

Stripper with a System

(Chapters 21-24)

Novus Peregrine

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

Chapter 21 – You Will Be Mentored, Resistance is Futile

July, 2168 CE – Nevos

Rylia threw herself backward into a flip, managing to launch a crude biotic push from her *foot* that *almost* hit Bruce. Somehow, by virtue of Utter Bullshit™, fuck-you-I'm-really-still-Batman-no-matter-what, he managed to shift in such a way it barely clipped him. Even as he followed her through the flip, continuing to attack, the bastard had the sheer gall to be capable of *talking*.

“Good. Much better. Every unexpected or dirty trick you can leverage is to be exploited. While Yaoyorozu did an excellent job of teaching you to defend yourself until help arrived, you need *more* than that.”

Clipping him with the biotic attack had at least *slowed* Bruce down, even if it hadn't forced him to back off the way she'd hoped. The small fragment of space was just enough to allow her to reset and weave around his follow-up jabs, but nothing more. She more than expected he was taking it easy with those same jabs, the man not even breathing hard even as *she* desperately panted and pushed the limits of her endurance. Damn it, the regen treatments had only returned him to his early forties physically, how was he *doing* this?!

“While you've chosen, correctly given the importance of the Marketplace, not to take a field role, you also already acknowledged the truth that you *will* be targeted eventually. Your steps to address that with a bodyguard droid and self-defense training were well chosen, but not *enough*. Not with your plans for the Terminus Systems. Once you truly kick those off, even using a patsy will only slow down dangerous people identifying you as the backer.”

Stamina was *not* an Asari strong point like it was for humans. Despite being in *extremely* good shape by this point, Rylia was flagging, and one of Bruce's shots landed. She managed to take it on a shoulder, but it was *not* a pulled blow, causing her to flinch at what she knew would be a spectacular bruise. Short lived due to Asari regeneration, of course, but spectacular.

Knowing that, unlike Momo, Bruce wouldn't stop just because he'd landed a solid shot, she forced herself to keep moving, managing to narrowly slide *under* the follow up blow with an instinctive action that was more dance move than martial art. Of course, *somehow* Bruce knew Capoeira, and had been teaching it to her. Which meant that her instincts for both were blending together in a way that was, admittedly, making her a lot better a lot faster than she'd imagined possible.

Which didn't stop her from resenting this a bit! She'd intended him to mentor *Lucy*, not the whole team! Especially not her, since she wasn't intending to go out and punch slavers and Reapers in the face! Unfortunately, Bruce had *persuasive* arguments, some of which he was drilling into her *again*, as he continued to casually talk while nearly planting a side-kick in her gut.

"Your current measures are solid. You've improved your personal shield to the point even an anti-material rifle won't punch through in one shot, and worked on the reflex to immediately add a biotic barrier when under attack. Against ordinary attackers, that and Kix would be enough. But once you are identified as connected to the affairs you're planning in the Terminus, *or* as the source of all the new weapons, you won't be dealing with *ordinary* any longer."

Desperately using the last of her energy to go on the attack, mustering her faltering biotics to produce a speed boost similar to a Charge but limited to one arm and one leg, she *pushed* her fist forward. The move was lightning fast and practically wrenched her arm out of its socket, but she actually managed to force Bruce to disengage...for a few heartbeats. In the opening caused by the pain of the trick afterwards, he ruthlessly moved in and she found herself somehow flying across the sparring mat, landing on her back with a 'oof' of lost air. She tried to get back up, knowing he could be ruthless, but couldn't manage. Thankfully, he didn't follow up, even if he continued to lecture.

"When that time comes, it will be either dedicated veteran assassins from Terminus powers, or groups like the Salarian STG, Turian Blackwatch, or even the Citadel's Special Tactics and Recon. The first out of fear your puppet will be after them next, the later because governments *hate* instability. They'll want you either dead or working for them."

A water bottle appeared next to Rylia, held in Bruce's hand. She accepted it with a shaky hand of her own, even as her breathing settled into something vaguely normal, instead of ragged gasps. He squatted next to her, leveling her with a serious look.

"Those groups aren't stupid. Kix and other measures might deal with *one* attempt. A dedicated sentient bodyguard, which I strongly recommend you have in place by then, might stop a second. But they *will* adapt, study your defenses, and work around them.

Sooner or later, you *will* be caught fighting someone serious, without being able to rely on just holding out for help. You need to be capable of fighting and *winning* against a serious opponent when that happens, no matter how dirty you have to be to pull it off. If you die, the chances of the galaxy surviving the Reaper threat drops *significantly*.”

Sucking down the water in shallow gulps, already having learned the hard way that *too fast* could just end up with her vomiting it back up, she nodded. She was *not* happy with this turn of events, as she did *not* intend to be a combatant if at all possible. Unfortunately, she was forced to admit that Bruce was *right*. It wasn't paranoia if they really *were* out to get you, and sooner or later a good chunk of the galaxy *would* want her head. For a wide variety of reasons.

She would learn what Bruce had to teach her, even if she *really* hoped to never need it, and was very unhappy repeatedly going home too sore and exhausted for sexy times with Momo. Even Asari regeneration could only do so much in the fact of Bruce's version of 'mentoring'...

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Bruce had to admit, in the quiet of his own mind, that Lucy might legitimately be his most gifted student yet. A conclusion he'd come to despite still not being an official mentor to her. The girl was, understandably, prickly. Yet he'd dealt with worse cases of that before, in both those he'd mentored and in some of the more morally grey members of his Rogue's gallery. The fact that she was also *professional* meant working with her was easy enough in the meantime. He could take his time in sanding off her rough edges a bit.

That professionalism also meant that he'd gotten a very good feel for just how talented she was, as they'd both spent time first breaking, and then shoring up, the security around T'aani's various companies and projects. It was a solid way for them to get a feel for each other's abilities, while also doing some good in hardening their little group's defenses. To T'aani and Yaoyorozu's credit, those defenses had been admittedly quite solid even before he and Lucy got to them.

