 2168 CE – Nevos

Miranda smiled as her little sister ran off with hyperactive energy. Orianna had only just turned four. Yet, given she'd been babbling about ancient Asari deep sea creatures while referencing a book clearly meant for someone in secondary education, it was clear she was going to be just as bright as Miranda herself. Not that such was exactly unexpected, given she was almost genetically identical.

Not *quite*, not enough to be a clone or truly identical 'twin.' Their asshole of a father hadn't quite been able to resist tweaking Orianna's genetics just that *little bit more* with what he'd learned from Miranda. Close though, very close. Enough so that the resemblance between them was obvious already, despite the nearly fifteen-year age difference.

As she heard her little sister babbling to the assistant/caretaker that looked after her most of the day, Miranda shook her head and smirked, before turning back to the terminal she'd been working at. She was *incredibly* grateful for whatever grudge had seen her unexpectedly picked up by Miss Yaoyorozu and the *weird* Asari that was her nominal boss. She'd been incredibly paranoid about it when it happened, but hadn't exactly had a lot of *options*. Particularly when presented with proof that the only other group that had reached out to her, Cerberus, had dealings with Henry Lawson. She could never have trusted them after that.

The...*odd* people that were her current employers had proven themselves to be more worth trusting, thankfully.

She hadn't entirely let her paranoia rest, of course, but in the six months she'd been working for them so far, they'd only been good to her. Not just her, either. She hated to admit it, but she *very much* hadn't known what to do with Orianna once they ran. Even the short few weeks they were out on their own had proven that fact to her in painfully embarrassing fashion. Her upbringing had been all about being Henry Lawson's eventually *legacy*. Which hadn't exactly included the sorts of life skills that it took to look after an, at the time, three-year-old.

Thankfully, one of the first signs that her new bosses were trustworthy had been them arranging *interviews* for a caretaker that could help her with Orianna and then letting *Miranda* run them. Eventually, despite there being a couple of humans on the list, Orianna had settled on an older *Quarian*, of all beings. One of the rare few that had decided *against* returning to their fleet and remained among the population of Nevos instead.

The woman had been a deft hand with a wrench when she was younger, apparently. Enough so to have come to outright *own* a major scrapyard on an *Asari* planet. She'd been aging too much to manage the place any longer, and had sold the business off to Rylia when the crazy Asari girl had crashed into Nevos like a miniature wrecking ball. At least, that's the way that Sini'Won vas Nevos had described it in her interview. Having met Rylia on a number of occasions now, Miranda could certainly believe it.

The crazy Asari was *absolutely brilliant*, to the point even Miranda felt nearly inadequate despite her own intelligence, but she was also had almost as much manic energy as Orianna on a sugar rush. All while *also* having access to a disturbingly large number of high-tech guns, which Miranda had been invited out to try once, seemingly on a whim. She had *no* idea how that horrifically powerful rotary 'Blaster Cannon' worked, or why Miranda had been trusted with even knowing it *existed*. She had to admit that it *had*

been incredibly fun to shoot, though. Doubly so when the crazy Asari had produced target drones with Henry Lawson's face on them.

Miranda had left the *cackling* to Rylia, no matter what witnesses might say otherwise.

Whatever the Asari was doing with her own projects, which Miranda was *very* curious about, but not enough to risk ruining a good thing, all three of her 'bosses' had been amazing so far. She mostly dealt with Dr. Dalisir, of course. The Matron had proven to be *very* different to work for that Miranda had first imagined. More than willing to listen to Miranda's ideas and actively help support her with various projects. Even making sure Miranda got the credit for her breakthroughs.

Very different than what might have happened as a similar R&D company in human space, though Mirana had eventually puzzled out the 'why.' It had taken her a while, given that she had Dr. T'naai as an example of Asari inventors, but she'd eventually cottoned onto the fact that Asari didn't *innovate* particularly well. Many of them were *fantastic* at refining new concepts and pushing those concepts to their limits and beyond once someone had come up with a new idea. People like Dr. Dalisir were legitimately talented scientists or engineers who outstripped their human equivalents in almost every way, by dint of experience if nothing else. You couldn't ask for better iterative scientists and developers anywhere in the galaxy, not even among the Salarians.

