

Fanatical Publishing's

Weekly Review

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Original Prose is brought to you by [Lurk and his friends](#)

The four of them awoke in a narrow stone cell.

They were unbound, and soon had explored the limits of the small room. They weren't much.

It was about eight feet by ten feet, there was a narrow stone bench running on one of the narrow sides, and the opposite wall was made of iron bars in which a metal door was placed.

Lurk tried to pick the lock, then gave up in frustration.

Abraham was struck by a thought and turned to Rushell. "Could you try to magic the door open?" he asked.

Rushell shook his head. "I tried, but cannot perform magic here: I think she must have constructed this cell in such a way that spells cannot be cast from within."

"There must be some way to escape," Heather said.

"What do you think this is, a fairy tale?" Lurk scoffed. "You think I'm gonna just lean against the wall, and somehow push on the exact right place to hit some secret switch?" he said, folding his arms and leaning against the wall. Lurk was so intent on what he was saying, he didn't notice a small stone that moved slightly under his weight.

"And then, some hole is going to open in the solid stone wall," Lurk said, while a hole opened in the stone wall right beside him. "And if that actually happened," Lurk went on, completely oblivious to what was going on right next to him. "I suppose you'd expect me to go right on talking, completely oblivious to what was going on right next to me!"

"Lurk?" Rushell said, trying to get his attention.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm talking at you!" Lurk snapped. "Where was I? Yeah, that kind of thing happens all the time in fairy tales, but this is real life!"

"Lurk!" Abraham said.

"That sort of thing does not happen in real life!" Lurk bulldozed on. "You and me will go through our whole lives, and never see anything like that!"

"Lurk!" Heather barked.

"Oh shut up, I'm talking here!"

Abraham, Rushell and Heather exchanged a glance, then turned and walked right past Lurk into the secret passage

"Where you goin'?" Lurk exclaimed, then did a double-take. "What- hey, wait for me!"

As soon as he was through, the secret door shut, leaving no sign that the prisoners had ever been there.

RAKUEN'S DUSK 1

Rylan K Clarke
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Hello dear readers. This is, as I hope you will be aware, my first appearance in this E-Zine. The first of many, I hope. It is doubtful that few, if any, are aware of my work. That which I put out onto the inter-webs can be found at my DeviantART account, here: <http://thevictoriouswolf.deviantart.com/> I don't upload things often, due to school, studying and <INSERTEXCUSE3HERE>, but when I do, I erm, well, do. I would say that I make sure that it is of a high quality, but that would be both cliché, and biased, considering it is coming from the Author. I guess you'll just have to judge for yourself!

Anyway, this particular piece that I have brought before you today, is a revision of one of the items on that profile, Dawn of the Dusk (<http://thevictoriouswolf.deviantart.com/gallery/#/d4pp5yu>). It is influenced very heavily by my love of a particular anime. I hope to turn this into a serial, though this is dependent on feedback. Bah, I lie. I'll do it anyway- I have plans, you see. Big ones, that menace with spikes of brilliance. I hope.

In the wake of a new day follows the path of the new.

It followed day, then night.

Repeat.

Details change. Details always change. However, nobody cares about details. Why should they? Details are not to be planned; they are to be appropriated for.

Adjusted,

Twisted,

Mocked.

Any fool can turn a detail to his advantage, provided he knows how. Despite this, it is details that are remembered, that have to be remembered because it is the details that matter. They always matter. They are the half the plan, half the fun is their unpredictability, and nothing should be predictable, least of all wolves.

But that was what had happened. He had become predictable. It was the same routine, every day. He had to. Ruts were what kept him alive. The grim foreboding that the after days had brought with them kept him here. True, wolves had recovered the land. The

Humans were gone now, been made to go.

Killed,

Wiped out,

Destroyed.

Their greed, faults and determination to destroy had brought them to ruin and virtually everything else, too. His ancestors had survived, and so he existed, and the planet had been recovering since.

But now he was here. That was what really mattered. He was here, all alone. Good. Good ridded. To hell with them, he was busy with him, himself, number one. He needed no one else. It didn't matter what he wanted. What mattered was what he needed.

Escape,

Freedom,

Adventure.

Rakuen

His body stirred, awakening like some Titan escaping to wreak havoc on the world tree. His orbs slowly opened. His optics springing to life, a sea of ice blue coloured them. The morning dawn flooded the room, as rays of golden torch-light, searching for life. They found it: Him, Dusk.

How ironic.

The White Wolf turned his maw downwards, and nipped at the exposed underbelly, his own way to make sure he was awake, that this was not just some dream, or nightmare. Or perhaps it would be something prophetic this time, perhaps... Lying on his back, he turned his gaze, to look about his location. He remembered now; an old shack, in the middle of some forgotten forest. This was real.

The shack was a small, one room building, and was simple enough. He was lying on a bed, his head next to a rotten headboard. The shack being rectangular, the bed had, in an effort to be economical with space, been pushed against one of the walls which made up

its width. The window hung above it, crooked, as if like a slanted picture, a vision of the outside. A dead world, with a cold climate gripping it, the forest itself was still in autumn- leaves of gold, brown, yellow and red dangled on barely living trees, with piles of foliage everywhere. The rest of the shack was empty, barring a small table on the opposite side to the bed, with a chair near it, but that was toppled on its side, the bones of its former owner having long been washed away, by the wind and the rain and the snow.

Letting a yawn of sorts escape his jaw, he turned his body, and rolled over onto his stomach. He was desperate to break this doomed timetable of boredom. He didn't care if it kept him living. He wanted to live. He wanted to see Rakuen. The Paradise of old, The Paradise the Pups would dream of, The Paradise Elders would scorn over. The Paradise where he could be happy and... And... He should just pick a direction and walk. No... That would never work. He would be killed if he was on his own, at least. He needed help, companions, as it were. No, he needed something more, if he were to succeed:

Details.

A STORY OF A CLOWN AND A LACK OF A TITLE #2

Darren James Mason
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Given that Cirque de la Vie was a circus of laughably small size, a team to clean and pack up was another luxury we could not afford. We ran the entire circus ourselves, with help from local townsfolk every now and then. Fortunately, circus folk have a knack for precision and efficiency. The big top, chairs, tables and other pieces were packed and we were ready to move out by midday.

The circus schedule was never benevolent. She was the bitchy daughter of Father Time whose hug was tighter than a straitjacket. We could spend three nights in one town, one night in the next and half a day to travel the distance in between. We traveled by day, set up in the evening, slept until early morning, had breakfast, practiced until afternoon, rested a bit before show time and then the routine would start again. The schedule kept the circus alive, but left the performers as little more than corpses – highly skilled corpses.

Up until then I had lived a relatively laid back life. I still had to do most of the things the performers did. I cleaned up, set up, practiced, bathed the tigers, repaired props, oiled the bicycles and other glamorous things people did in a circus. Those activities tended to take up most of my time, but come show time I was a free man. Everything would already be set up so I had little to nothing to do.

I often spent that time reading books that Harry had collected when he was younger. He no longer had the time to return to those books, nor did he have reason to. The man was, in himself, entertaining enough never to need any other form of amusement. Some would consider that a form of insanity.

We set off as the sun reached its peak in the sky. The blistering summer heat was accentuated by the humidity of the Spanish air. Making a beeline for Girona, caravan passed groups of interested tourists and locals alike. At one point in the afternoon, we passed by a group of tourists that called us carnies. Circus folk do not like being called carnies because circus folk are some of the most skilled people in the world and carnies are freaks of nature that pride themselves on prostituting their abnormalities to savages. We feel a great deal of pity for carnies, but we also feel an equal amount of disgust.

Three nights in Girona came and went. The crowd was nothing notable. The odd heckler would often be silenced by the earsplitting cheer of the fans.

The shows opened with Klein's act. Juggling pieces of meat while riding a unicycle, Klein would flee from Sasha as she chased after him hungrily. Luckily for Klein, Sasha was nowhere near as fierce as the tigress she portrays. Klein had raised Sasha and her brother, Grayson since they were cubs and had been using them in his act for years.

Catherine's performance had men gawking at her. One man volunteered his wife for the

grape act and pleaded Catherine to aim low. Suffice to say, the wife borrowed the knife after the act.

Harry also got a fair amount of cheers and laughter followed by the applause that showed he was respected despite the fool he made of himself. The irrefutable stars of the shows, however, were the equestrian tricks of the Impeccable Schepps.

The Schepps always lived up to the adjective affixed to their name. Each member of the group of four had unrivaled balance acquired from training on horseback from the age of five.

Dante, the patriarch of the group, was noticeably the most skillful as evidenced by the crowd's awe-inspired silence at every flawless maneuver he pulled off. His wife, Bea, often served as his riding partner. Their eldest son, the sole reason Bea was no longer on par with Dante, was named Virgil. Virgil showcased Bea's fused with Dante's dauntlessness. Experience was the only thing that made Dante his superior. Damian was the youngest of the group and Virgil's riding partner. Like myself, Damian was adopted by the troupe when he was young. I do not know much about him as he was never exactly open to me about his past. He also provided musical accompaniment for the comedy pieces with his trumpet, which he was quite proficient at playing.

The shows ended with Klein cycling back into the middle of the ring as both Sasha and Grayson chased after him. The clown duo of Punchinello and Beezo then lured the tigers into their cage but unwittingly locked themselves inside as well. The cried pathetically as they were wheeled out of sight. End of the show. Bravo, bravissimo.

At the end of the second show, Harry came at me again. He dogged me for the name I still hadn't come up with. "Come up with a name yet, m'boy?"

"No, I haven't. Not for lack of trying, mind you." I sounded defensive more than anything.

"Aye, not for lack of trying, but perhaps lack of mind, you."

"Your wit and wordplay rarely fails you, Harry. You must be getting old. Getting closer to dying, are we?" I began to think I was gaining the upper hand.

"At least when I die, I'll have a name on my gravestone."

"Touché." I was wrong.

"Catherine told me you had another one of those nights."

"Gossip flies out of her mouth faster than knives from her hands." I was disappointed, but not at all surprised.

"She only told me because she cares. Maybe you should pay more attention to what those nights mean."

"I've been having those nights since I was three years old. If there's anything I've overlooked, it likely means nothing."

"Aye, it might mean nothing. Nothing yet, that is."

"What?"

"It means nothing only because it hasn't had the opportunity to mean anything."

"That makes even less sense than the last thing you said. You really are getting old, and senile."

"Think of it this way." He explained, "Do you understand how medicine works?"

"No, not at all." My confusion was growing, manifesting itself as I scratched the side of my head.

"If you had to use medicine to cure someone, would you understand it?"

"Aye, so you're telling me I should find a way to give meaning to my traumatic experience by applying it?"

"Close enough." He leaned back and crossed his arms the way one would after making a clever point.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me how to do that."

"I'm a clown, m'boy. I'm not your fairy godmother."

"You'd look terrible in a dress anyway."

"And clown shoes would fit you better than glass slippers."

"I'll think about the name thing, aye? Just stop dogging me for it."

"Aye-aye, m'boy. Four days to go. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Harry."

As he walked away he turned back to me and said, "For the record, Harry the Harlequin looks marvelous in anything."

I couldn't argue with that.

Breakfast the next day was gleaming with proud smiles for a show well done. The Schepps laughed and praised each other, not bothering to praise the others. Aerialists were often pompous, but the Schepps kept to a tolerable degree. Klein spent his breakfast inside the cage with the tigers, scratching their bellies and praising them as he shared his food with them. I found the clowns and Catherine having a conference at the far end of the table from the aerialists.

I approached them and said, "It's funny how the intelligence in this group totals to nothing."

"Well, it's gone south now." Catherine rebutted. I could still feel her bitterness towards me swearing at her. Perhaps, she didn't let it pass, but rather she held it back and let it fester.

"Last night was really something, aye?" Harry said as he raised his mug at me.

"Yeah, it was. Did I cry good?" Beezo asked, showing his brilliance.

"Aye, Beezo. You did great. Didn't you hear the crowd?" I assured him.