Those R3 droids she used as cybersecurity were far more creative and clever than most of the AI he'd run into over the years, and they'd done a solid job of physically securing *Maiden's Mercy* and the R&D blacksite. The constantly updating holofield showing the 'salvage yard' being slowly emptied by workers had been a particular nice touch. The sort of attention to detail that Bruce appreciated. Yet, for all that attention to detail, the existing setup hadn't been enough to keep either him or his newest protegee out, even individually. Let alone when once they'd started working together.

Lucy was an even better hacker than his version of Barbara had been, which was saying quite a lot. That she was also a remarkably good and experienced fighter, with every bit the talent there as she had on the cyber side, only left him more impressed. Mind you, she was *far* too used to using lethal force for his peace of mind. But then, that was part of why she'd been paired with him in the first place. Something he noted again as she carved through the Commando Mechs that would make up the bulk of their force against this 'Shadow Broker.'

The mechs were *good*. He could and would freely admit that. Yet, as he'd seen time and time again with robotic enemies of League, they still lacked somewhat when fighting a living person with good combat instincts. Lucy had been convinced to act as a combat test for them and was proving able to deal with whole squads on her own. Though that was becoming less and less true as the things built better and better combat algorithms. He was, frankly, reasonably confident that they would do the job against the majority of the 'Broker's' internal security. The issue was the Broker himself and any close-in bodyguards.

T'aani had admitted she didn't *know* who the current Broker was. In a decade, it would be a Yahg. In all likelihood, however, that Yahg had probably not killed the previous Broker yet, and who that previous Broker had been was an unknown. T'aani suspected either a Salarian or an Asari, and either was honestly more trouble than the Yahg would have been. One likely wouldn't hesitate to use any weapon, even things sane people would shy away from, and the other was likely not to be operating fully alone.

Which is part of why Bruce had convinced them to modify the plan a bit. Yaoyorozu, himself, and Lucy would all take part in the actual strike, instead of just going in afterward. T'aani, despite her own latent talent and progress, was both too valuable and not of the right personal disposition to go out in the field. But the three of them, plus the commando mechs and Kix, should be enough to do the job. They *had* to keep the team small, to contain the secret, so it would have to be enough.

Shaking his head, Bruce retuned to looking through a catalog of options T'aani had given him. It was far from a complete representation of what she could get through the Marketplace, but it was a solid cross selection of technological tools he could use to enhance his own contribution. He might not have Lucious around, but T'aani and Danvers certainly made up for that, when it came to making a new suit for himself.

Even if he didn't intend to take on the Batman mantle fully again, it would be best to have a version available. Both for the assault on the Shadow Broker's base, and as a 'just in case' for future use. After all, he was now young and fit enough to make use of it again, if it proved sufficiently necessary...

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“Good. Excellent, even. This is a very solid step for *Maiden’s Mercy*, which will eventually produce an in for you with both the Turian Hierarchy and the Systems Alliance.”

Nodding, Momo had *mixed* feelings about the glow of accomplishment she felt at Mr. Wayne’s approval. The entire vector of providing improved cybernetics for both groups had been his idea, even if she’d executed it, and he’d calmly nudged her a little at various points on things that would get them the best combination of influence and credits. Momo was not used to feeling like an amateur when it came to running a large-scale business, but damned if Bruce Wayne wasn’t making her feel like it.

Of course, the man had apparently run a multi-national company just as large as Yaoyorozu Industries, and done it for decades longer than Momo had in a world that was far more cutthroat than hers had been. All while *also*, somehow, still making time to be either a full-time hero or the administrator and mentor of *multiple* hero teams. The final one being an organization nearly on par in scale to the World Hero Association, only without a fraction as much government support and almost entirely self-funded and internally supported.

Seriously, the more she learned about Mr. Wayne, the more deeply she understood why Rylia had selected him for their needs out of tens of thousands of options. She was learning things about *running a corporation* from him, when that wasn’t even why they’d wanted him. The sheer degree of multi-discipline mastery concentrated in one individual was almost absurd. *Would* have been absurd, honestly, if she hadn’t known that he was seventy-three, rather than the fifty he now appeared or the forty he now was physically.

“It does risk bringing military attention to our companies sooner than we had planned, but I have to admit the connections seem to justify it. Particularly with the Systems Alliance. They are going to be the hungriest for new ideas to help level the playing field, once we start marketing combat equipment. For that matter, someone on their side was on the ball and is already asking about our labor mechs for their shipyards.”

Mr. Wayne leaned back in one of the comfortable chairs she kept in her office, nodding along with her statements.

“There is a certain amount of risk with the military attention, obviously. But you aren’t providing weapons technology, and the truth has always been that the military is one of the absolute best testing grounds for medical technology. They can and will push things forward without half the red tape of the civilian sector. Sometimes that’s detrimental, of course. But in the case of technologies you know are legitimately safe, and which can help to the degree of what Maiden’s Mercy is offering, it’s a useful vector for early mass testing. Which, in turn, shortcuts approval processes for civilian use down the line.”

Momo nodded, having looked into it once Mr. Wayne had brought the idea up. Yaoyorozu Industries hadn't had a lot to do with medical technologies, and she hadn't realized there were ways around some of the red tape as a result. Let alone a way that would end up giving them those connections that Mr. Wayne had mentioned.

"More, there is an additional advantage that's more political, one I suspect your girlfriend will recognize instantly when she sees this."

Frowning a bit, Momo tried to see what he was getting at. If anything, she'd counted the politics involved as likely one of the downsides. Particularly with the Hierarchy. While they were *pragmatic* almost to a fault, which had seen them legitimately evaluate what was brought to them and decide they were interested, what they had for the Turians was mostly cybernetics. Which was going to sting, given that the Turians themselves had previously been the *best* in that field. An Asari company producing better results was going to both sting their pride and hurt their bottom line.