They were *terrible* at coming up with *new* ideas, though.

Not all of them, obviously. Dr. T'naai proved that readily enough. Yet it had slowly become obvious that Rylia T'naai was a rare exception, not the norm for Asari geniuses. Which neatly explained why Dr. Dalisir and many of her colleagues were happy to let *Miranda* come up with ideas. Ideas that they then enthusiastically ran with, often leaving her scrambling to keep up with the insane skill they applied to *refining* those ideas.

It was a *genuine pity* that humanity as a whole hadn't run into the Asari first, and that the idiots running the Alliance had somehow latched onto the *Turians* as the most 'like them.' While it was absolutely true as far as political goals went, Miranda's eyes had been pried firmly open by her time with *Maiden's Mercy*. Asari and humans would have *complimented* each other in a way that the Turians were utterly incapable of. The Turians were *too much* like an overly militaristic version of humans.

Still, stupid as it was, the Alliance wouldn't change course now. The Turians truly did fit their *politics* better. Both because the Systems Alliance wanted to expand their military influence, something the Turians honestly approved of as it meant less strain on their own fleets, and because the Hierarchy was a straightforward government to deal with. She

strongly suspected human politicians had been put off of dealing with the Asari Republics precisely because of that critical S on the end. The Asari weren't *really* a united faction, not truly. Which made making deals with them much harder for a government polity that had, itself, only recently combined into a single conglomerate to deal with other species.

Shaking off her idle musing on that as the terminal reported back with the simulation of her new project, Miranda focused on her work. She'd taken this one home with her, despite lectures on 'making sure you relax enough' from Dr. Dalisir. After all, she'd started designing the MM-1 implant partially out of enlightened self-interest. Yes, due to her father's influence, she'd gotten one of the first L3 biotic implants. Which was a *major* leap up from the unstable and problematic L2s. Yet it was still absolute *shit* compared to what the Asari were capable of. Particularly with the new influx of concepts Dr. T'aani had provided. Concepts that seemed oddly geared toward humans to Miranda's eyes.

Well, wherever the crazy Asari had come up with the numerous cybernetics breakthroughs from, some of them were going to make it *easy* to upgrade implants. Yet, understandably since Asari generally didn't need them, the big boss hadn't come up with a biotic implant among the others. Which had inspired Miranda to design her own. It would help her, it would help her sister since she was already showing biotic potential, and it would even help humanity as a whole. That was something Miranda could certainly get behind.

Particularly if it meant being able to rip out at least one piece of the 'gifts' her asshole of a father had given her and replace it with something of her own making...

... ..

June, 2168 CE – Nevos

Aova Dalisir was pleased as punch! Or she suspected she was, anyway. She hadn't *quite* figured that particular human idiom out, it being yet another she'd learned from her delightful human! Well, *technically* Miranda wasn't *her* human. But she was Aova's personal assistant, which was close enough for her! Particularly with how *amazing* she was at coming up with new ideas for the rest of the team to develop.

Honestly, she'd been happy with just Rylia. Her Maiden boss was an odd one, even by Maiden standards, but part of that oddity was a surprising consistency. Oh, not moment-to-moment, of course. She was as erratic and all over the place as any Maiden that age. Possibly more so than the average, actually. Yet, unlike *most* of those Maiden's, she'd created a consistent *base* to operate around. A reliable business, several of them in fact, which she'd quite intelligently handled over the proper management of to someone more stable.

That said someone was a gorgeous human who Rylia was obviously sleeping with was, Aova thought, probably only a good thing. Humans were, as she could attest from her own human minion, marvelously *interesting*. Which meant Rylia would likely stick to her human, with possibly another human or two added into her bed for variety, for a good few years. Long enough that her various businesses would likely survive if she lost interest and wandered off.