"But Punchy cry gooder, right?" The question made me forget that Beezo wasn't the dumbest of the troupe. Punchinello was the Auguste of a duo lead by Beezo, who was also an Auguste. It was a case of the dumb leading the dumber.

"It isn't a competition, Punch" Harry intervened. Harry loved a good argument, but an argument between two morons would be anything but good.

"Anyway, what were you talking about?" I didn't often see those four conversing, so I was curious.

"A new act, kid. We're planning to collaborate to make something fantastic. It'll bring the house down." Catherine answered me with enthusiasm.

"Anything I could do to help?" I wasn't exactly eager to help, but I needed an excuse not to think of a name. Maybe I did lack the brain to come up with one.

"Help Punch here throw his voice properly. We need him to sound like a fat Italian baker."

Throwing my voice was one of the clown skills I was particularly adept at. The Schepps also taught me a thing or two about athletics but I was nowhere near as proficient as any of them. I couldn't juggle well and my slapstick skill was less than half that of Harry's. My voice, however, was my strong suit.

"Aye, I think I can do that. We'll work on it while on the way to Vidreres. You'll have to make space for me, though." I tried to hide my relief at having an excuse.

Girona was behind us by noon, earlier than usual. Beezo, Punchinello and I sat together in a carriage. Usually, I would stay in a wagon with the props, familiarizing myself with the various oddities circus life brings. At one point I fell asleep inside the wagon only to be woken up by the stabbing pain of a Kris snaking its way into my calf. The scar reminds me to keep the boxes closed.

Punchinello and I began practicing immediately. The fundamental issue we had was that Punchinello sounded like an idiot. He sounded like so much of an idiot that the idiocy pervaded every modulation I could think of. Nothing could mask it. Nothing could defeat it. Seeing that I could not beat it, I decided to join it. Rather, I decided to use it.

It all seemed natural after that hurdle. Punchinello executed line after line with precision stupidity. Beezo clapped enthusiastically at his partner's progress. Within an hour of departure from Girona, I was no longer in a carriage with two stupid clowns. I was in a carriage with a stupid clown and a stupid baker. I did not know whether to be proud or completely indifferent.

We arrived at Vidreres as the sun sank into the horizon. It was beautiful, the sky turning a rich gold as the birds flew to distances unknown. The atmosphere itself became a spectacle of beauty and wonder. The air around us became impregnated with the glorious magnificence that is a Spanish sunset. I had somewhere between two and five seconds to take it all in before we began setting up.

As I set up the quarter poles, I found myself distracted with thoughts of my birth. Harry's words often found a way to embed themselves in my subconscious and, delayed as the reaction may have been, they persuaded me into giving more thought to that day. I went back and forth from lucidity to daydream inebriation. I heard what I imagined my mother sounded like, the words I imagine she said to me. I saw it all. I relived it second by second in the span of five seconds, over and over again. I could make sense of nothing. I would have stayed teetering on the border of insanity were it not for the loud bang of another quarter pole promptly followed by the earsplitting sound of Harry screaming as it crashed down on his leg.

LEGEND OF ALEX FLYNN PROLOGUE

Leaving Life, Living Death

by Ahmad Yusri Bin Zambri of paragonflynn@gmail

“Well, here goes nothing then...”

She muttered under her breath as she carefully pushed open the dusty wooden door standing before her, revealing the darkened room that lay beyond. She was still very much unsure of what exactly she will discover within the dim room, yet still she pressed on. As she stood there at the edge of the small entryway, she couldn't help but wonder what could perhaps be hidden amidst the darkness of this mysterious room? She still didn't know why she even bothered all this effort to come all the way over to this kind of creepy and odd place. It was suppose to be just a simple joke, after all... It was actually suppose to disprove all those exaggerated rumours about this place but before she knows it, one thing quickly came after another; she somehow received an admittedly foolish dare by one of her friends to come here all by herself.

Or at least... she would like to consider them as one of her friends...

“This is for you, Amy...” The young girl spoke to herself in a hopeful tone, reminding her yet again about the entire reason why she accepted doing this stupid dare all by herself in the first place.

A harmless dare, that's what they told her... It's just a simple and harmless dare in order to prove her true self to them...

“Where's the harm in it, Charlotte?” They said, literally surrounding her...

“It's not like anyone will get hurt or something so why don't you just do it already, Charlotte? Unless you want to admit that you're just as scared as always...” They mocked and intimidated her...

“If you really want to be friends with us, Charlotte, you're going to have to go through with our whole 'initiation' thing! If you can just suck it up and do it already, then you're already one of us! It's as simple as that so how the hell could you not understand it?”

Fitting in with people you could call as friends... That's all she ever wished for and hence, here she is, nervously standing before an open doorway leading into a dark and mysterious room as her own two feet struggles to keep her standing.

She briefly wondered whether or not if it's too late to simply turn around now, go back home to her comfortable bed which is the most loyal thing she could think of, and just call it the end of the day. But she also knew somewhere inside her that she really couldn't do anything to change this now or else the other girls she consider as 'friends' probably wouldn't let her live this entire thing down for certainly quite a long time. They would probably keep bothering her and mocking her for possibly weeks, maybe even months...

And that is something she is definitely not looking forward to at all...

Well, it looks like she might actually have absolutely no choice at all.

“Oh well, just keep calm and carry on...” She tried to reassure herself as best she can.

“What could possibly go wrong if I just enter the room and let it all be over with? Who knows? Maybe I will learn something new and maybe I might even get a laugh out of this in the end when it’s all finally over. Ha, that’s right... Nothing could go wrong...” She desperately tries to find the silver lining in this whole ridiculous situation.

“Now then, Charlotte... What in the world are you waiting for?”

“Take a deep breath and just go ahead... Just take a step forward. He’s already waiting for you, I think...” She briefly closed her eyes and took a deep breath, hopeful that it could somehow calm her nerves.

After what seems to be a long while of self-debating, the young girl finally gained the courage within her to move both of her petrified legs and take the necessary few steps forward into the dark room that lies before her.

The uncomfortable stench of thick smoke and blistering leather immediately flooded her nose as she took her very first steps into the dimly-lit room. The thick smoke, reeking of a toasty cherry aroma, was quite uncomfortable and simply put, distracting for the young girl. It was for some unexplained reason, incredibly cold too. Surprisingly, it was even colder than the brisk autumn weather from the outside. The nervous young girl briefly took the time to tighten the brown sweater jacket she was wearing and completely fasten up all of her little buttons before she took another deep breath to calm her nerves yet again and continued on into the middle of the foggy room before her...

“Oh God, this place reeks!” She immediately regretted taking the deep breath earlier as she hesitantly cupped her nose and mouth with her hands, struggling to keep the stench of all the horrible smoke at bay.

“Why does this place smell like my Uncle?” She couldn’t help but stifle a minor gasp for the remaining small traces of clean air in this small room before she immediately waved her right arm right in front of her face, desperately trying to clear what’s left of her available breathing space.

As the thick smoke surrounding her began to somewhat clear ever so slightly by the young girl’s panicked efforts, her eyes peered through the veil of smoke as she tries her best to survey the room she was standing in.

“Where is that guy?” She wondered. “I am in the right place, right? ...Right?”

“Oh, God!” The young girl’s pale heart slightly skipped a beat at the shock and amazement to witness a small candle made out of wax suddenly igniting seemingly all by itself in the middle of the foggy room.

After quickly regaining her composure by repeatedly taking numerous deep breaths and trying not to accidentally gulped down a puff of smoke while she’s at it, she eventually realized that it was nothing more but a mere and simple candle.

“Really, Charlotte? That was very stupid of you...” She couldn’t believe that she was almost surprised by the fact of just a small candle in a dark room. Much as she hated to admit it and yet she still tries to deny it to this day, she was always an easily frightened girl...

“That’s probably got to be the oldest trick in how to appear- I don’t know, mystical, I guess...” Her overwhelming nervousness was slowly beginning to wane as she finally calmed herself down ever so slightly.

“Maybe the rumours about him were over-exaggerated, after all... Maybe Amy was right.”

The wax candle was resting in the middle of a small and ordinary circular table; the flickering flame seemingly danced around the thick cherry smoke of the dimly-lit room, its bright and reddish yellow flame was obviously apparent that it was the only thing illuminating the already dim room. The wooden table however was seemingly innocent and not very mystical or anything at all as it had nothing but detailed floral designs carved into it. Besides that, there was also just one simple wooden chair resting under the table, its design was also mirrored by the table with the many intricate carvings of flowers, leaves and the floral what-not sewn across it. Other than those few things, there actually weren’t that many stuff in this pretty small room.

“You would think he would at least try a bit harder to seem otherworldly or something...” She couldn’t help but be slightly a bit disappointed as her expectations were slowly being lowered.

“I guess Amy was probably mistaken or-”

“Ah! Hello there, young lady! Did you happen to be my next customer?”

The poor girl almost threw her entire body backwards as soon as she heard a thick and raspy voice suddenly calling out to her, slightly echoing in the small room.

She felt like her heart skipped yet another beat as she didn’t realize that there was an old man, properly dressed in a clean-cut and dapper black suit, neatly sitting on a crimson but very comfy-looking lavish chair across the wooden table before her.

“Oh God, what in the-? Where in the world did HE come from?! Why didn’t I see him there earlier?!” Her heart was ever racing as she helplessly took a step back towards the door behind her; she couldn’t help but to quickly rubbed both of her amber eyes, just to make sure if her eyesight wasn’t suddenly worse for the wear. They were still fine though...

Between his slightly receding hairline, his skinny stature and the many wrinkles adorned on his wide open forehead, he seemed like any other elderly man. But because of the tiny flickering candle on the table and the thick smoke of the foggy room surrounding him, it couldn’t help but give an atmospheric but mysterious flair about the otherwise kindly old man sitting before her in a rather gentle and patient demeanour.

It seems like he had actually been sitting there on his crimson cushioned chair for the entire time; his cheerful smile was still ever unchanging as he firmly kept his beady little

eyes onto the young girl's face, both of his white-gloved hands were tightly clasped onto each other as if he had been patiently waiting for seemingly quite a long time.

A perfectly normal man... Well, other than the fact that he seemingly appeared out of nowhere just a short moments ago...

"Where the heck did he come from? Did I see him just sitting over there? He- He wasn't there before, right? Could- Could- Don't tell me that the rumours could actually be true?" She still couldn't believe it herself even though she had just witnessed it not a few moments ago.

"Is something the matter, young lady?" The old man spoke up yet again out of her continued and ongoing silence; his polite and cheerful smile was still brimming on his wrinkled face.

"Uh... What? Oh no! Did I-? Oh no!" The young girl suddenly realized that she had been awkwardly standing there for the entire time, seemingly unresponsive to the old man's question and acknowledgement.

"Quick, Charlotte! Say something already! Don't be a fool! You don't want him to think that you're socially awkward or something, don't you?! Hurry up!" She literally panicked inside her head as she struggled and debated with herself on what to say next. She didn't want to admit it to anyone but she's not exactly... Let's say: 'good' at conversing with other people, let alone complete and total strangers. It was actually one of the reasons she was very nervous in doing this whole thing in the first place...

"I'm fine! Yes- Yeah, I'm fine!" She suddenly bellowed out loudly, much to the old man's pleasant surprise.

"Uh... Haha... Um... I'm- I'm fine..." She weakly muttered as she just realized at what she had done, she could almost feel all the blood flooding into her soft cheeks as she blushed a pinkish red colour.

"Darn it! Not a very good first impressions, Charlotte..." She scolded herself as she shamefully kept her gaze downwards, staring directly into her twiddling thumbs as a means of hopefully calming herself down in this embarrassing situation while she tries her best to deny her previous outburst from ever happening in the first place.

"Mwe-he-he-he!"

She was incredibly surprised to see that the old man was simply cackling loudly all to himself in response to her erratic outburst, causing her pinkish cheeks to turn to an even darker colour.

Her worst fear felt like it was actually coming true this time...

She assumed that the old man was actually laughing at her, mocking or making fun of her and she certainly did not like it one bit.