Mr. Wayne's lips twitched as he saw Momo trying to puzzle it out, but he didn't just give her the answer. It was something she was already getting used to, though it oddly made her feel like she was back interning under a Hero in her early career again. Certainly, she might have been the one to realize this man was almost as much a mentor as he was a hero or administrator, but she honestly hadn't expected it to end up aimed at *her*.

Mentally both exasperated and invigorated by the challenge, she dismissed the Turians from the equation, not seeing how it could be a positive with them. Relations between them and the Republics were always a bit of a mess because of how organized one was and disorganized the other was. So, if not the Turians, then what about the deal was positive politics for the Systems Alliance? Slowly, a thought surfaced, then more rapidly she started connecting the dots with a frustrated *lament* that both Rylia *and* Miranda Lawson had expressed previously.

"It...the Asari and humans actually have better Synergy than any other pair of species. The humans haven't properly realized that, because their politicians dislike trying to deal with the dispersed polity that is the Republics. On the flip side, the Asari likely *do* realize it, at least at the top levels. But they are so patient by nature that they are content to wait until the humans realize it, not wanting to push so 'soon' after a First Contact war situation. Not helped by the fact that humanity is a comparatively small market for them."

The longer she spoke, the more she didn't need the approving expression on Mr. Wayne's face to realize she'd hit on the right point. By making a serious connection to the human medical establishment, *Maiden's Mercy* was going to start subtly making that point to the mid-levels of the Alliance. A mid-level whose observations would filter upwards,

given time. Which didn't even mention the more recently created *Sprocket Technologies Inc* that was handling the new labor mech designs.

If the Alliance started using the labor mechs in their shipyards and saw a significant boost to their rapid growth, that was going to get *attention* from the major political factions of humanity. A positive showing for making connections with the *Republics* instead of the more rocky relationship they'd been trying to form with the Turians. There were risks there, as the Republics could practically swallow humanity and end up with them *accidentally* becoming a near client-state. But that was a long-term issue, because of how slowly Asari took action on a political level.

Given that long-term, as the term applied to Asari, meant well *after* the conflict they were preparing for? In that light it was almost a meaningless risk. If they all survived long enough for that to even *be* a problem, it would be a victory.

"Very good. Of course, that does mean we need to start considering politics of our own. Nevos is relatively neutral within the Republics, due to being primarily a corporate world. Yet, eventually, we're going to need to wrangle some connections within factions of the Asari Republics as well. Which means *understanding* those factions in the first place. An area we currently lack somewhat in. I suggest we make investigating the whose-who of the various Matriarchs a next step. We can start on that even before replacing the Shadow Broker, then use his captured information to verify what we've found."

Momo nodded instantly at *that*. In truth, it was something she'd already begun to do, but was having some trouble unscrambling the byzantine connections. The Asari political structure was bizarre to her in many ways, and trying to navigate it as a non-native wasn't easy. Worse, Rylia hadn't been interested at all in the past, as Maidens rarely cared about that sort of thing. Meaning they didn't *have* a native expert. Perhaps it was time to try and find someone who could fill that role...

Chapter 22 – Preparations

"Manned test jump one ready. Activating Slipstream Drive."

Rylia gritted her teeth in frustration as she listened to Kara's calm voice via the secure broadcast. Intellectually, she knew everyone else had been right in telling her she shouldn't go on the maiden manned test flight of the Slipstream Drive. Sure, they'd already done a half dozen test jumps with remote control of the *Ghost*. Yet there was always the

possibility that they'd missed something that would negatively impact sentient life making the jump in some fashion, and Rylia was the last person they could afford to lose.

She'd almost refused their pleas and gone anyway.

The *Ghost*, their prototype Stealth Assault Shuttle, was arguably even more her baby than she was Kara's, and not being able to be aboard for the test pissed her off as a result. Enough so that she'd actually snapped at a couple of people, for basically the first time even Momo had seen. Original Rylia's basically sunny disposition and the amount of fantasy fulfilment the Hazel part of her was getting from all the stuff she was making normally kept her from such displays. Typically, the most you had to fear from her verbally was the occasional snarky remark if you did something stupid. Something which hadn't held true in the last week, much to the terror of a few of the minions that she'd worked with on various teams.

She honestly felt bad that, even among her summons, only Bruce was willing to risk her ire at the moment, but couldn't stop herself despite that. There were downsides to being in the body of an Asari Maiden, apparently. You know, aside from the horny energy and less stamina than a human would have had. Doing her best to push past how grumpy having to only *watch* was making her, she eyed the repeaters closely as the Slipstream Drive on the *Ghost* activated. Everything looked nominal, right up until the readings blipped out of existence for a brief moment, only to blip back in a moment later.

Thankfully, they were using Quantum Entangled Comms, giving them instant reconnection. Slipspace was *weird*, being some sort of eleven-dimensional space that hurt even Rylia's brain to think about. 'Slipping' through it was enough to momentarily cut even a QEC connection, but reconnection was instant as soon as the ship was back in real space. The QEC system hadn't even been that pricey on the Marketplace, thankfully. Mostly as they would have been developed within the next fifteen years or so inside *this* reality. Since they meant instant, high-security FTL comms no matter the location or distance, they were one of the easiest choices she'd made yet for a Marketplace purchase.

"Successful slip confirmed. On target and no complications, at least so far as I can tell. I'm turning the ship over to the pilot droid to run myself through the medical scanner for any changes. Assuming no complications, return jump should be in one hour."

A bit of tension left all of their shoulders at confirmation that Kara was fine. Well, despite being unhappy she hadn't been able to participate directly in the test of their most awesome build yet, things were looking up! Confirming the capability and safety of the Slipspace Drive had been the last thing they needed to check off before planning the raid on the Shadow Broker's lair...

... ..