Which was *great* for Aova.

Landing this job had been the perfect way to segue out of her own Maiden days and into something a little more stable, without it being *super boring*. She hadn't been ready to give up entirely on excitement, even if she'd recognized that she wasn't happy blowing shit up as a merc any longer. It had taken her four fairly boring years to get recertified for her original doctorates via one of the better Refresher Academies on Thessia, but she'd gotten lucky in hearing about this job before getting locked into a contract somewhere afterwards.

Maiden's Mercy was honestly just right for her. She was still getting her excitement by being allowed to pursue fascinating new research in multiple fields. Her successes in those fields were building up her reputation nicely, so she'd been ahead even if Rylia lost interest and the company collapsed. Then, of course, she was getting to interact with multiple humans, one of them daily! Her timing hadn't been lucky enough to expose her to many of them, with them only slowly trickling into the Terminus even as she'd been on her way out of merc work and settling down to refresh her skills.

Yes, between the humans, the new projects, and the quite good money Rylia was paying, this was excellent. Though she was sort of starting to wonder just where the hell Rylia was getting all these advancements. The first few had made a fair bit of sense. The sex toys were a natural progression from her engineering background and Stripper work. (Marvelous things too, she was glad she'd gotten a set as a signing bonus!) Then the nerve-related stuff was kinda a logical progression from there. Even the current cybernetics were *related*, at least, with a heavy focus on making nervous system connections superior to anything even the Turians had.

Some of the other stuff though...well, she guessed the girl's random stint working on shuttles recently was her mother's influence. But where had those labor mechs come from? Or some of the interesting advances in computing? Something wasn't *entirely* adding up for her. Though, to be honest, Rylia seemed like a good girl and it was working out for Aova personally. So she was sure it was fine.

Maybe she should sign up a few of her still loyal girls from the old merc unit for jobs in security, though. Just in case? Rylia had been talking about expanding their security

force, and having some girls she knew would be just as loyal to her as the Maiden might be a good idea. That way, she'd at least have an escape route at hand if everything went tits up...

Chapter 20 – Welcome to the Family

June, 2168 CE – Nevos

Despite deciding who they were going to Summon next, and Rylia actually having enough Karma from her still going side-channels on her stream to have done them immediately, they'd held off. In truth, the day they'd debated and hashed things out had been a preliminary step. The Assault Shuttle and Commando Droids still hadn't been fully tested yet at that point, and they'd still been gathering bits and pieces they would need before feeling comfortable taking out the Shadow Broker.

Then too, of course, they'd also needed to prepare false IDs, data packets, and all the other bits and bobs required for their two new Summons. Both of which were going to be a bit more *involved* than Momo and Kara's had needed to be. Bruce Wayne was old enough that, even if he accepted their rejuvenation treatments, they'd needed to carefully create a proper trail for him back on Earth itself.

The first human extra-solar colony, Demeter, hadn't been founded until 2152 CE. Just sixteen years previously. Momo and Kara were young enough that they'd been able to muddle things a bit, creating only digital records on Earth and relying on humanity's crazed enthusiasm to spread out and explore *everything* to account for them getting off Earth quickly in that first expansion wave. Bruce, on the other hand, would be expected to have lived a major chunk of his adult life on either *Earth* or a small Mars colony. With the more detailed records that implied.

With some elbow grease and a short mission to Earth by Momo and Kara, they'd been able to make a more complete job of it, but they honestly weren't completely happy with the depth they'd managed. Something that they hoped they could use the very network they were planning to take over, plus Bruce and Lucy's skills, to fix in due time. The most critical issue had been not having a great idea what he'd end up looking like, if he used the rejuvenation treatment, and thus having to fudge anything with images of him more than ideal.