"What- What are you- What are you laughing at?" She demanded to know, unknowingly pouting sulkily as she struggled to simply utter the question from her quivering mouth because of the sheer sight of the old man simply laughing before her.

Her heart felt like it continued to sink and sink and sink even further as she witnessed a stranger laughing at how strange she behaved...

“Why, I’m laughing at you, of course! Who else happen to be in this room, young lady?” The old man finally stopped cackling to himself as he simply gave her a very direct answer, much to her shock and bemusement as she was obviously taken aback.

“Oh no...”

Her worried mind fearfully began to wander off, thinking about all the possible outcomes in the distant future. She began to wonder...

What if the old man would tell everyone he knows about Charlotte, the strange and weird girl?

What if they too started telling everyone else they knew?

What if one of them somehow happens to be someone from school or maybe related to one of the students from school?

What if all the students find out? What if Amy finds out? What in the world would she think? She and her popular friends would probably think that Charlotte is a ridiculous girl or something and it would probably get rid all of her chances to be considered as a friend to them.

The young girl feared that her carefully protected social status in school would be completely ruined in an instance!

She was obviously panicking over this admittedly trivial matter as frightened tears were slowly beginning to swell over her weary amber eyes...

“No, no, no! I meant no disrespect at all, young lady. Please don’t cry! Please don’t cry!” The old man quickly added, pleading for the young girl to stop the tears from flowing down her cheeks.

“Wha-What?” She muttered confusingly in response.

“If you don’t stopped crying, young lady... Then I’ll- I’ll- I think I would start crying too!” The old man exclaimed before he quickly covered his entire face with both of his hands and immediately started making overly loud nonsensical sobbing noises.

“Boo Hoo! I am crying! I am so sad right now! No one could be more depressed than me! Waaaaa~!” The old man bellowed loudly in a very strange and yet oddly sarcastic manner as he still continued to make loud nonsensical sobbing noises.

The young girl simply watched in complete confusion, her previous fears had been completely erased from her mind as she instead, wondered what in the world was the old man trying to do.

It wasn’t that long before she immediately realized the old man’s true intentions and couldn’t help but smile...

“You can stop now... I’m fine now, really.” She couldn’t help but slightly chuckle at the

old man's strange crying behaviours when she finally realized that there were no signs of him stopping at all.

“That’s wonderful! Excellent! Incredible! Or as you kids say nowadays, awesome!” The eccentric old man suddenly propped back up into his crimson chair and happily waved his arms around in the air, his brimming smile quickly returned onto his wrinkled and all traces of him seemingly crying from before had completely disappeared within seconds.

“Now then, let us try again, shall we? Do you happen to be my next customer, young lady?” The old man brightens his smile even more as he asked her the very same question.

“That’s right. I- I am your next customer.” She told him the answer he wanted to hear in a hushed and meek tone but at least this time, her voice was at least a bit more self-composed, much to the old man’s apparent glee and joy.

His beady eyes immediately lit up with such excited fervour as soon as he heard her expected words that she somewhat half-expected him to suddenly leap out from his crimson lavish chair and did a little jig or something crazy. But sadly, none of those things actually happened even though it would certainly make for quite an exciting show.

“Wonderful! Wonderful!” He excitedly exclaimed as he waved both of his skinny arms into the air yet again in order to signify his joyful glee.

She couldn’t help but simply stand there, giving him a slight but awkward smile as she didn’t know exactly what to do in response to the old man’s overzealous excitement.

“Ah! Forgive me! Forgive me, young lady! Where in the world are my manners? Don’t be shy! Don’t be shy! Take a seat and make yourself at home!” As soon as the inviting words left his smiling mouth, he gently waved one of his hands into the air and lo and behold, the wooden chair, fitted with such detailed floral decorations, suddenly slid out from under the table all by itself as it somehow revealed itself to her.

With the decorated wooden chair waiting for her and the kindly old man’s very apparent excited anticipation on his wrinkled but kindly face, she knew that there’s certainly no way that she could turn back now. It certainly seemed like she have no choice in the matter but to slowly approach the wooden chair and simply take a seat as she was instructed.

“Thanks...” She muttered as she hesitantly shambled her feet closer to the intricately carved wooden chair and promptly but very slowly sit down, both of her hands immediately gripped down under the base of the chair hoping to calm herself down.

In her mind, she was still very much embarrassed and she couldn’t believe what she had done a few moments ago. A sudden outburst in front of a complete stranger... It felt very embarrassing to her even though there was no one else in the small room. Throughout her life, she never liked it when other people she does or doesn’t know think of her as a weird and strange person. And she was very worried of what the old man was thinking about her...

The old man briefly waved his hands around and seemingly out of nowhere, a white silk

napkin suddenly appeared at the palm of his gloved hand. He quickly offered it to the young girl and smiled, "Here you go, milady! It's to wipe away those accursed tears."

"Thank- Thank you..." Yet again, she wasn't exactly sure of what to say as she gently grabbed onto the napkin and promptly wiped away the tears being swelled up in her eyes, feeling the soothing silky texture as she does it. After she was half-done, she shakily handed it back to the old man whom simply tossed it aside like it was nothing, no questions were asked...

And for the next few minutes, the small room was immediately engulfed in deafening silence as the young girl didn't say anything nor did anything at all as she was simply just sitting there on the wooden chair, keeping her gaze eternally into the ground below as her body was frozen completely stiff.

She was very much worried that she will do something stupid yet again that would cause the old man to burst out laughing. In fact, her fickle heart was still racing even though she simply sat there in front of the befuddled old man and there was not a single sign that it will be stopping anytime soon.

"Ahem..." He silently coughed to himself in order to obtain the young girl's attention.

"Okay, first things first, why are you here, young lady?" The old man finally broke the deafening silence between the two as he tried to start a conversation.

"I- I- Um... I was forced by some of my friends to see if the rumours about you were actually true..." She somberly answered as her head kept tilting up and down nervously like a plastic bobble head although her gaze was eternally kept downwards.

"Ah, friends! Always a fickle thing, aren't they?" The old man muttered; one of his weary hands seemingly caressed the warmth of the small candle on the wooden table as the bright flame danced alongside the motions of his hand.

"Just like a flickering candle, they may give you light and warmth or they may give you darkness and the cold... You'll never know. You'll never know..." A glint of longing sadness briefly flashed through the old man's beady eyes as his cheerful smile was still ever present.

"Oh my, I'm getting sidetracked yet again with my foolish memories! Would you please forgive this old fool, Miss...?" He raised his furry eyebrows suggestively as he beckoned for an answer.

"Uh... Charlotte. My name is Charlotte." The girl answered with most haste.

"It's been a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Charlotte! I would stand up and give you a bow, my dear, but these weary old bones prevented me from doing such things nowadays." The old man briefly cackled to himself yet again as the girl simply sat there on the chair, still very much unsure of what to say or do next.

"In any case..." The old man cleared his throat as if he was about to announce something important.

"I can assure you that those rumours about me are very much true indeed! My name is Sir

Matthew Pendleton, at your lady's service, but you may know me more by my official name, the 'Story Teller'!" The old man exclaimed in a confident tone, slightly gesturing both of his arms around as he gave the young girl a polite and greeting bow from his crimson chair.

"Uh... Hi- Hello there..." She finally smiled politely at the old man before giving him a nice greeting or two. "It was- It was very nice meeting you, Sir--"

"No, please, my dear! Just call me Matthew, if you do so desire. Calling me 'Sir' makes me remember that I am very old indeed." The old man quickly interrupted her before uttering a disheartened and embarrassed chuckle.

"Okay then, Matthew..." She couldn't help but feel a bit weird calling an elderly person by their first name. She felt like she was being disrespectful for calling an older person by their first name, even though the old man didn't mind it not one bit. It's just- It's just that it doesn't feel right or natural for her...

"Now then, Charlotte, do you know what I exactly do?" The old man continued to inquire, curious about his new guest.

"Not exactly... The rumours uh... The rumours said that you were some kind of magician or something..." The young girl finished with a slight chuckle of disbelief, feeling quite ridiculous that she just said something like that.

"Well, Charlotte, what if I tell you that I truly AM a magician... or something!" He grinned excitedly as he announced to the young girl in a loudly confident voice.

The young girl's soft amber eyes immediately lit up with a confused disbelief look as she hesitantly answered with a simple, "...What?"

"Well, to be completely truthful, it's not exactly the kind of magic you're probably thinking about. Sadly to say, I can't really shoot lightning bolts from the tips of my hands or make things simply disappear into thin air, even if it would truly be awesome if I could do such things." The old man continued explaining more and more about himself, briefly stopping occasionally in order to chuckle and cackle to himself as he seemed to barely contain his own excitement. He was too excited that he could not even notice the slight disappointment on the young girl's face.

"I'm actually talking about the true magic that lies deep inside our minds, a little magical thing called: Imagination!" The old man yelled as he excitedly waved his arms around in the air as if to truly signify of what he truly thinks is amazing and... magical.

The young girl couldn't prevent herself from raising both of her eyebrows ever so slightly even though she knew it was quite impolite of her, "...Imagination? Um... Really?"

"I know that you may think of me now as some kind of crazy and strange old man but I implore you to please stay for a while and give a poor old soul a chance to let him explain, Charlotte!" The old man pleaded and begged before he slightly tilts his head sideways curiously, a glint of expectation shone in his beady eyes.

"Um... Okay." The young girl hesitantly smiled as she unknowingly scratched the back

of her crimson-laden head, completely unsure of what to really say and what to do in this situation.

The old man's bright smile seemingly grew even brighter on his wrinkled face before he finally started explaining himself..

“Imagination is what I truly believe defines each and every one of us. It's what separates us from the others as it defines who we are, who we really are in this massive world of ours... From the great Albert Einstein, he, himself, believes in the importance of such an overlooked but yet still equally important prospect of our mind. For without Imagination, my dear Charlotte, we would never be able to dream, to fuel all of our curiosity and gives us a reason to question everything, our sense of Adventure! Changing what we think and what we believe... It's amazing! Imagination helps us forge our very own personality as it inspires us for what is so unique about humanity, to create... Without Imagination, I dare say we would be better off as empty soulless husks that are devoid of any reason to be considered a single and whole individual.”

“Okay...” The mystified young girl simply listened on intently; her eyebrows couldn't help but slightly creak upwards in a confused but understanding manner as she felt slightly odd about the old man's ecstatic explanation.

“Anyway...” The old man briefly gasped for air before he immediately continued...

“As the Story Teller, my sole purpose is to retell stories with such fervour that you could actually experience it first-hand. I had hoped that with these experiences, it could assist your very own Imagination to be set free, my dear Charlotte. When you start seeing the world we lived in another light and unleash your own mind to a higher sense of thinking, I would consider it a successful task. I will mostly retell some classical stories of mine which details the lives of different heroic characters, different worlds, evil forces, the ongoing battle between darkness and light and so on and so on and yada-yada. As long as you have the Imagination, you can go anywhere you want and you can truly experience it nonetheless!”

“I know that perhaps I may not be perfect at all but I do certainly wish to try my best and help you unleash your own Imagination. I hope I would be able to entertain a sweet and beautiful young lady such as you, Charlotte.” He quickly finished with a cheerful and excited smile, his white gloved hands was unknowingly fidgeting with eagerness.

“Um...” She couldn't but smile as she slightly blushes yet again, thinking that no one besides her family had ever given her a compliment such as that from before.

“Is- Is that basically it?” Charlotte was hesitant to ask as she doesn't want to seem rude.

The old man outstretched his arms upwards and simply shrugged, “Yeah, that's basically it...”

“Oh...” It seems that those rumours about him turned out to be slightly exaggerated, after all.

“So, what do you say, young Charlotte? Are you going to take part in this old man's experiment of his?” He smiled politely at her, but his weary eyes were gleaming with

anticipation.

“Well...” The young girl seemed thoughtful at his question, unsure of what to say as she tried her best not to look directly at the excited old man waiting for her answer.

She wondered what she should do...