-Lemon Starts Here-

Momo reveled in the moans that poured out of Rylia as she explored her lover's 'azure' with her tongue. It was hardly the first time she'd done so, of course, but this time she had Rylia helpless, suspended in the Tentacle Bondage device that was one of *Erotic Delights* main products. Which meant she had all the time she desired to find *every little weak spot*. It had taken Momo an embarrassingly long time to realize that Rylia wasn't a straight up Dom, and it was only tonight that she'd finally truly put the realization that her girlfriend was a switch properly to the test, to results they were both enjoying.

With Rylia still so obviously irritated about the tests of the *Ghost*, Momo had decided *something* needed to be done, and had gambled on an aggressive approach. She'd pulled a startled Rylia into a kiss, firmly grabbed her ass to start groping it, and forcefully stripped her. Thankfully, she'd been *right* about Rylia actually being a switch, with her girlfriend quickly folding as Momo *took charge*.

An intense make out session had eventually led to their current position, with Rylia suspended by both the 'bondage field' of the device and three thick tentacles. Two held her legs spread wide apart, and the third was holding her arms trapped above her head. Momo, meanwhile, was kneeling between those spread legs, taking full advantage of her lover's helplessness to *thoroughly* explore her alien anatomy in far greater detail than she had previously.

Momo hummed, trying again to figure out a way to get *both* clit-analogues with one motion of her tongue. It was proving a fun, but surprisingly hard challenge, since each one was on opposite sides of her lover's azure. Using her tongue for broad strokes stimulated both, but trying to get more fine and pointed stimulation was much harder.

Sucking on one left the other unattended, and the tongue movement required to flick both was devilishly tricky even with Rylia so vulnerable and her Azure lewdly spread by Momo's fingers. Already, Momo was having *ideas* about new toys that could try to solve the issue, but that was for later, when she didn't have a moaning girlfriend she needed to fuck into a better mood.

Deciding she'd explored the clitoris analogues enough, she shifted to plunge her tongue into Rylia's depths, enjoying the way her spine helplessly arched as the *intense* number of nerve endings at her azure's entrance went wild. It didn't take long for Rylia to cum, again, having already cum twice while Momo was experimenting. But one of the nice things about Asari is that they were *all* rather thoroughly multi-orgasmic. Honestly, Momo could buy her lover's theory that the race had been genetically modified for sex. They were

certainly well suited for pleasure, particularly for a species that didn't even *need* physical sex to reproduce.

Enjoying the unique, slightly citrusy taste of Rylia's cum, Momo spent a few more minutes toying with her, deliberately building her up *without* letting her cum this time. Grinning as little whimpers and whines began increasingly joining the moans, Momo reached down for the remote that controlled the tentacles. Familiar enough with the controller by now, she blindly made the selection she wanted, pulling back only just as a more phallic pair of tentacles rose up between Rylia's legs.

A whine of loss was soon replaced by a moan of delight as the first tentacle filled her lover's azure and the second began lubricated her rear entrance with obvious intent to fill that hole too. Grinning and letting it get to doing that, Momo stood and stripped the last piece of her other clothing that hadn't been lost yet. A fairly skimpy and utterly soaked black thong. Kicking it clear across the room, she noted when the second tentacle was fully hilted, and used the remote again.

This time, the effect was for the bondage field and stronger tentacles to adjust, lifting Rylia's plundered bits up, even as it lowered her upper body down toward the floor. Specifically, down to *juuuuustttt* the right height for Momo to step forward and swing one leg over her lover's tits, then press her dripping pussy down into Rylia's face. Her Good Little Toy didn't need any more hint than that to get to work, her own tongue happily digging into Momo's sex.

Moaning herself as that *very* talented tongue got to work, Momo rewarded her girlfriend by using the remote once more, setting both tentacles penetrating her to vibrate and thrust on low. It wouldn't be enough for Rylia to cum from again, not yet, but Momo would let her do so once she had her own first orgasm. After that? Well, they'd just have to see how many more times Rylia could earn an orgasm before one of them passed out...

-Lemon Ends Here-

... ..

Rylia was in a *much* better mood, after her night with Momo, and everyone else seemed...relieved. Which made her feel a *bit* guilty, but she did her best to push past that. She was still allowed to be human and get upset about things! Er, well, allowed to *Asari*, she supposed. That phrase had some problems when encountering alien life, didn't it? 'Allowed to be a sapient' just didn't quite have the same ring to it.

Anyway, she was in a better mood!

Which was awesome, because it was time to start doing the actual planning for taking down the Shadow Broker! As the one who'd been collecting all the data up to this point, even if she wouldn't be involved with the assault team, it was up to her to start the briefing! They weren't taking any risks of leaks, with the entire group, all five of them plus Kix, gathered in a makeshift war room off Rylia and Kara's lab/workshop. That space was under the land that had once held the scrapyard, and which was still covered with holographic illusions showing that scrapyard being slowly cleared out.

The room wasn't *that* makeshift, since Rylia had thought ahead, bringing in some decent furniture, wall displays, and the secure holoprojection table they were all seated around. She was at the foot of the table, not the head, since she was only doing the background brief. After she was done Bruce, who was at the head of the conference table, would lead everyone through the actual planned operation and their parts in it.

For the moment, Rylia stood and flicked on the central holo-projector, showing a world wracked with massive storms.

"Alright ladies and gent! This is Hagalaz! Based on my own dubious future-knowledge, Kara and I sent stealthed recon probes using Kryptonian hyperdrives to investigate this planet some time ago. Thankfully, they were able to *confirm* by dubious future-knowledge, by locating a custom-built cruiser-sized vessel that routinely rides within the storms for concealment."

Rylia punched the advance button for the holoprojector, and it moved on from showing the planet to showing the best scans they'd been able to get of the Broker's ship. It was very clearly a one-off special design, matching absolutely nothing any of them had ever seen. Heavy armor, scarred despite how thick it was, massive lightning rods and capacitors to store the captured energy from the storm, and a layer of what the display quickly labeled as motion dampeners.