Lucy had presented an *entirely different* problem, but one that was honestly the harder of the two to sort out. After all, the girl had *extensive* cybernetics that would *not* match anything anyone had ever seen before. Cyberarms, complete with monowire

weapons, EMP Threading, Neruoport, Cyberdeck, secondary Deep Net Dive Processor, multiple Personal Links, a subdermal neural processor, and even some Midnight Lady mods. Though not a full cyberization on the last bit. Just birth control, hormone regulation, and some...*personal entertainment enhancements*.

Rylia was very interested in recreating those last options, but that wasn't the point.

The *point* was that Lucy would *very much not* pass close inspection by scanners without triggering *all the flags*. Thankfully, she was even younger than Momo and *Maiden's Mercy* was studying cybernetics tech. In fact, Rylia was fairly sure that their Head Minion over there and Miranda were both suspicious of how much she'd been able to pass on about cybernetics. Even if she hadn't given them outright *designs*, it was absolutely too much data for mere untested theories.

Which meant that Lucy's identify problems and a bit of her past would actually work nicely as a cover.

They'd already had Momo's identity as having been working for unnamed groups out in the Terminus Systems, which Rylia had carefully implied had been wiped out. Planting clues for those already looking into Momo's background that one of those 'unnamed groups' had been a corp doing illegal cybernetics research was more than doable. It had been a little time consuming, since they'd needed to maneuver around those very searchers to plant the data, but they'd gotten it done.

The result should be worth the effort, as what they'd planted painted a picture of Momo taking exception to some of that group's unethical practices and helping destroy them. That Lucy, a heavily cyberized girl who could *absolutely* tell you all sorts of details about horrifying cybernetic research without the slightest bit of struggle, turned up after Momo got properly established? Well, obviously, she was just someone Momo had helped flee and hide from the group. Bonus points that they could claim it was Lucy who'd been sitting on the cybernetics research data, passing it along through Momo prior to coming out of hiding herself.

It was a bit convoluted, and they were stacking story on top of story here. Something that always ran the risk of someone fumbling the story and creating a chink in their narrative. Yet, all of those involved so far, save possibly Kara who didn't interact much with anyone but Rylia, Momo, and Doctor Dalisir, were the types that could easily keep the narrative straight. Hopefully, by the time any of them slipped up, they'd be well past the point that it even mattered they did.

At any rate, it had taken them a bit over a month and a half to fully get everything lined up for the two they were summoning. They'd also managed initial tests of the Stealth

Assault Shuttle and Commando Droids, though both would need more updates based on those tests before serious use. Which was perfectly fine, since they'd need to give Bruce and Lucy *at least* a few weeks, possibly as much as a couple of months, to fully adjust and get up to date. Even with a Kara-improved rapid-learning device to help, they would both need and *deserve* a chance to adjust and acclimate. Trying to do that *and* take over from the Shadow Broker at the same time would be stupidity in the extreme.

Still, the time had come, and after some debate they'd decided to do the two Summons simultaneously. There *had* been an argument for doing them one at a time, but in the end they'd decided that keeping them together through the adjustment process was more likely to pay off the way they'd hoped. Which is why they were sitting in front of a pair of doors with a countdown timer on them. Timers that were just hitting zero.

Both doors opened, with *very* different people walking out of them, though both shared a very suspicious look at their surroundings. Not unexpected, honestly, given the pasts these two were coming from. Rylia waved energetically from where she was sitting on a loveseat with Momo. Fully in 'bouncy charisma' mode. Something even Batman would read as genuine...since it *was*, at least to the original Rylia.

"Hello, you two! I'm Rylia, your friendly local summoner! Given how little the Marketplace usually tells people, I bet you have lots of questions! Take a seat and I'll happily answer them. Oh, and before I forget, introductions!"

Rylia gestured to Momo first.

"This is Momo Yaoyorozu! She was my very first Summons from the system, and is currently acting as CEO of the companies I'm using to fund our whole 'save the galaxy' thing!"