In the end, it's not exactly what all the rumours about the strange old man were cracking up to be so it's not what she's expecting at all... And she's not so sure of what's the process or the exact result of this 'experience' of which the old man is holding in such high standards. Then again, if she doesn't do this whole thing, Amy and her friends would certainly mock her for not going through with their dare and challenge. Plus, it would definitely make her seem like such a rude and impolite girl if she were to just turn around and simply leave the old man behind like some kind of heartless monster. So...

“Yeah, sure... Why not? I'll do it!” She meekly exclaimed her answer, much to the old man's sheer joy.

“Excellent! Excellent! Let's get started immediately, shall we?” The old man excitedly clapped his hands in eager anticipation, his grin widens ever so slightly.

The old man immediately raised his right hand into the air and simply waved it around in a brief motion similar to casting a spell of some kind. Seemingly out of nowhere, either hidden from the surrounding fog or more realistically, under the table, the old man pulled out a certain book and immediately held it high up into the air like it was some kind of prized trophy of his. The thick book which lies neatly at the grip of his hand had a strikingly black cover, only to be adorned with two symbols which actually resembled some kind of 'blue rose' at the middle of both of its thick book covers. The symbol of the blue rose was obviously part of the book's cover but... But the design of it was so detailed that it actually seemed life-like to the befuddled young girl.

There was strangely for some reason, faded outlines of various crudely etched hands surrounding the single blue roses, seemingly commingling with the striking colour of the cover to the point it would be somewhat difficult to see at a simple and short glance. The many faded hands surrounding the blue rose appeared to be as if they were working together to reach out and trying to hold onto the lonely blue rose.

The young girl wanted to ask about the curious design of the book and wondered at what it was supposed to be since there was basically not even a title on it, but she quickly decided against it because she didn't want to start another, what she had deemed, 'unnecessary topic of conversation'.

“Let's start with one of my favourites, shall we? One of the very first stories that I had the pleasure to tell... It's a story of a young man; a young man whom had to leave his entire life behind in order to protect the ones he truly loved, The Legend of Alex Flynn.” The old man spoke in an announcing tone before neatly placing the thick book onto the wooden table and immediately cracked it open, quickly flipping the seemingly hundreds of pages all the way to the very beginning.

“Shall I begin then?” The old man asked yet again in a polite manner, seemingly asking

for permission from the young girl.

“Um... Okay then.” The young girl deftly tried her best to stop her fidgeting body and get comfortable in her carved wooden chair. She knew that maybe she was going to be here for definitely a very long time. Might as well just get along with it as soon as possible...

“Alrighty!” The old man excitedly exclaimed as he clapped both of his hand in a happily manner. He immediately covered his wrinkly mouth with his free hand and promptly coughed to himself repeatedly; quickly clearing his coarse throat for the upcoming story for which he is so eager to tell.

He carefully placed his right hand onto the many pages of the thick book as a cheerful and excited smile was plastered across his entire face.

He finally uttered the very first few words of the book with a wry smile of sheer excitement...

“Chapter One...”

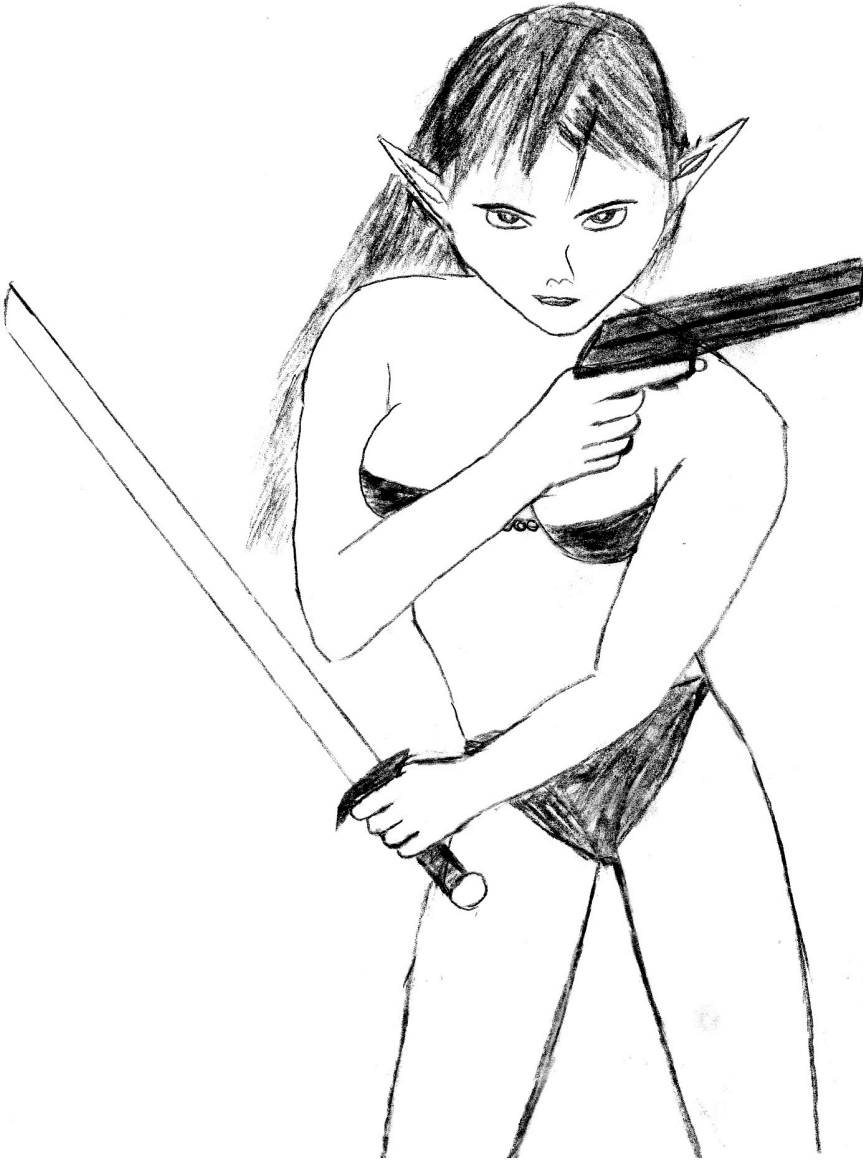
And now, an editor's personal recommendation:

I've got a friend who needs to make a down payment on a house, and so is offering commissions she is a very versatile artist who can draw just about anything you want, and at very reasonable prices, too.

Now, let's be clear on this: I am personally recommending this person: she is a very good artist, and quite reliable, if you need any commissions done, you should go check her out at her website:

<http://therealmsofartha.weebly.com/commission-info.html>

FAN FICTION



Or: Leanna's Return

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ME2 HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 13: ILIUM

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Ashley looked down at where the bullets should have been in her chest. There was nothing there and she felt no pain.

“What?” said Shadow.

The Phantom’s thoughts were interrupted however as Griffin uncloaked right in front of her and punched her hard in the face.

Almost immediately a massive brawl broke out as the rest of Alpha Squad uncloaked and started fighting with the other Cerberus soldiers.

Miranda reacted quickly and reached for her SMG, a plasma blast from Griffin’s cannon however shot it out of her hand.

“Oh no you don’t!” said Griffin.

Austin meanwhile was still offline. True to what Shadow had said, the device was preventing his systems from turning back on. It hadn’t hacked anything, so the security was still intact, but he couldn’t turn anything on. In fact, he couldn’t even move because his suit needed to be on in order to move.

At that moment however, Liara uncloaked in front of several of the mechs and cut them down with her sword. The rest of the mechs were too busy trying to fight the rest of Alpha Squad that they were too busy trying to fight the other Helldivers.

Liara knelt down in front of her bond mate and removed the small device from his chest. Almost immediately, all the armour’s systems came back online and he stood up.

“Thanks, love.” he said.

Right at that moment however, he saw Shadow get up from where she’d been knocked down earlier and she charged right at him.

“Move!” he yelled as he pushed Liara out of the way and allowed Shadow to charge into him knocking him right into one of the nearby buildings.

The impact of smashing right through a wall caused both opponents to separate for a moment. They were quick to get back up on their feet though and were now ready for a fight.

“This is between you and me, Shadow.” said Austin as he readied for what would no doubt be a very violent fight.

“I’m going to enjoy this!” said Shadow as she cracked the knuckles on her left hand.

“You’re going down, Shepard.”

“Well then, what are you waiting for? I’m right here.” said Austin challengingly as he and Shadow slowly walked toward one another.

Austin was the first to attack as he delivered a very hard punch to Shadow’s face. Shadow quickly attacked back with her own punch and then a quick second one as well. She then followed that with a blow from her elbow as well. She went for another swing but Austin dodged this one by ducking under it. He delivered a swift punch to Shadow’s stomach as he did so. This was then followed by a haymaker blow but Shadow employed an elbow block. Austin’s other strike was also blocked by Shadow crossing both her arms and pushing his arm away.

Austin reacted fast to this however and charged Shadow right into one of the walls. Both the Phantom's arms were free however and she managed to get a hold of Austin’s arm. Twisting the two around, Shadow used this to slam Austin’s face, or helmet rather, against a nearby table. Due to the excessive strength of Shadow and Austin, the Helldiver left a massive dent in the table as his helmet smashed into it.

Shadow did her best to keep him there, but the Helldiver still managed to push himself away and then gave violent push against the table that sent both of them against the wall again. It only hurt Shadow though and Austin felt the Phantom’s grip on his arm loosen a bit. Seizing the opening, Austin smashed his elbow into Shadow’s face and then followed this with a full blow from his arm. Shadow lost her grip and Austin’s arm was now free again.

Back up to fighting speed again, the Helldiver attempted another haymaker with his left arm but Shadow once again used her arm to block the attack. Austin swung another punch at her, but she dodged under this one and gave Austin a sharp kick, sending back against the table he’d been smashed on earlier.

Not wanting to give Shadow a chance, Austin charged her again, smashing her against a nearby plant which shattered upon contact with the Phantom’s armour. Shadow tried the same maneuver she had used last time and attempted to get ahold of Austin’s arm again. The Helldiver had counted on this happening though and he once again pushed her against a stack of shelves. Like the plant, they too got smashed to pieces.

Using her strength, Shadow managed to flip the both of them around and she now had Austin’s against the wall instead of her. Austin however reacted fast and pulled up one of her thighs, causing her to lose her balance and fall on her back. Before Austin could deliver another attack, Shadow used both feet to kick him away. With the Helldiver knocked back Shadow used a flip to get herself back on her feet. She then jumped at Austin, punching him as she did so. Austin took another swing at Shadow, but she dodged under it again and used this to get behind her opponent. Before Austin could react in time, Shadow wrapped both her arms around him and flung him through the glass window they’d been fighting in front of. As Austin slowly got up, Shadow followed through the window.

By the time she’d climbed through, Austin had managed to get back up again and the two charged each other. Austin had more strength and mass than Shadow and so he ended up

pushing her, smashing her head hard against a locker in the process. Taking advantage of the head knock, Austin whirled Shadow around and gave her another hard punch causing her to step backwards and hit her head on another window. There were glass shards all over the floor now.

With Shadow still dazed, Austin took the opportunity weaken her while it lasted. He took her head and smashed it again against another locker and then punched her again. By this time though, Shadow regained her senses and grabbed Austin's incoming wrist. She attempted her down punch but Austin did what she'd done and grabbed her wrist.

The two opponents wrestled with one another violently as they tried to shake each other's grip. An idea then came to Austin when he noticed the wall behind them. He brought his head back and then thrust it forward giving Shadow a violent head butt. The Phantom released her grip over Austin's wrist and attempted another swing at him.

Austin quickly let go of Shadow's wrist and ducked under her attack. Summoning up all his strength he then charged Shadow and the two smashed right through the wall and back into the courtyard where everyone was still fighting. All the mechs had been destroyed now, but the soldiers were still putting up a tough fight.

Both opponents were slow to get up due to their tiredness and dizziness from earlier. Just as Austin managed to stand up though, Shadow noticed this and swung both her legs at his, causing him to fall on his back. Next, Shadow got back up as Austin rolled onto his front. He could see Liara noticing the fight. She was running over to help.