"We actually had to build an entire second generation of probes to get these scans, as our initial set couldn't survive the storms while maintain stealth. Note that the *Ghost* has been specifically equipped to do so, using what we learned from the probes. That said, there are a number of hazards just getting *into* the ship, such as the lightning capacitors that harvest power from the storm for the Broker's ship."

Bruce was the one that would go over those obstacles, and how the team was going to tackle them, so Rylia moved on. This time, when she shifted the projector, it showed a small *Salarian-built* frigate docking with the massive cruiser, while both were in a lighter patch of storm than the Broker's vessel normally rode.

“The armor is thick enough that we have little data on the internals of the ship. However, the one critical detail we *have* gathered is that the ship is resupplied only very rarely. Always by the same ship, likely to minimize how many people *outside* the Broker’s ship have any idea where to find it. The ship thus becomes our only real clue to extrapolate from. Thankfully, it wasn’t *that* hard to track down.”

Another advance of the holoprojector version of a slideshow, this time to show the frigate in question, docked elsewhere.

“While the ship is originally Salarian-built, it’s an older model, lost to Terminus Pirates a couple of decades ago. Regular port of call is Omega, with a mixed crew aboard. Yet, the Captain and First Mate are both Salarian...who suspiciously look a lot like two of the senior crew that were supposedly killed by the pirates.”

Lucy, who was seeing this data for the first time, leaned forward at that, raising a finger. Rylia waved for her to say whatever was on her mind, and wasn’t too surprised by the question.

“What are the odds this whole thing is STG run, given the Salarian connection?”

Rylia shrugged, but she’d expected that question, so she had her logic in order.

“Not very likely, but not impossible. While the loss of the frigate *could* be intentional, and the two Salarians *could* be STG, the limited future-knowledge we have doesn’t support it. The STG, if they knew the location of the Broker vessel as that would imply, would never have allowed it to stay in the hands of a former test subject. Still, it isn’t *entirely* impossible that the Yahg was a pasty of some sort, merely allowed to *believe* he was the Broker.”

Lucy nodded acceptance, even if she looked a little less than fully convinced. Which was fine. Rylia wasn’t completely sure she could trust any of her ‘future knowledge’ either, after all. Though enough things *had* checked out, such as Miranda’s situation, that she was considering it at least *mostly* reliable. At least the bits that were already established before she started sending butterflies with lasers on their heads out to derail things.

“More likely, what we’re looking at is a pair of traitors who were working for the Broker from the start and stole the vessel specifically for resupply use. While not explicitly a stealth ship, Salarian frigates are universally stealthier than most Mass Effect craft. Acquiring it to make quiet supply runs for his main base is somewhat logical, and keeping the crew from knowing where they were going wouldn’t be overly difficult. In fact...”

Rylia triggered another ‘slide’ advance, shifting the holoimage to one that displayed a breakdown of the known crew of the frigate...including a high rate of turn over figure.

“...we’re fairly sure that the high rate of turn over for this particular ship means only the officers have any interaction with the Broker. We *hope* this means that his ship is largely automated, with a minimum of crew and mostly mech-based security. This would fit well with the Broker’s desire for absolute secrecy, and also be a best-case scenario for us. For that, however, it’s time to turn this discussion over to the Bruce, since he’ll be managing the team for the actual assault.”

Rylia motioned for Bruce to take the floor, even as he stood and took control of the holoprojection.

“As Ms. T’aani said, I’ll be commanding the teams for the assault itself. We have scans of both the outer hull, and some penetration into the interior. Based on those, I’ve determined the surface assault isn’t viable with most of our assault force vulnerable to the lighting discharges. As such, we’ll need to go in from the docking port area the resupply frigate uses. From there, we’ll have three goals for the assault team when things kick off...”

Rylia sat and listened as Bruce walked everyone through the plan. She and Kara would only be involved in this operation in the sense that they were assigned to pilot the *Ghost*. Still, even if she never intended to lead troops, absorbing what she could from the tactics involved would likely come in useful sooner or later. Even if it was just in planning what sort of gear would best suit future units when they started working on the Terminus Systems.

Chapter 23 – Assault

“Everyone make sure you’re ready! We’ll be entering the storm in thirty seconds! Contact with the Shadow Broker’s ship two minutes, twenty seconds after that!”

Ignoring the statement from Rylia, Kara focused down on the controls and sensors of the *Ghost*. Thankfully, she’d been a fairly experienced pilot long before being summoned by Rylia, and she’d spent a great deal of time test piloting this ship specifically. Which, given how unusual a ship it was in many different ways, was important. Even aside from the wild mix of technologies in it, there was also the little detail that the *Ghost* was *barely* an assault shuttle, despite that having been the original goal.

It was, frankly, a little too big to be considered that way by the rest of the galaxy. This galaxy, at least. Part of the reason for that was that the version of the Slipspace Drive they’d managed to make out of local materials could only be shrunk so much, and that ‘so much’ wasn’t enough for a true small craft in the way this galaxy thought of them. The other part,

however, was that they'd always intended the *Ghost* to be used for this operation and needed it to carry enough of their Commando Mechs to matter.

The Alliance Kodiak, for comparison sake, had a max capacity of fourteen, twelve troops and a pair of pilots. Unless you were Shepard, and possibly not even then depending on how accurate the narrative Rylia knew was, trying to take a Cruiser-sized ship with a dozen troops was insanity. Instead, the *Ghost* was large enough to handle twice that number of sentient soldiers...or four times the number if most of your troops were mechs that could fold for storage. That meant they were currently carrying 40 of the best commando mechs they'd been able to make in the 'troop' compartment, plus Bruce, Momo, and Lucy. While Kara and Rylia flew the ship.

All of that meant that the ship was actually around 25 meters long. Too big to *really* be considered a 'shuttle' by the standards of this galaxy, but a bit too small to be considered a corvette. Though only a little on the small side for the latter, as the smallest corvettes used by some species tended to be around 35 meters, while the smallest frigates tended to be around a hundred. The Salarian frigate that resupplied the Broker ship regularly was around a hundred and forty, while the Broker Cruiser itself was close to six hundred.