Another gesture toward Kara had Bruce's eyes narrowing, and Rylia grinned.

"Not your Kara, Mr. Wayne. Though she is part of why I know a fair bit about a version of you. Kryptonian, but no powers due to unfortunate Gold Kryptonite exposure. Ah, for your benefit Lucy, her name is Kara Zor'el, currently going by Kara Danvers. She comes from the same cluster of multi-verses as Mr. Bruce Wayne here, so they've met versions of each other. Mr. Wayne, your new fellow summons is Lucyna Kushinada, who I *think* prefers just Lucy? Sorry if I got that wrong?"

Lucy responded with a kurt shake of her head.

"You got it right. Just Lucy, please."

Rylia nodded, then gestured them to the pair of comfortable armchairs across from them.

“Right! So...lots both of you are going to need to know, but we aren’t in a huge rush or at a crisis point or anything. So we’ll start with the basics, which are going to be pretty different for both of you! First, surprise Lucy! Aliens are real! Well, at least they are in *this* reality.”

They were using a Room with a View, much like she’d used with Momo, and Rylia tapped the control to turn one wall transparent. The new window looked out over the alien ocean of Nevos, one that notably showed far more vibrant colors than Earth’s did, one of the features that made it a popular tourist destination.

“You’re on a planet called Nevos, a colony world of my race, called the Asari. Earth *does* exist in this reality, though it’s fairly new to the galactic community. Nevos itself, and most worlds in the largest galactic polity, called Citadel Space, is quite a bit more peaceful than either of your worlds were. Unfortunately, every organic race is on a bit of a countdown timer, with an invasion by a race of ancient AIs that harvest the galaxy on a Cycle due to show up in a bit over a decade. Our job is to prepare the galaxy to handle that invasion...”

Bruce was looking like this was just another Tuesday, while poor Lucy looked like she might be racking up multiple existential crisis to have later. Trying to back down a bit from the enormity of the situation for her sake, Rylia grinned.

“That’s the huuuugggeee picture though. In the shorter-term, after you adjust, we’re hoping you two will be a good fit for running a galactic scale information broker network! Don’t worry, we’ve got *plenty* of information packets, the operation to take over that network won’t happen for *at least* a month, and we’re happy to answer all sorts of questions! Including any you might have about how the whole Marketplace thing works. Though to be honest I can only tell you what little I know, as I’ve only had access to it for a bit over a year...”

Bruce Wayne, speaking for the first time, surprised her with what he had to say. Maybe it *shouldn’t* have been a surprise, given this was *Batman*, but it still was.

“Then I probably know more than you do, girl. The user of the Omniversal Marketplace I made a deal through had been making use of it for decades, and I made sure to grill him for everything I could. How much do you even know about it?”

Taken aback that *this* was the direction he was going in first, Rylia hesitated for a moment, before shrugging and starting to explain what little she *did* know...

... ..

Three Weeks Later – Nevos

Bruce stared at the reflection in the mirror. Looking back at him was a version of himself in his early fifties, only with less scars and pains. A lot less scars and pains than he'd actually had at that age. To be honest, he hadn't really even realized how much of his own will was being tied up suppressing a lifetime of breaking his body, forcing it to go on despite all he'd done to it. His mind felt clearer than it had since possibly his thirties, even if the rejuvenation treatments hadn't taken him that far.

He'd gone over the tech with a fine-toothed comb before allowing it to be used on him, of course.

To her credit, Rylia T'aani hadn't hesitated to give him the complete, comprehensive database on *exactly* how to rejuvenation technology worked. Complete with the *parts* for a brand-new unit that he could individually examine, understand, and assemble himself. She'd very obviously fully expected his paranoia, and simply...not had anything to hide. Not with this at least.

Honestly, he was beginning to suspect she didn't have a lot to hide period. At least not in the ways he cared about. She had plenty of secrets and plans he only half approved of, but even in those she'd been completely blunt. Telling him outright that she suspected he'd want to find a way to deal with the Reapers short of open warfare. Informing him in no uncertain terms that he was *welcome* to try and find such a method, so long as he obeyed certain rules about the attempt.