"No! I got this! Help the others!" he said.

Liara did as she was told and ran back to help Griffin who was struggling with Miranda's biotics.

Austin noticed Shadow's gun at her feet and went to reach for it, but the Phantom was just as fast as he was. Shadow quickly kicked the gun away and delivered a swift punch to his helmet with her cyborg hand.

The punch was way harder than Austin had anticipated and he lost his footing again. Dazed slightly, he tried to get up again but Shadow delivered another blow in the form of a kick.

As she went for another however, he was ready for her this time. Just before her foot made contact with him, he grabbed it in his left hand. Shadow only had a few moments to notice this before Austin brought his other hand around her leg and twisted it.

Shadow lost her balance as her whole body twisted with her leg. Landing on the ground again, she had just enough time to notice Austin's next attack as he attempted to use the blade on his elbow to stab her. Shadow instantly rolled to the side and Austin's elbow blade made contact with nothing but dirt and rocks.

Seizing this opportunity, Shadow grabbed Austin's helmet with her left hand and began using her cybernetic wrist to wrap around his neck and choke him. Shadow had fought Austin enough times to find a few chinks and weaknesses in Helldiver armor. The necks were armored, but the user could still be choked if you squeezed tightly enough.

Austin desperately grabbed at Shadow's arm as her strong cybernetics contracted around his neck. Realizing that it wasn't doing any good, he felt around hastily for anything to use. Just as his vision began to blur he found something hard, a rock. Without even hesitating he smashed it against Shadow's helmet.

The left side of Shadow's helmet was smashed in as the rock connected hardly with her left red eye optics. Now only the blue ones on the right side were working and she was once again left dazed by the attack.

Austin got back up for another attack and readied a punch for Shadow while she was down. The Phantom however counterattacked with a swift kick to Austin's helmet. It only knocked him back, but it was enough time for Shadow to swing herself back up onto her feet. Austin was still getting his bearings back from the kick and Shadow seized that opening. She charged at full speed and punched Austin right in the stomach with her cyborg hand. The sheer force of the punch left Austin very winded. However, the Helldiver never gave up that easily and he charged Shadow with as much strength as he could. Shadow failed to react fast enough and was hauled off her feet as Austin charged right into her and smashed her on the ground.

Once again though, Shadow readjusted her strategy and rolled on top of Austin. She only managed one punch though before Austin managed to swing a leg around, pushed her off him and slammed her on the ground, hard.

What happened next took Austin by surprise. Shadow suddenly glowed with biotics and charged Austin very hard. The sheer force once again sent the two flying. They both crashed against the tower.

Austin had really had enough of this and he kicked Shadow off of him. The two continued to wrestle violently amongst all the other Cerberus soldiers who were fighting Alpha Squad. Tiredness and exhaustion eventually got to the two and the fight soon turned to simple punches again. After several hits, Austin mistimed one of his and Shadow grabbed his arm. Before Austin could react in time she grabbed his head and smashed him right into a massive rock.

At the sound of this, the fighting seemed to cease. Shadow simply looked at everyone. Had she really one this time? Her answer however came in the form of a massive rock as Austin picked it up and smashed it against her.

Shadow staggered before she fell and her mask ended up in a nearby fire that was still burning from the missiles. Her mask kept her safe from the flames, but it still pissed her off big time. She clambered back up to see Austin standing a few metres away from her. She wasn't delaying the inevitable any more. She raised her cyborg arm and a small plasma cannon appeared out of her wrist. Austin immediately reacted to this and his down plasma cannon activated.

"Put your hand down." he said calmly.

"I don't take orders from you, Shepard!" Shadow replied.

"You don't have to do this, Shadow." said Austin, trying to diffuse this.

“You want to try be a hero, take your shot!”

“Put it down.”

“You gonna take a shot?!”

“Put it down!”

Both plasma cannons charged up. This would not be pretty.

“You put it down!”

“Drop it, Shadow!”

Both cannons fired at the exact same time. As the two shots met the set of one massive explosion which sent everyone in the courtyard flying. All was silent for several seconds.

Austin slowly got up. The field looked just the same as it had done, except more wrecked than ever now. The rest of Alpha Squad had also recovered and were slowly getting up.

“Any sign of them?” he groaned as Liara helped him up.

“No. I think it go then all.” said Alaara.

“I don't think they're gone. Shadow's survived worse than that. She'll be back!” said Austin. He then looked around urgently as he suddenly remembered. “Where's Ashley?!”

“I've got her right here!” said Griffin as he came into view carrying Ashley in his arms.

“She's badly hurt, we need to get her to the Normandy immediately.!”

“Joker, send the shuttle to pick us up. We've had enough of this colony.” said Austin.

Ashley was immediately rushed to med bay as Austin went to talk to the Arkane Council. He would join the others in a minute.

Griffin gently laid Ashley on one of the beds as Doctor Chakwas examined her. She was still conscious but didn't look in the best shape.

“Dr. Chakwas? What are you doing?” she asked in surprise.

“Long story, Miss Williams. Good to see you too.” Karin smiled.

“How are you feeling?” Griffin asked as his helmet retracted.

For a moment, Ashley was left a bit speechless as she saw the demolition expert's face. He was rather handsome looking and it was no secret that she always loved a man with a lot of muscle.

“I've been better.” Ashley groaned as Chakwas began dabbing at Ashley's forehead with a small wet cloth.

“You'll be alright.” said the doctor.

“Are you new to Alpha Squad? I don't remember seeing you before.” Ashley asked.

“I only joined about a year ago. I’m the demolition expert.” Griffin replied as he sat down next to the bed. There was something about Ashley that he really liked. He could see why she and Austin were good friends.

“What’s your name?” Ashley asked.

“Griffin.”

“That’s it? Just “Griffin”?”

“No, that’s my call sign on the team. My real name’s Alex Wilson.” Griffin replied.

“Well, nice to meet you, Griffin.” Ashley smiled.

Griffin couldn’t help but smile back. Chakwas also smiled when she noticed. She could already tell where this was going.

“Shepard, good work on Horizon. Hopefully, the Collectors will think twice before attack another one of our colonies.” said Councillor Spartan.

Austin was currently in the comm room. He’d needed to let them know that the Collectors weren’t the only enemy they’d have to be careful with.

“It’s not a victory, Councillors. We interrupted the Collectors, but they still abducted half the colony.” he said.

“That is deeply regrettable. But it’s better than an entire colony, and more than we’ve been able to accomplish since the abductions began.” said Tarnack.

“The Collectors will be more careful now that they know we’re on to them, but we think we can find other ways to lure them in.” said one of the unnamed councillors.

“Whatever those plans are, we need to make sure they don’t abduct any more of our colonies.” said Austin.

“We want the Collectors stopped for that very reason, Major. That’s why we sent you after them. We’re devoting all our resources to finding a way through the Omega 4 relay. We have to hit them where they live.” said Spartan.

“Fight ‘em in their down home? I like the sound of that.” said Austin confidently.

“I might sound simple, but it’s not. Your team will need to be strong... as will their resolve. There’s no looking back.” said another Arkane.

“What do you mean?” Austin asked.

“Shepard, once we find a way through the Omega 4 relay to the Collector homeworld... there’s no guarantee you’ll return. To have any hope of surviving, you, Alpha Squad -- and your entire team -- must be fully committed to this.” Spartan explained.

“So it’s a suicide mission. Don’t worry, Councillors. Alpha Squad and I have faced missions like this before. We can do this.” said Austin.

“Good to hear that, Shepard. Even from the beginning we never have doubted you.” said

Tarnack.

“So what happens now?” Austin asked.

“For now, we wait until the Collectors make another move. When they do, we’ll be ready for them this time. Until then, we’ve forwarded three more dossiers. You keep building your team while we find a way through the relay.” said Spartan.

“Before I go Councillor, there’s something you should know. The Collectors may not be our only problem.” said Austin.

Austin explained everything that had happened to the Council. They were rather surprised to hear that Cerberus had got involved in this.

“Even if Cerberus are against us, what makes you so sure it’s just as big a problem?” asked one of the unnamed.

“They weren’t alone. Shadow’s back.” said Austin.

Some of the Council murmured to one another at the mention of Shadow’s name. Some even fell silent.

“Shadow? The Cerberus assassin? Impossible! She’s supposed to be dead.” said Spartan.

“She’s made a habit of cheating death, Councillors.” said Austin.

“If Cerberus seem this determined to try and stop us, then we will indeed have to be careful.” said Tarnack.

“Agreed. We will have to adjourn this meeting. Be careful out there, Shepard. The Collectors and Cerberus will be watching for us.” said Spartan.

The holograms disappeared and Austin stepped off of the table. Alaara and Liara were waiting for him.

“So we’re really going to do it? Take the fight to the Collectors in person?” asked Alaara.

“Yes. They’re powerful, but we’ve got what it takes. We’ve faced many missions like this before and we’ve still got plenty of tricks from them. If anyone can stop them, we can.” said Austin.

“I know. I’m not saying we can’t do this. I’m looking forward to the action in fact after seeing what those monsters did on Horizon. Still... it makes you think.” said Alaara.

“What do you mean?” Austin asked.

“Horizon just made it hit home. What we’re doing. What we’re up against. Sandra and I are gonna go take care of a little unfinished business. I imagine some of the others are too -- getting some closure.” said Alaara as she left the room.

Austin turned to Liara.

“You gonna be okay? Things got intense down there.” he asked.

“I’ll be fine, Austin. Your strength gives me strength. I am with you until the end.” Liara smiled.

Austin smiled back and gave Liara a kiss on the cheek.

“Come on. Let’s go check on Ash.”

As the couple entered the med bay, they found that Griffin was still sat next to Ashley and appeared to be keeping her entertained by telling her about some of the past missions he’d done with the squad. Austin hadn’t seen Ashley this happy in a long time. He couldn’t help but notice they way they two looked at one another.

“And then he said “You’re only supposed to blow the bloody doors off!” Griffin laughed as he finished recounting one of the events on the Purgatory. Ashley laughed along with him.

The Chief looked much better now. Most of her wounds had been cleaned now and her arm had been popped back into its socket. Her ankle didn’t look too bad either. Then again, Austin had expected that Ashley would be alright. She always had been a tough girl.

“Hey, Ash. How you doin?” Austin asked as he sat down next to Griffin.

“Doing well, thanks. Stings a bit, but it’s nothing i’m not used too.” Ashley smiled. “I feel I should apologise for doubting you. Alaara was right. You shouldn’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“It’s alright, Ash. I don’t blame you for being cross at me. I’d probably feel the same sort of way in your position. It’s hard when you haven’t seen anyone for two years.” said Austin.

“Still, i’m sorry. I was wrong to even think for a minute that you were working for Cerberus. I know you better than that.” said Ashley.

“I feel I should tell you, we need to head to Ilium first, so unless you’re okay with booking another passage to the Citadel you may be staying for a while. I know you will probably still decline, but the offer is still open.” said Austin.

“Trust me, Austin. I really do wish I could join you, I really do.” said Ashley.

“Well, since you’re okay, we should leave you to get some rest.” said Austin as he and Griffin stood up.

“See you soon, old friend. It’s good to have you back.” Ashley smiled.

“Same here, Ash. Same here.” said Austin.

Ilium was definitely what Austin would call a beautiful city. Built by the Asari many years ago, Illium was a classic garden world developed to serve as entrepot between the Terminus Systems and the Asari Republics. It was popular place for some Helldivers as well since it was one of their best places of operations, trading and many other things in the Terminus Systems. To abet this trade the normally stringent customs laws of Council

space on product-safety-proscribed materials and sapient trafficking were more relaxed than many other places in Asari and Council space. Officially, Illium was not an Asari world and was only colonized and operated by Asari corporate interests. This gave it the same legal latitude enjoyed by the human corporate research enclaves of Noveria. Illium was one of the youngest Asari colonies settled during the 7th Expansion Wave. The first child born on the world was only now reaching her middle age. The world was hot and massive; ground settlement was only possible at the higher polar latitudes. In more equatorial locations the population was housed in arcology skyscrapers to escape the heat of the surface.