None of which was relevant, save for the little detail that the *smaller* places a Kodiak might have put down on the outside of the Cruiser weren't viable for the *Ghost*, even if they hadn't been afraid of what the lightning would do to the mechs. Instead, they would be hitting the secure airlock normally used for the resupply frigate, which had *risks*, as it was likely to be defended. Still, it was their best option unless they wanted to try getting multiple smaller shuttles onto the ship in rough weather. After all, the Broker wasn't expecting guests, so his ship was currently riding deep in the storm.

Thankfully, the *Ghost* had been built specifically to handle *that* too.

"Engaging atmospheric flow shields."

Rylia was the one that spoke this time, her hands moving calmly as she put action to her words. Those specific shields had been her and Kara's answer to the early probes not being capable of surviving a search through the planetary storms. Proper full shields, or even the cruder kinetic barriers used by Citadel species, would have ruined any attempt at stealth. Yet attempting to navigate the high winds and lightning of the storms *without* shielding would have been a creative form of suicide.

Enter the Atmosphere Flow Shield.

The AFS was a much lower-power option, which relied on creating a tight-to-the-ship, shaped deflection field which encouraged turbulence in the atmosphere to *flow* around it. Even lightning discharges were guided by a careful field of static that created a path of least resistance which would drag any lightning strike into gliding past the ship. It wasn't perfect, something displayed as they entered the leading edge of the storm and began to experience low-grade turbulence.

Yet, even as they penetrated deeper, heading for the probes that were keeping an eye on the Broker's ship, the turbulence remained minimal. Better yet, the low power signature of the AFS system wasn't enough to be picked up by even the best sensors. Not against the background noise of the storm itself, at least. Something they'd tested extensively with the probes that had been keeping an eye on the Broker's cruiser for months.

"One minute to contact. Prepare for extreme violence and possible death!"

Kara snorted, amused at Rylia's 'cheery' message, even as she leaned heavily on the probes' feeds to guide their vector. They were coming in intentionally hot, under no delusion that they would be able to maintain stealth once physically in contact with the Cruiser.

"30 seconds. 20. 10. Contact! Breaching protocol deployed!"

They weren't stupid enough to go directly through the main airlock. Instead, they'd created a breaching frame using chemical cutters and explosives. Kara locked the *Ghost* to a spot just off from the airlocks, and Rylia deployed the breaching mechanism. It worked, thankfully, punching a hole into a corridor off the main route that would have connected to the airlock. The whole sequence taking less than forty-five seconds. Their own airlock latched onto the breach and the first mechs poured into the Broker ship, even as Lucy began an EWAR assault on the various security systems that weren't physically air-gapped.

Less than three minutes later, the *Ghost* was empty save for them and a quartet of guard bots. Settling in for a tense wait, they listen to the tactical channel as the assault began in full...

... ..

Lucy was almost offended at how *shit* the Broker's cyber security was. Oh, she was sure it was top tier by local standards. But compared to what she regularly had to cut through back in Night City it was pitiful. Something that was already costing the Broker, as it turned out Rylia had been right. The *vast* majority of the security aboard ship were mechs. Mechs that had *wireless connections to the ship's systems for coordination*. With how

easily she cut through the security, she managed to outright disable the first several waves of mechs, and turn many of those deeper in the ship against each other.

Pity that the Broker or his people weren't *complete* idiots, and the mechs cut themselves out of the wireless system before she got *all* of them.

Not that it was going to do the Broker's people much good, considering how much *better* the commando mechs that Kara and Rylia had built were. So far, she, Momo and Bruce had yet to lift a finger on the physical side of things, as their own mechanical muscle cut a swath through the defenses. A few were lost to weapons emplacements that were on hardlines, but those were few and far between, with most of them on networks that Lucy was hacking and disabling in real time.

Honestly this looked like it was going to be...

Instinct was all that saved her as she folded under the omni-blade of a Salarian who appeared out of thin air, his high-quality tactical cloak failing as he moved too fast for it to compensate. Momo was there an instant later, concussing the bastard with a staff, even as Bruce tangled with and quickly defeated a second assassin. Growling and kicking herself for underestimating the enemy, Lucy focused on looking for the telltales of a cloak. Even good ones had weaknesses to high-quality cyber-optics like her own, and she quickly spotted two more assassins moving into position.

One died as she whipped her mono-wire through his body, his barrier not reacting to that sort of attack. The second she pegged with her blaster, but didn't tag him anywhere fatal. Thankfully, Momo wasn't as squeamish about killing as Bruce was, and followed up knocking out the first assassin with a shot of her own that blew a hole through the head of the one Lucy had wounded.

More cautious now that that they'd encountered *living* opponents, they nevertheless pressed forward. The *Ghost* was jamming all outgoing communications, but that could only happen for so long before someone realized there might be an issue with their boss...

... ..

They'd lost half the commando mechs cutting their way through a small private army of opposing, lesser quality mechs. Along with them, and causing most of their losses, had been a handful more of living opponents, not all of them Salarian. Yet, they'd reached the central operations area of the ship all the same, with Momo producing a breaching charge using her Quirk.

Eight of the remaining commando mechs created a two-row deep phalanx of physical shields on command, ready to push into what was undoubtedly the best

protected section of the ship. The charge went off, punching a hole in the heavily armored door, and the mechs advanced with no hesitation.

Their shields immediately started to get hammered by auto-turrets, and the first row went down in the process of slagging those turrets in return. The second continued advancing, only to be slammed into by a glowing blue figure. An Asari commando, who managed to destroy one of them and scatter the other three. Lucy and Bruce both reacted to the charge, monowire and a batarang slicing toward the Asari, only for her biotic barrier to fair much better than a mechanical kinetic barrier would have, blocking both.