He'd been ready for her to chain unreasonable rules about him for that, to fetter the attempt and justify her conquest plan. Only for her to give him nothing but insanely practical ones limitations. She'd explained, in as much detail as she could, how the Reaper's worked to create fifth columns inside every Cycle by trapping their tech with an indoctrination effect. That the Reapers, having done this a thousand times before, *already knew* that someone would try clever solutions, and trapped the routes to attempting to find those solutions.

Yet she hadn't outright forbidden attempting to research such.

Instead, she'd merely highlighted the dangers and set limits. No in-person experimentation, no AIs that the Reapers could potentially corrupt. Study only remotely, filter *everything* through someone else you could monitor for behavioral changes, and focus first and foremost on a way to *detect* indoctrination effects. She'd even told him that the 'Protheans' had found a way to do so, and a copy of the method should be available on the lost planet of Ilos. Which she'd given him everything she knew about, even if that didn't include any hard data on its location.

It wasn't a lot, but once he was in charge of the Broker Network, it was a genuine lead he could chase down.

It was after that detailed briefing, along with another one about a scouting effort she was making to create sanctuaries to hide populations of each race, that he'd *really* understood. Rylia wasn't preparing for war out of a desire for that to be the solution, or any lack of imagination about other possible methods. She was preparing for the Total War option *only because that was the method that took the longest*.

She was being *methodical*, in a way that had *Batman*, not just Bruce Wayne, reevaluating her with genuine respect. Yes, her choice of methods were a little chaotic, but even *that* was calculated to hide the depth and layers of preparation. Rylia was building the means to do things *the hard way* first and foremost, simply because that way took the largest degree of time. In reality, she was actually planning to examine *every* possible method. To look to the past for what had almost worked, to look for a golden BB or silver bullet in alternate tech, to try and find weaknesses to exploit. To fight only if *required* in the end, and to *hide* enough remnants to rebuild afterward if even that failed.

Stages of redundancy, as many eggs in as many different baskets as she could beg, borrow, browbeat, bend reality, or steal from the very heavens into existence.

It reminded him of the only other user of the Omniversal Marketplace he'd met so far, and he suddenly suspected rather strongly that *all* of those chosen to use it were the same way. That the Marketplace itself always picked the sort of person who could and would look at the hopeless and inevitable and say:

'No. Fuck you. I reject your reality, and will defy your inevitability not just until my last breath, but until the heat death of the universe. In fact, if the heat death of the universe happens first, I'll find a way to beat *that*, even if I have to find a way to mug God for the answers.'

It had taken Bruce a while to see it, even with all his years of experience. Now that he had, though...he could work with her. Maybe not *for* her, but she'd obviously already realized and expected that from the start. He snorted to himself as he thought of the bait she'd blatantly laid out for him too. The girl had even predicted that his personality would practically force him to reach out to Lucyna to try and help her. Much like he had Jason, after...

Bruce shook that dark memory off and shifted away from the mirror.

The point was, he'd discovered his Deal with the Marketplace had brought him somewhere he could, perhaps, do even more good than he'd done with the Justice League.

The methods weren't entirely to his taste, but he understood them, and Rylia had covered her bases in making sure there was someone working *with* him that could and would handle the things he would refuse to touch with anything but a torch.

He had a feeling this new reality was going to be just as *interesting* as the last one had been. Though hopefully with *slightly* fewer eldritch monstrosities waiting to crawl out of the woodwork. Truly, he appreciated deeply that Magic didn't seem to be a thing here, at least so far as Rylia knew. He wasn't doing to take that as fact, not until he'd been able to look into it far more deeply himself. But it would certainly make things a lot simpler if it were true. Dealing with the 'moonlit world,' the gods and monsters, had always been the *worst* part of being Batman.