It was still a marvel to behold for him though. He'd only been here once before and that had been in the lower, darker, regions.

Austin decided on taking Liara, Sandra and Alaara for the small tour. He just hoped that they two would behave themselves and not sneak off somewhere to have sex while he wasn't looking. Not that he wouldn't mind some time alone with Liara. A world like this was the perfect place to have a dinner date with her. That reminded him in fact that he and Liara still had yet to do something like that.

As they Helldivers disembarked, Ashley also followed then. She had decided to leave early and book passage to the Citadel on another ship. As the airlock opened they found themselves greeted by an Asari and two mechs with guns. The Asari had several gold tattoos on her face and was dressed in a surprisingly revealing dress. So revealing in fact that Austin had to remind himself that her eyes were up there and that he had to stop staring at her smooth hips or her breasts.

"Welcome to Nos Astra, Major Shepard. We've been instructed to waive all docking and administration fees for your visit. My name is Careena. If you need information about the area, it would be my pleasure to assist you." said the Asari.

The eyes of the mechs changed from red to white and Careena bowed her head in greeting.

"Who instructed you to waive the fees?" Austin asked. It seemed a bit strange.

"The order came from Zhi Shang Ren, or Xun as she likes to be referred to. She paid all fees on your behalf. She also asked that I direct you to speak with her at your convenience. She's near the trading floor." Careena replied.

"Xun's here? What's she doing?" Austin asked. It was quite a surprise, but a very welcome one to hear that their Helldivers information broker was here. She and Alpha Squad went back a very long way.

"She is here on behalf of the Helldivers to try and improve trade relationships between the Helldivers, Nos Astra and the Terminus systems. Nos Astra is based upon trade. Information is a valuable currency, and Xun seems to feel right at home here. As I said, you'll find her near the trading floor. She has been looking forward to seeing a very old friend." said Careena.

"Well, thank you very much for the greeting, Careena. I hate to cut this conversation, but

I have a very busy schedule ahead of me.” said Austin.

“I understand. Again, welcome to our city, Major. Please enjoy your stay.” Careena smiled.

“I’m sure we will.” said Alaara seductively as she and Sandra eyed up Carrena. The Concierge Asari couldn’t help but blush a bit.

Two of the three new dossiers they Arkanes had provided were here on Ilium. A Drell assassin, Thane Krios and an Asari Justicar named Samara. The third dossier had been Tali, but she had already been closer to Ilium, so Austin had decided to get those two done first.

“Customs records indicate a justicar named Samara is visiting this port, Shepard. The information broker, Xun, may have more information. Her office overlooks the trading floor. You may also wish to speak with her regarding Thane Krios, the assassin on your dossier, as well.” said EDI.

“So... I guess this is goodbye.” said Ashley as she turned to Austin and the others. Griffin had also disembarked in order to say goodbye to Ashley.

“Not completely. I’m sure we’ll see each other again, Ashley.” said Austin.

“Yeah, I guess so. Just... don't do something stupid, like die again.” said Ashley.

“And put you through the same misery again? Not on your life.” said Griffin.

“Thanks Griffin. It was good to meet you, and thanks for saving me.” said Ashley as she planted a small kiss on Griffin’s cheek. Unknown to the others, she handed something to Griffin.

“Call me.” she whispered.

Griffin quickly regained his composure and smiled at Ashley.

“Goodbye, Miss Williams. May the lord watch over you.” he said.

“You believe in God?” Ashley asked, surprised.

Griffin simply nodded.

I know you do as well. Shepard told me a lot about you.” he said.

Ashley just smiled at the Helldiver and then turned to Austin.

“Good luck against the Collector’s, Austin. Come back in one piece.” she said.

“Goodbye, old friend. Stay safe out there.” Austin smiled as he and Ashley shook hands. The Alliance marine then left and disappeared into the crowd. Austin then turned to Griffin. “Now, what did she give you?” he asked.

“What?” said Griffin trying to sound surprised.

“Don’t try to hide it, Wilson. I saw her give you something.” said Austin as he indicated to Griffin’s hand. The Helldiver reluctantly handed it to him.

“Her contact number?” Austin asked, slightly surprised.

“I guess you could say that we’ve... got an eye for each other.” said Griffin bashfully.

“We’ll keep in contact and see how it goes.

“Have you ever had a girlfriend before?” Sandra asked.

“Yes. She was a Blue Sun. As you can probably tell, that didn’t work out.” Griffin replied.

“Just be sure you treat her right. I won’t take kindly to you if you break her heart.” said Austin sternly. Ashley meant a lot to him as a friend.

“Don’t worry, Sir. I’m not gonna screw this up. I really like her.” said Griffin.

Austin handed the small datapad back to Griffin and the demolition expert headed back to they Normandy.

As the group left the docking area they became mesmerized by the sight of Illium’s various skyscrapers. This was interrupted when Austin heard an Asari calling his name.

“You’re Major Shepard? I saw your.. I guess you would say your aura. Id recognise you anywhere.” said they Asari.

She was dressed in a white dress with a red line down the front and red on the arms. She had purple skin, like Aria and Councillor Tevos and white tattoos.

“Do I know you?” Austin asked, slightly puzzled.

“You do not, but I know you form a... friend of yours. I was asked to give you a message if I saw you. It is from this friend. A friend that you made on Noveria.” said the Asari.

“I met a lot of people on Noveria, Miss. Could you be more specific?” Austin asked.

“I believe the message itself should make it clear.” they Asari replied.

She then walked up to Austin and her eyes turned white.

“Shepard. We hide. We burrow. We build. But we know that you seek those who soured the songs of our mothers. When the time comes, our voice will join yours, and our crescendo will burn the darkness clean. Thank you, great warrior. The Rachni will sing again, because of you.” she said, her voice echoed as she spoke.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re rebuilding, your majesty. Are you somewhere close by?” Austin asked.

Normally he would be concerned that they Rachni was controlling the Asari without her permission. But they way this message had been sent, it sounded as though that wasn’t the case.

The Asari stepped back and her eyes returned to normal.

“The Rachni queen is not here. That message is one of many memories I carry from her. I encountered her on an uncharted world. She saved my life. More than that, she gave me a

purpose. They are an amazing people, Shepard. They galaxy owes you a great debt for giving them a second chance.” she said.

“How did you encounter the Rachni?” Austin asked.

“I was working as a courier. Pirates ambushed my ship, and I was forced down on an uncharted planet. I was badly injured, alone... and near death... then they found me. They saved me.” the Asari replied.

“You obviously got off-world again. Did they Rachni give you a ship?” Austin asked.

“No, countless workers repaired my ship. It runs better now than it did before. They remind me of the keepers on the Citadel in a way. All working together, each with a purpose.” said the Asari.

“What happened to the pirates who attacked you?” Austin asked.

“They were obliterated. As they should’ve been. The Rachni are not aggressive, but they do what they must.” the Asari replied.

“Thank you for giving me that information. I’m glad that my friend is doing well.” said Austin.

“Be well, Major Shepard. Perhaps one day we will see each other again.” said the Asari as she left.

Austin and the others continued their walk through Nos Astra. Then, as they neared Xun’s office, Austin saw a familiar face sat at a table.

“Well well well, look who it is!” said Austin warmly as he walked up to the woman.

“Holy crap, Shepard? I thought you were dead!” said Gianna Parasini. “What happened? No, wait, probably classified. Forget I asked. You’d just have to lie.”

“Nice to see you too, Gianna Parasini. It’s been a while.” said Austin.

“Yeah. Two years in fact since you helped me nail Administrator Anoleis.” said Gianna.

“Always happy to help. What to Anoleis anyway?” Austin asked.

“He made the one mistake Noveria won’t tolerate: he got caught taking their money. He’s doing a few years in white-collar prison. More importantly, he won’t work in the field again. Sit down. If I remember right, I owe you a beer.” said Gianna.

Austin sat down while Liara simply stood against a nearby doorway and Alaara and Sandra went to have a look at one of the circular holographic shopping kiosks.

“What brings you to Ilium? You know, that you can talk about?” Gianna asked.

“You ever heard of they Collectors? They’re attacking human colonies. I’m going to stop them.” Austin replied.

“Damn, Shepard. For me, a tough job involves more paperwork.” said Gianna.

At that moment, she suddenly looked at and Asari that was stood near to one of the kiosks that Alaara and Sandra were looking at.

“Hey, listen, I just remembered something. I’ve got to go. Talk to you later? And don't forget to drink your beer.” she said as she left the table.

As Austin reached for the drink, he noticed a small note underneath the drink. He took the drink in one hand and the note in the other.

“Shepard. Had to leave. Target saw me. Couldn’t break cover. Asari merchant smuggling schematics from Noveria. Can you talk her into showing you good stuff?” said the message.

Austin tucked the message away into one of the pouches on his belt and activated his comm link. He then explained the situation to Alaara and asked her to talk to the Asari. Alaara was very good at undercover work. Alaara simply turned to Austin and nodded in acknowledgement. Then, she went up to the Asari.

“Excuse me, sweetheart.” Alaara greeted.

“Welcome! You look like someone who needs high-quality equipment! Feel free to look around. My store has the best tech and biotic equipment on Ilium.” said the Asari at the kiosk.

“Do you have anything else? Anything not listed on your main merchandise kiosk?” Alaara asked. She flashed her well known persuasive look that somehow seemed to work all the time. The Asari Helldiver had become very well known for using it.

“Well, there is one thing. Very advanced design. Not publicly available yet.” said the merchant.

Alaara gave a very suggestive smile before she noticed that Gianna had been listening in. She knew that the Asari was working for Austin because she was a Helldiver, so there wouldn’t be any confusions.

“That’s because it’s still in development on Noveria. And illegal for export. Hello, Hermia.” she said.

“Parasini! You set me up! But this isn’t Noveria! You don't have the authority to arrest me!” Hermia objected crossly.

“I don't care whether you go to jail. I’ve got all the evidence I need to fine you out of business.” said Gianna.

“Word of advice, babe. Never try to operate above the law. It always manages to bite your pretty little ass eventually.” said Alaara smugly.

“I... I need to go. I have to talk to my lawyer.” said Hermia as she rushed off.

“Talk fast, Hermia! When they fines hit, you won’t be able to afford him!” Gianna shouted after her. She then turned back to Alaara. “Ah, that was good. Thank you for your help. I’ve got to go file a few papers. Shepard, if you’re listening through her, come by my table when you’ve got a minute.”

Austin sat back down at the table as Gianna came back.

“Hermia is going to be a very poor woman very shortly. Thanks for the help, Shepard.” she said. “I love nailing Asari. So ageless and superior -- them you get then, and the squeal like schoolgirls.”

“Careful what you say, Gianna. I have an Asari girlfriend.” said Austin. “Still, it must be nice having a job that you really enjoy.”

“I wanted to be a cop, or C-Sec, but my family had bills. I needed the money a corporate job brought in. Besides, in this job, you don't see things that make it hard to sleep at night. White collar crime is nice and clean. Hell, at least this time I didn't have to wear heels and a dress.” said Gianna.

“It's been a pleasure, Gianna.” said Austin as he got up from his seat.

“You too, Shepard.” said Gianna as she too got up from her seat. She then walked right up to Austin. “Before I go, would you mind removing your helmet for a minute?”

“Ookay...” said Austin suspiciously as he retracted his helmet.

Gianna looked at his face for a few seconds before speaking again.

“Ah, hell with it.”

To Austin slight surprise, she then planted a kiss on his cheek and smiled at him.

“Much better than an autograph.” she said. With that, she disappeared into the crowd.

With that dealt with, Austin, Liara, Alaara and Sandra headed for Xun's office. Sat outside the office at a desk was a purple Asari. At first, Austin thought it was Xun's Asari assistant, Oranna, but this one looked and sounded different.

“Hello Major Shepard. Xun will be pleased to see you.” she said as she stood up and greeted then.