The Asari *charged* again, but was met by Momo with a Quirk-Created riot shield, causing the Asari to stun herself striking it, even if Momo stumbled back in turn. Lucy fired point blank, as did two of the command droids, and one of their hits burned through the biotic barrier, causing the woman to cry out in agony. Then, Bruce was there, and with her barrier down she wasn't able to handle him in close combat. She went down in a heap, even as Momo took advantage and charged into the control room, riot shield first.

That shield saved her from the small arms fire of three Salarians, and Momo's own weapon, this one an *actual* blaster purchased via the marketplace rather than a lastech weapon, fired back with stun rings. They hit one of the Salarians, utterly ignoring his barrier and dropping him to the deck. The other two kept firing, but missed it when Bruce somehow ghosted into the room past Momo.

One of them *didn't* miss it a moment later as he found himself in close combat with Batman, even as the third found himself pinned by Lucy's careful shooting, with Lucy restrained trying not to hit anything important. Momo strafed, dropping the riot shield in favor of a flash grenade they were all equipped to ignore, with both remaining Salarians crying out in agony as the flash went off two seconds after she tossed it. Both went down seconds later, one to another stun shot, one to a fist.

Lucy was in the room a moment later, jacking into the main systems and assaulting the firewalls. They were good, better than she expected, but no better than decent Corpo Ice. Not even Black Ice, as this reality lacked that sort of thing for the most part. She burned through the Ice in less than thirty seconds, even as the other two secured their prisoners.

"I have access. Disabling system purge and redeploying mechs to sweep remaining mercs. Looks like they tried to send a standby message to the network. I'm checking it for malware or alerts and letting it through to the majority of contacts..."

Lucy's work would continue for some time, soon aided by Bruce, Rylia, and Kara, as they both took control of the ship...and the Network.

Within less than twenty hours, the Broker Network would be running smoothly again, no one the wiser for the Shadow Broker having been replaced. As for the three Salarians...they would prove to *all* be the Shadow Broker, a combined team that had been running the Shadow Broker personality, but hadn't been either STG *or* the original Broker. Who the original Shadow Broker had been, they would never find out. Given how long the network had existed, they suspected that this scene had played out many times in the past. Now, they just needed to work hard to make sure it didn't happen to *them*.

Starting, probably, with the Yahg currently held in the prison section for experimentation. They would need to quietly drop him back on his homeworld before he got ideas about trying to duplicate their own takeover...

Chapter 24 – Assessment

August, 2168 CE

It was Bruce opening the meeting this time, with Lucy largely absent.

Two weeks had passed since taking over the Broker Network, and Rylia and Momo had been forced to return to Nevos, as they were more or less public figures who couldn't be out of sight for long without raising questions. Thankfully, QEC was secure enough that they could hold a remote meeting safely. Thus, Kara and Bruce, the former of which had stayed behind to put the Broker's ship back in order with several batches of labor and combat mechs they'd brought in, were dialing in from Hagalaz. Meanwhile, Momo and Rylia were connecting from Nevos, and Lucy was busy playing Shadow Broker while Bruce updated them on various matters.

"The Broker Network is stable, with only a few minor hiccups with people who knew enough to be suspicious. The only outstanding issue on the information security front is the resupply frigate, which will be taken care of quietly the next time they arrive for regular resupply. We did find several other alarming matters that we'll need to take action on fairly swiftly."

Bruce looked down, presumably at a set of notes. Considering what a steel trap his mind normally was, the fact he was referencing anything was a slightly concerning indication of how overwhelming the information flow had been. Though he had already reassured them that they were getting a handle on it, with a team of R3 and JN-66 droids helping manage the load now that the initial rush was taken care of.

"The biggest issue is whispers of a Batarian slave raid being planned to hit the human colony of Mindoir in a few months. Thankfully, we've caught this early enough that

we can arrange some subtle assistance. First by using Broker assets we want eliminated anyway to provide reasons for Alliance ships to be closer by. Second, by sending quiet rumors to the locals a few days before the raid so they will be on alert. Third, by having a few elite mercenary assets ‘just happen’ to be passing through when the raid hits. Combined, it should minimize losses while eradicating the slaver group.”

Everyone else nodded. None of them particularly liked the idea of letting there be losses *at all*, of course. But that slaver group was going to hit *someone*. Better, if they knew the target, to arrange for that target to be enough of a trap to minimize the damage and eliminate the threat. Rylia was the least comfortable with that sort of decision, lacking the experience that everyone else involved had...but that’s why she’d summoned them in the first place. To cover for her weaknesses or lack of experience in their areas of expertise.

“Aside from that attack, there are a number of smaller operations we can arrange to fail without being obvious. Though the fact that nearly half of them are being quietly sponsored by the Batarian Hegemony means we need to arrange some manner of political move to effect long-term change. We’re still looking through the immense windfall of information we’ve gained to identify how we might do that. A political expert may be an additional slot we need to fill, though even with the Marketplace, finding one that isn’t corrupt may be an issue.”

All three women snorted at the utterly *dry* tone Bruce delivered that last bit with. Still, he wasn’t entirely wrong. Rylia would have to start poking at the Marketplace to see just who she could find. Though getting someone with military experience so they could start planning the Terminus operation and what it would require might be more critical. That was a discussion for another time, however, as Bruce indicated he was finished with his own overview and would forward everyone a more complete list of current or upcoming problems. Kara was the next one to speak up, having been charged with one other critical task beyond getting the Broker’s ship squared away.

“I have largely positive news regarding Hagalaz itself. Rylia’s thoughts about the mining operations here were accurate. While operations were abandoned, it *wasn’t* because the mines were played out. It was only due to the comparative difficulty of mining a second-tier garden world, compared to several other opportunities that appeared on more easily accessible worlds.”

Kara made a motion that caused the display to split, shuffling their respective holo projections off to one side and bringing up a window showing...what appeared to be an *operational* mining facility.