Humans, aliens, and ancient, murderous, renegade AIs were *so much easier to deal with...*

... ..

Lucy was still honestly a little disbelieving.

Even after weeks, she was still kinda waiting for the other shoe to drop. This new world...reality? Reality she supposed. This new reality she'd ended up in wasn't a utopia. She'd *really* have struggled to believe it was all real if it had been. Even ignoring the threat in the distance (easy to do, it was over a decade away, that might as well be a lifetime to someone like her), there were places in this reality that would have fit in all too well in Night City. Omega, for certain, just as one example. Parts of Illum too, if you compared it to the nicer corpo sections of Night City, where dirty deeds done in the dark were all signed for on contracts.

That was the thing though. Almost all of the really horrible places were in the Terminus Systems, not Citadel Space where she currently found herself. Not that there wasn't *crime* in Citadel Space. There was plenty of that to go around. Yet, for the most part, it was still the governments in control of their worlds, not the unfeeling or outright malicious megacorps. Laws still actually *mattered* and there was something at least vaguely resembling real justice and rule of law.

It was like something from before the Corpo Wars and extended to hundreds of worlds.

Frankly, to Lucy it felt a lot like she'd found some sort of paradise. Which didn't even get into her new employer(s). It had taken a while for her to get used to the idea, but Rylia seemed *genuinely* nice. A super-flirty pervert, sure. But that was honestly harmless and she was legit low-key compared to people she'd known in Night City. Like Becca or half the Mox.

Momo was, if anything, even *nicer*, and somehow made you actually *believe* that Heroes were a thing. Which the Lucy of a month ago would have derisively laughed at you for believing. Kara was pretty similar, but held a seed of bitterness that Lucy could recognize. Honestly, that seed of bitterness actually made her relate more easily to the *apparently* alien girl.

Which, yeah, somehow the fact that *aliens* existed was less weird than the fact that some of them were nice.

Then there was Bruce. He was...he was like a gruffer Kiwi, yet it somehow didn't grate the way it should, after Kiwi's betrayal. He was just as paranoid as her first mentor had been, possibly even more so, honestly. Yet he wasn't even a fraction as *bitter* as Kiwi had been. Heck, he was less bitter than *Kara*. In some ways he was the one that reminded her the most of her old home, yet in others he was the *most* alien. Someone who, somehow, she knew wouldn't have bent a single inch even in Night City.

She also genuinely wasn't sure if the city would have broke him, or if *he would have broken the city*.

Something about him was comforting, in a way that she'd never expected to feel. Almost like the little girl she'd once been had believed her father to be, before she'd hacked that terminal and seen what a monster he truly was. Bruce was too good to exist, yet was *grounded* in a way that you believed he existed anyway. Gruff, even surly and abrasive at times, yet...

She didn't properly understand him, but she thought she could *work* with him. More seamlessly even than she had with her old team, save maybe David. Which was saying a lot, given that she hadn't been at all sure she'd ever be anything but a loner again. Of course, it didn't hurt that the *job* actual sounded pretty interesting. This Shadow Broker was a Fixer, as she understood it. The idea of just *replacing* a Fixer, then slowly using their network to make things *better* instead of more fucked up?

Lucy was surprised to find that she believed it might work. She was even more surprised to find she was looking forward to it. The idea of *her* being able to somehow make things *right*? That had been a dream bigger than even her child self could have imagined. She didn't think she was fit to be a hero, but maybe she could be something else. What was it that Rylia had said that struck a cord with her? Right...

'Ideally, evil would be fought by good. But sometimes, well, what you really need to fight evil is another kind of evil.'

She'd never heard a better way to distill the best Night City could ever manage into a single sentence. Given that her new boss was putting it in context of using those evils to wipe each other out, while *also* creating good to replace them? Or, if not good, at least something less bad? Lucy might just believe that things could get a *little* better. Even if she thought the energetic alien was probably being overly optimistic...

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