“What happened to Xun's usual assistant, Oranna? I don't remember seeing you here before.” Austin asked.

“Oranna is currently away on a very important mission for Xun. My name is Nyxeris. Xun relies upon me to acquire useful intelligence. I don't have her network of contacts, but I supply her with supplemental data. It's really an honor to work with her.” Nyxeris replied.

“What's Xun's reputation here on Illium?” Austin asked.

“She is greatly respected. In a few short years, she's amassed a sizeable network of connections. She could have even more political power than she already wields if she weren't so focused on her personal goals. But I believe she should tell you about that, not me.” said Nyxeris.

“I'd like to see her now, please.” said Austin.

“Of course, Major.” said Nyxeris.

The Asari led the group through the door as it opened.

The whole room was finally dressed in several different Chinese decorations and furniture. There was a desk in front of the large window that overlooked the rest of Nos Astra. Behind that desk was a large podium, the top of which was surrounded by hundreds of holographic screens. Stood on top of the podium, was Xun.

As a reward for her various services, they Arkanes had given Xun a Helldiver suit of her very own. Like all other Helldivers, the helmet still had the familiar triangle shape, but their similarities ended there. Unlike the others, Xun's helmet was more smoother and more angular, which gave it a very elegant and smooth look.

The rest of Xun's suit was a fine coloured silver. Despite that Xun had seen many battles, she always kept her armour in near perfect condition. Xun's arms, chest and part of her helmet were decorated in several different Chinese tattoos. Xun also had a very clear tattoo of a Chinese dragon painted on her helmet.

Other additions included a katana strapped on the back of Xun's waist, lack of a plasma cannon, and few Samurai armour pieces accessorizing her armour. Another noticeable feature was that Xun's suit design did in a way resemble a business outfit, a small difference though was that the split dress at the back extended all the way down to her ankles rather than usual stopping at the end of the thighs, so it now looked more like a long cloak or a battle dress. The skirts were also made of a very light chainmail rather than the usual material for suits.

Xun currently appeared to be in call with someone. She had a datapad in her right hand and a large metal fan in the other. This was one of Xun's most treasured possessions. Surprisingly, the fan could also be used in combat for distraction purposes. However, the fan could also be used as a weapon. Although it didn't look it, that fan was just as sharp as Xun's katana and could slice through things with no trouble. It also somehow concealed Xun's ability to throw knives at her enemies when in combat.

"Look sir, I am not an unreasonable woman, but my services are not free. The information you want was not easy to acquire. Besides, we both agreed on the price. How dare you try to pay me at one tenth of it!" she said angrily.

There was a brief pause as Xun's client replied.

"Really? Well guess what, you don't have the information, I do!" she said.

There was another pause.

"This argument is getting us nowhere, and I have better things to do with my time. I'll make this simple, either you pay me or you won't see that information."

The communication ended and Xun turned to several of the other holo screens she was surrounded by.

"Excuse me, mistress." said Nyxeris.

"What is it, Nyxeris?! I told you I do not want to be disturbed!" said Xun. The Helldiver information broker didn't turn to look at Nyxeris and still continued with her work.

"You have visitors, mistress. I believe you were expecting them." said Nyxeris.

Xun slowly turned around and looked down at then. Her expression was unreadable through her helmet, but she looked pleased to see Austin and the others. They holo screen that she was surrounded by vanished and they podium slowly descended into the ground.

“Shepard! Nyxeris, hold my calls.” she said. The information broker then walked up to Austin and embraced him warmly. Austin hugged her back.

Once they two had finished, Xun walked behind her desk. She put down the datapad she’d been holding earlier, but she still continued fanning herself with the metal fan. It was a very common habit of hers.

“My sources said you were alive, but I never believed... it’s very good to see you.” she smiled under her helmet.

“It’s good to see you too, Xun. How’re you doing?” Austin asked warmly.

“I’m doing well. As you’ve probably been told, i’m here on a trade mission to improve trade relations between us, Ilium and the Terminus systems.” said Xun.

Austin sat down and Xun quickly did the same.

“And now you’re back. Gunning for the Collectors.” she said.

“That’s not exactly public knowledge.” said Austin.

“Neither is you being alive again, old friend. Information is my business, remember? And if you need help finding people, i’m more than happy to help.” said Xun.

“What about you, Xun? We’d love your help on this mission.” Austin offered.

“I wish I could, Shepard. But I can’t I’m sorry. I have commitments here. Things I need to take care of.” said Xun.

“What kind of things? You’re not in trouble, are you?” Austin asked.

“No. Of course not. It’s very complicated, and I understand the mission you are on. I don’t want to waste your time.” said Xun. She took a moment to consider something however. “Although, if you want to help. I need someone with hacking expertise, someone I can trust. If you could disable security at key points around Illium, could get me information I need. That would help me a great deal.” said Xun.

“If it will help you, i’ll take care of it.” said Austin.

“When you hack one, a server will open somewhere nearby for a short time. You can download data from there. If you hurry. Thank you, Shepard. This may help me a great deal.” said Xun gratifyingly.

“You’re welcome. Now, you said that you could help me find people if need be?” Austin asked.

“Of course. Name the person, i’m happy to help out an old friend.” said Xun.

“There’s an Asari warrior named Samara here in Illium. Do you know where I can find her?” Austin asked.

“Samara... Yes. She arrived recently and registered with Tracking Officer Dara. You can find Dara at the transport hub.” said Xun.

“Thank you, Xun. That’s all I need to know for now.” said Austin.

“Of course, if there’s anything else I can help you with, let me know.” said Xun.

“I’ll talk to you later, Xun.” said Austin.

Now that they knew who to look for, Austin and the group headed to the transport hub to look for the Tracking Officer Dara. As they neared where Xun had told her she would be though, Austin saw an Asari who looked very familiar. She was wearing a green lab coat and had a green skin pigment.

“Shepard! I... I don't suppose you'd remember me. I'm Shiala. We met on Feros during the Geth attack. Saren had given me to the Thorian creature as a slave, and you killed it... and saved me and the colony. I promised to help Zhu's Hope recover. I'm actually here on Ilium for just that purpose.” said the Asari.

“Good to see you again, Shiala. How is Zhu's hope doing?” Austin asked.

“We've done a lot of rebuilding. We even salvaged some useful material from the Geth ship you destroyed. They ExoGeni researchers got called back to their headquarters, however... along with what was left of the Thorian.” said Shiala.

“Is there something I can do to help?” Austin asked.

“I'd appreciate it. I've reached the limits of my diplomatic abilities, and I'd prefer not to start trouble. Some of the colonists had health problems as a result of the Thorian control. We hired a colonial survey group to do some medical scans. But the medical contract apparently allows the company to perform invasive procedures without our consent. That's why I'm here.” said Shiala.

“If you don't mind me asking, Shiala, why are you green? You were only green when the Thorian made clones of you. The real you was purple.” Austin asked.

“Those health problems I said were related to the Thorian control? This is mine. A few months after they Thorian died, my skin pigment changed. My biotic abilities are unstable as well. I'm also having vivid dreams... about my time with the Thorian. It is... disconcerting. Something else happened as well, but I really cannot talk about it. It is deeply private.” Shiala explained.

“I understand. I'll talk to the survey group.” said Austin.

“I appreciate it, Shepard. The Baria Frontiers representative known about the issue.” said Shiala.

Austin and the others walked up to the Asari that Shiala had told them about, Erinya.

“I saw your conversation, human. You're here to complain about the medical contracts those colonists signed. I suggest you leave. Your life is short enough. Do not waste what

time you have bothering me.” she said.

“What’s your problem with humans?” Austin asked crossley.

“Not just humans. It’s all of you. They Salarians and Turians are no better. They galaxy would be a better place if nobody but they Asari had ever dragged themselves out of the primordial muck.” said Erinya.

“Why are you so prejudiced against aliens? What have they ever done to you?!” said Austin.

“Where do I begin? With Salarian explorers unleashing the Rachni upon us, them unleashing the Krogan to correct their mistake? Or they Turians, so eager to bomb every problem away? Or humans, they new arrivals who already think they should be in charge?” said Erinya.

Austin’s hand clenched into a fist at this.

“Every war that plagued this galaxy has been caused by your people. My people’s deaths are on your hands.” said Erinya.

“What the hell are you talking about?!” Austin asked sternly.

“The mother of my daughters was killed on the Quarian homeworld during the initial Geth uprising. My daughters died on the Citadel when the Geth attacked. One worked in the Embassy. The other was a greeter for the Consort. I am not speaking in hypotheticals, human. The aliens will never be my allies. They best they can do is give me useful medical data.” said Erinya.

“Your bondmate was with the quarians. Your daughter worked with aliens every day at the Embassy and the Consort.” said Austin.

“And look what happened to them!” Erinya replied.

“You’ve suffered. I get that. But these colonists were trying to live peacefully! They’ve suffered, too! They lost family to the Geth and the Thorian creature. What makes you think you can add to their suffering?!” said Austin harshly. He didn’t remember being this angry and a long time.

Erinya was deeply hurt by this and fell to her knees crying. Austin did not go to help her up. He simply waited until she calmed down and stood up.

“I’m... sending an amended contract. No more tests. No fees. There’s enough grief in this galaxy. I don't need to add to it.” she said.

“Bitch.” said Alara as Erinya left. Even she was appalled by this, regardless of whether Erinya had changed her mind.

With the job taken care of, they went back to Shiala.

“You did it! I just got the revised contracts. Thank you, Shepard. You’ve saved Zhu’s Hope again. I don't think I could have... Is it always like this? Yesterday’s problems lingering in some new form? Isn’t anything ever just fixed?” asked Shiala.

“You’ve got the power to make a difference, Shiala. Not everyone does.” said Austin.

“You’re right. You gave us a chance by saving the colony. I can’t let them down. I won’t. Thank you for what you’ve done here, Shepard. I’ll keep doing what I can.” said Shiala.

“Good luck, Shiala.” said Austin. He then ultimately decided that he should do it and he took a small datapad out of one of the small pouches on his combat belt and handed it to Shiala.

“What’s this?” the Asari asked.

“A contact number for some top Arkane scientist.” Austin replied. He then moved closer to Shiala and lowered his voice. “My suit shows me everything. I know about your... private problem.” he said.

Shiala knew what he was talking about. At around the same time her skin pigment had changed, Shiala had also ended up growing a phallus form out of her Azure. It hadn’t bothered her too much though since she and her lover Lizbeth Baynham had had a lot of fun with it.

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me. I won’t tell anyone.” Austin added.

“Thank you again, Shepard. It does embarrass me slightly, but with any luck, they medical scans will take care of that.” said Shiala.

“If it doesn’t, call them. They’re bound to be able to help.” said Austin.

“I hope we meet again, Shepard.” Shiala smiled as she and Austin shook hands.

“Same here, Shiala. Take care of yourself.” said Austin.

Officer Dara’s office was right next to where Shiala had been, so the group moved on to her next.

“A Helldiver? What a surprise. We don’t see your kind around here a lot. Can I help you with something?” she asked.

“I’m looking for an Asari warrior name Samara.” Austin replied politely.

“Wait. Why? Do you have a problem, or... Did she kill somebody already?” Dara asked, horrified.

“Relax -- I just need to speak with her. I’m outfitting a special team for a mission and she’s on the list.” said Austin reassuringly. Dara calmed down after that.

“Good. Samara’s they first Justicar I’ve seen on Ilium. If i’m lucky, things will stay peaceful. She went to the commercial spaceport a few hours ago. If you want to get there, the pedestal on that balcony will summon a cab. Just be polite when you meet her. Justicars embody our highest laws, and the usually stay in Asari space. She’s not used to dealing with aliens, especially Helldivers.” said Dara.

“Thanks for thy help.” said Austin.

“Good luck with the Justicar. Try not to piss her off.” said Dara as she went back to her work and Austin and the others headed to the pedestal to get a cab. Their next stop, the

commercial spaceport, and hopefully Samara.