“Perhaps the best news is that the *Broker* knew about the mining facilities. Wherever the Shadow Broker was operating out of *before*, this ship is only a few decades old, and a significant chunk of the materials used in its creation were quietly sourced from heavily automated mining operations set up by a past Broker. They were offline when I found them, as they didn’t want even the small number of sentients they needed for operation to be aware Hagalaz was in use.”

Kara flashed a triumphant grin at them as she explained why they were operational *now*.

“The operations were carefully shuttered so they could be brought back online easily, and it turned out that a JN-66 is entirely capable of handling the bits that needed more intelligence. I took one out of the pool, along with a pair of R3s and a dozen of our RK-1 mechs. That was enough to get this particular site up and running at a basic level, mining several useful metals for ship hulls. There are two more sites that can pull rare earths needed for electronics, too. It’s hardly a comprehensive list of all materials we need, but a lot of what we need in *bulk* can be pulled out of either the current mines, or others we can reactivate with a bit more effort.”

Rylia was grinning hugely now. This was even better than she’d hoped for! She’d expected to be able to reactivate some of the mines, but hadn’t considered that the *Broker* might have had the same thought and already done some of the work for them. She spoke up next, once it was clear Kara had said her piece.

“Perfect! Excellent work, both of you. Kara, I want a list of exactly what the mines are capable of pulling out. I’d like to get a base set up on Hagalaz for at least basic manufacturing, as well as command and control, as soon as possible. Eventually, our various expansions into new fields are going to draw too much attention to Nevos, and hiding even our, currently limited, weapons production here will become increasingly risky. Moving most of that off planet is going to become important, sooner rather than later.”

All three of the others nodded at that, though it was Momo who interjected next. She brought up both a point that Rylia *had* considered and an option that she *hadn’t*.

“On that subject, Rylia? Sooner or later you’re going to have to move around a lot, in a way that doesn’t attract attention. You’ll have to spend time here, plus time in a more concealed set of labs somewhere. Time on Hagalaz and, mostly likely, a dozen other places besides. All without ‘vanishing’ from the public eye too often. To that end, I think we need to consider leaning into your ‘rich Maiden’ persona and have a custom ship either built or rebuilt for you.”

While Rylia blinked, thrown off kilter by the idea, even as her brain raced with pros and cons, Bruce nodded. With a considering look, he took control of the central display and quickly brought up a number of ships for comparison.

“An Asari frigate, perhaps. There are a number of companies in the Republics that build military-adjacent frigates for richer Matrons and Matriarchs. Not true military vessels, but second-line ships that would be suitable for militias. They use them for exactly the sort of thing Yaoyorozu is implying. A combined mobile base of operations and status symbol. It would be easily sold as an abruptly wealthy Maiden wanting a status symbol, while still being practical enough that it makes sense, given you already have operations in multiple system with the Orbital Salvage facility.”

Rylia winced as *prices* started to fill in next to the ships. Still, they weren't *that* prohibitive, compared to the amount of money she was making between the various businesses at this point. On the lower end were more corvette-sized ships, priced anywhere between twenty to a hundred million. The actual frigates started closer to half a billion and shot up well into the billions.

Still, even with money pouring *out* to expand various businesses, they had liquid assets totaling nearly three billion credits just sitting idle. *Erotic Delights* was *still* struggling to meet demand, and they'd made multi-billion credit deals to license the designs for several different technologies. Just the security field technology used in the Tentacle Bondage machine had been licensed out to several manufacturers for close to a billion credits in total, and it had hardly been the only technology they'd done that sort of thing with.

No, even with all the money they were *spending*, they had the assets to absorb a major purchase like Momo and Bruce were suggesting. The more she considered it, the more it made sense, too. If they ordered the ship custom, it wouldn't seem even slightly odd to the yard building it for her to want a significant R & D lab/workshop aboard, given what she was famous for. So long as they were careful who they staffed the ship with, they could run most of their research out of the ship, allowing her to keep working as they moved around the galaxy.

So long as they didn't spend *long* periods of time out of sight, they could duck over to Hagalaz for weapons testing and such, and no one would think much of it. Meanwhile, Momo could move around and make deals as well, and she and Kara could *probably* use the Salvage Yard facilities to upgrade the ship on the sly. With *careful* choices of who operated the ship, no one would realize it was much more heavily armed and protected

than it seemed. Which, combined with the idea that a moving target was harder to hit, would also add a layer of protection for Rylia in the long-term.

Heck, it would even give Rylia and Kara an excuse to study a larger ship in production. Bribe the manufacturer a bit to let them get involved in the design work and it would double as learning the practical lessons they needed in larger-scale ship design. Yes, the more she thought it over, the more useful boxes this seemed to tick.

“Alright. I can certainly see the value. This isn’t a high-priority task just yet, but Bruce, please start a check on the various manufacturers to find one we can work with, you know the sorts of things to prioritize far better than I.”

Bruce nodded, clearly already creating a mental checklist.

“Meanwhile. Kara, you and I will get together on the subject and figure out what we need built into such a ship. Including how we can get away with adding some blank space that we can sneak upgrades into. Momo? Staffing an entire frigate with just Summons isn’t practical. So see if you can track down some of the people we’ll need and start vetting them, with Bruce running final background checks. A mixed-raced crew would be best, but we’ll be expected to use predominantly Asari.”

Kara and Momo nodded at their own pieces of the puzzle, and Rylia leaned back.

“Alright. Table that for now, as it’s relatively low priority. For the moment, let’s get back to actionable details now that we have access to the Broker network. Bruce, I assume you’ve pulled the data on failing companies with dubious debts I asked for? Lets see if we can find a few to target for acquisition. Both for manufacturing capacity and to poach some of their talent.”

The meeting would go on for several hours, but none of them complained. They got a *lot* done over that time, after all. Even if it was still only a fraction of what they could use the Broker network for, now that they had it. They had to start *somewhere* on making use of it...

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