Shadow stood looking out of the window. Just like her last encounter with Shepard, she felt disgraced and humiliated. Shepard had managed to win once again. This fight had really taken its toll on her. The medics who had treated her had said that some of her wounds would never fully heal.

Unknown to the Phantom, a figure appeared behind her form out of the Shadows.

“Still in regret?” asked the Illusive man.

Shadow didn't say anything, nor did she stand to attention. She was far beyond caring whether this was her boss.

“I know things didn't go well, and that you don't feel like talking, but I have an offer for you.” said the Illusive man.

Shadow slowly turned to face him.

“Go ahead then. I've got nothing else to do.” she said.

“Recent studies of new technology we've uncovered from the dead Collectors you brought back from Horizon have unlocked new possibilities for our cybernetics division. If you'd be willing, there may be a chance we could give you the edge you need so that next time you encounter Shepard, the outcome will be in your favour.” said the Illusive Man.

Shadow simply smiled. She was beyond caring now. If this meant she could have her revenge, she was game. Not matter they cost, they Helldiver would pay...

POETRY is published here thanks to John Mahler's [Quotes of the Day](#).

Some people, at least, have enjoyed my Quotes of the Day, so here they are, for your amusement and bemusement: one entire year's worth of quotes. My quotes by the way; nobody else's. These are my thoughts and observations on the world around us: funny, sad, uplifting, evocative, inspiring, silly, and occasionally just plain stupid, they are all here for your perusal: enjoy!

JUST A GIRL ON A STRING

Maria Kubiak
of bloodymary16@hotmail.co.uk

You know that I love you,
You know that I would do anything for you,
But for you,
I am just a girl on a strings.

Please let me go,
Let me live my life,
Let me be free,
But i am just a girl on a strings.

Fake happiness on my face,
Real pain in my heart,
I don't want be just a girl on a string.

THROUGH THESE EYES

David McKinstry
of davidm19@uw.edu

In a city where it rains so much
How easy it is to just see gray
Not through these eyes though
These eyes see color everywhere
No sadness will be found in the rain
By me all that's found is joy and serenity
Each drop hitting the ground is a small symphony
I say let these tears of bliss fall from the sky
Breathe life into the plants
Quench the thirst of the city
This is what I see in a city so "gray"
And it is through these eyes
I catch a glimpse of something angelic
Inside of you, when I look into your eyes,
I can see it, feel it, deep inside of you
A mysterious elegance that pierces the heart
I know now, my queen, there is nothing
Nothing more exquisitely divine than you

IT BEGINS WITH RESOLUTIONS

or, A New Year's Sonnet

by Zuko4444

of legodude93@charter.net and <http://zuko4444.deviantart.com/>

I am simply an amateur poet from deviantart. I love finding new ways to expand and practice my craft, such as trying out new fixed forms of poetry. If you like what you see here, visit my page on deviantart--> <http://zuko4444.deviantart.com/> Thanks!

It begins with making resolutions
And starting off the year with a clean slate.
I wish to figure out a solution
For a friendship I want to reinstate.
I am granted only a single shot,
A second attempt to redeem myself.
This past year I was an insecure twat
And overlooked some academic wealth.
But I fear I will not keep this promise
To myself, to my mom, and to my friends.
I fear I will be seen as dishonest
And it will be too late to make amends.
Alas, I should keep myself confident;
And with it, start becoming more patient.

SUNRISE, SUNSET

Kavita Rae Songbir
of thegothicsongbird@gmail.com

The sunrise that I knew was a far too fragmented truth.
The day has never been my friend, the light it had was my end.
In the dusk I lost my home, a story burnt with pages torn.
The twilight hours passed me by, reality making things too cold to fly.
The sunset began to bring me back, to a world that was not cracked.
When the night finally rang true, my spirit lifted - me and you.
Now as the hours float on by, my worry is so sharply raised.
When the sun returns, does that leave my love on Earth?

THREE BY KAYLA

By Kayla “Zaden Willowfyre”
of musickstarz@earthlink.net and <http://zadenwillowfyre.deviantart.com/>

Contact the artist or see more of her work at: <http://zadenwillowfyre.deviantart.com/>

Brave Face (Book)

If I were as beautiful as my avatar...
Dressed in digital [makeup](#) and pixilated smiles;
A brave face
Lost in a stream of the closest strangers
Verbally scrap-booking their compressed lives.
A multitude of gratitudes, platitudes, and attitudes-
Shattered clouded windows to the soul.

If I were as joyful as my avatar...
All optimist with isms and quips;
A brave face
Enamored by a pang of superficial concern
For a multitude of fragmented cyber personas.
This hunger fed by refreshes and bites-
Though it churns in me, green with longing.

And I still put on that brave face
To face those artificial avatars.

Ink

Pierced heart
Black ink pours forth
Carrying the essence of her being
Written on its DNA
Gushing art
Beauty in the gore

She grows cold, her life blood sings
Written on her flesh and page

Drip
Drip
Drip
Words fall from gaping wounds
Until she is bled dry
Tick
 Tick
 Tick
Pulse grows thick as poisons purge
Until she comes alive

Dream Eater

As a kid I hated- no, I *dreaded* sleep. I saw it as a complete waste of time; far too much exploring, fun, and mischief was at my disposal for such trivial and boring tasks. Mostly I hated the idea of missing ANYthing. A product of my over active imagination no doubt. But, there were also the nightmares...

Awful, recurring, terrifying, and often confusing images and forms would plague my sleeping hours. I would lie awake most nights, fighting to stay awake with what little discipline I possessed, until the Sandman eventually wrestled me into those dark places. The Sandman always won...

But I toughed it out and, being young, I had energy to spare to make up for any lack of sleep. Some nights I wouldn't even dream; I would simply wake up with a vague sense of unease. It wasn't long before I accepted that my nightmares were just a part of life. But still, when the nightmares were especially bad, I had the feeling that some sadistic...thing...was feeding off of me as I dreamed those terrors. In my mind I called it the Dream Eater...that dark presence that was always lingering in the back of my nightmares. It took me some time to notice it, but it was usually there, feasting on what good dreams I may have had.

Things slowly began to change as I got older and the nightmares lost some of their power over me. Age and rational thought convinced me that my dreams were just images my

subconscious used to interpret and deal with the facts of the day. In fact, I began to relish sleep, especially after hitting puberty. Before long, only the occasional nightmare returned to haunt my slumber and I had all but forgotten the Dream Eater.

No, my dreams were for the most part...good. Incredible even. However, they always retained a sort of intrinsic nightmarish quality to them; a familiar wrongness that was almost imperceptible except during those first few moments of waking. I hardly took notice though, as the dreams kept getting better. I even managed to control them a time or two. Lucid dreaming was an art I soon mastered.

However, a funny thing happens when your dreams are that enticing. At first it was just a welcome change, a pleasant retreat from the woes of a hard life. Not that my life was terrible, but it was a far cry from what I had hoped it would be. Despite being plagued with nightmares as a child, I still had high aspirations for the future. But I was stuck working a dead end job which I, of course, hated and well...you've heard all the rest before...the American Dream they call it. So it was natural, then, that I found myself comparing my real life with my dream world. These comparisons only brought disappointment and depression, but the dreams were often so vivid that I couldn't help myself.

As my depression grew, I began, more and more, to yearn for that dream world. It felt as if I was being slowly lured into it...like a sailor adrift at sea who catches wind of the Siren's song. I would count down the hours until I could sleep and be taken under by the sweet melody of my dream world. And once a normal night's sleep wasn't enough, I began to sleep more; I would do anything in my power to catch a nap and my weekends were spent largely in bed, especially as my power over my dreams increased. I used any and every OTC sleep aid I could find...I just wanted to escape. The line between dream and reality had been blurred. In my mind, my life had become the nightmare.

And it only got worse as I started lying to doctors for prescription sleeping pills once the OTC varieties were no longer enough. I lost my job. My social life was nonexistent, and my friends had all but disappeared; not that I could blame them. I didn't mind, though. Never having lost that imagination, my subconscious always had some new adventure with new friends waiting for me the minute my head hit the pillow.

As time went on, I found I didn't need the sleep aids anymore. I could will myself to sleep any time and in just about any position. It wasn't hard...I had practically become a walking zombie due to my copious sleeping anyway. It was at that point I began sensing the Dream Eater again. His dark presence was ever lurking in my mind, even in waking. But this time, I welcomed it...like an old friend or some twisted spirit guide. If he was still feeding, on me I didn't notice. Or more accurately, I didn't care.

Eventually, my family and what few friends I had left somehow convinced me to see a doctor. I admit, I was concerned for myself too on some level. Not too surprisingly, the doctor didn't find anything wrong to cause my excessive sleeping, but he remarked that it was as if something was draining the very life of out me. My mind briefly went to the Dream Eater. I swear I could feel his laughter echoing through my head. The doctor then mentioned something about "hypersomnia" and "sleep addiction" and left me with a script for happy pills. I never got it filled.

It wasn't long after that I was spending more time asleep than awake, my body barely

surviving. I could feel myself withering away, but I didn't care. In my dreams, I was strong. A hero! I was everything I could never be in life.

Things are different now, though...

There are fuzzy memories of hospital rooms, feeding tubes, the occasional crying, someone lightly squeezing my hand...Don't they know I'm only dreaming?

I wonder if I'll ever fully awaken again, but I am so happy in my dreams. So vivid and beautiful and full of life...

Time passes...or maybe it doesn't. I rarely wake up now...if I even wake up at all. Nobody squeezes my hand anymore. All I'm left with...all I can perceive in my waking life is a faint scent of dirt and rot...I couldn't escape from this now, even if I wanted. Not even when the nightmares return...

The Sandman always wins...

THE WAITING GAME

Kristina Carlock
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People always say:
Good things come,
to those,
who wait.

They never mention,
however,
that waiting,
is so lonely.

Like..
Being chosen last,
to be on someones team.

Sitting alone at lunch,
because you don't fit in.
Watching the ground,
to make sure people in front don't trip you.

You wait for a long time,
so long perhaps,
you wait your entire life.

And you ask yourself,
"when do the good things come?"
Or maybe the good things have come,
they just decided they didn't want to stay.

Like..
a bird flying south,
for the winter.

The longer you wait,
the stronger you become.

You learn not to depend on people,
But you also learn not to trust them.

You learn not to get your hopes up,
But also learn not to have hope at all.

Sometimes the most important lesson of all,
is to never fall in love.

If you have to wait for someone,
to fall head over heels,
madly,
insanely,
brilliantly in love with you,
you will die.

You will die of loneliness,
resentment,
jealousy,
self-loathing,
hatred,
sadness.

Everything eats away at you,
because they don't look at you,
the same way as they used to.
Or they give that smile,
to someone,
who most definitely isn't you.

Your heart screams,
"What about me?"
and your brain repeats,
"I told you so."

Good things..
Bad things..
Both of these come to those who wait.

The only way to stop either of them from happening,
or only one,
lies within your hands.

The true decision of when you stop waiting.

I FEEL THE FIRE BURNING WITH IN

by dr4gonsfire

of ryyu_doragon@hotmail.co.uk and <http://dr4gonsfire.deviantart.com/>

I feel the fire burning with in,
raging on till there is nothing,
I am losing my own mind
till there is nothing left behind,

I feel the fire burning on,
its consuming my heart and soul,
complete and utter destruction,
its final goal.

I'm fighting a battle within,
but the fire soon will win,
when I finally lose the fight,
you all better run in fright.

I'm sorry but I cant be saved,
I fight on till I will cave,
I'm fighting a fire within,
we are all doomed if I let it win

so I continue to fight the fire within

THE TRUE PAIN INSIDE

by Faiasu-chan
of usagi-san_lover@hotmail.com and <http://faiaisu-chan.deviantart.com/>

the night sky rises
the moon is high
my thoughts all ripples
in the pond of life
the stars are bright
like the light deep inside me
but the light is dim
in the darkness where its hiding
a rose clutched in my hand
tight and firm
the thorns make me bleed
but it doesnt hurt
the pain thats in my heart
flowing through my eyes
is much more harmful
than on this physical disguise