

Fanatical Publishing's

# Weekly Review

Issue #52

DATE 4 March, 2013

## AND NOW, a word from the publisher:

Hello folks, Jochannon here; first let me say thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy, and please feel free to share it with your friends, re-post it to your profile, spread it around; the more people who get to read it, the better!

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If you want to contribute, I'd love to see your work, send it to me at the aforementioned e-mail address with: 'category(prose, fanfic, poetry), story title, author's name' in the subject line: please include the text of your story in the body of the email, and please include a cover letter about you, your work, or whatever; include any links you want.

Do you have any questions or comments? If you do, I'd to hear them; write to me at the aforementioned e-mail address.

I'm bad at stopping these things, so I'll just say again: thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy!

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AND NOW, another word from the publisher:

Hello, folks, you may not know this, but I'm a writer too. One of my more popular works is the Lurk series: It's a hodge-podge collection of bad jokes, stupid pop culture references, action, adventure, sex, a quest for true love, and an incredibly ugly hat:

Inigo FitzGibbons was a short, thin man with stringy black hair and a narrow pinched face. A barbarian hero from the western continent, he had come to the Romany Empire seeking his wife. Right now he wore a sword on his right hip, thrust through a red sash worn over a patched brown jerkin and britches. Everyone called him Lurk.

The tailor seemed not to want to touch Lurk's hat(which had made his job rather difficult) but he was eager to get it out of his shop, so quickly repaired Lurk's hat, and passed it over quickly.

Lurk paid him, then popped the hat onto his head and looked at himself in the mirror. "Well now," he said with satisfaction. "Doesn't that look good?"

"I agree with you Lurk," Abraham said.

"You do?"

"Yeah. That doesn't look good." Abraham van Helsing was a scholar-turned-wandering swordsman. A Hitton from the Desolation of Balilael, he was tall with gray hair and clear gray eyes. He wore a heavy tunic of black wool belted over brown canvas trousers and old boots.

Lurk sighed. "Y'know, I'm tired of you guys complaining about my hat all the time."

"Tell you what," Rushell offered. "If you stop wearing it, we'll stop complaining about it."

Lurk turned away and saw Heather standing in the doorway.

Heather was a werehuman, but she looked attractive for all that. She had pale white skin and a build that drew one's eye to all the right curves. Her silky, straight, neck-length hair was the color of coffee with cream, and was worn in a severe, simple style.

Right now she stared at Lurk with a very worried look in her wide orange eyes. "Heather!" he said cheerfully. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," she said softly. "Lurk, there is something very important I need to tell you."

"Okay. . ." Lurk said, getting worried. "What's wrong?"

"Lurk," she said carefully. "Stay calm, don't panic. There is something eating your head."

Check it out!

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?keyWords=lurk&contributorId=242500&sorter=publicationDate-desc>

# SPIRIT ENCHANTED, CHAPTER 2

Jessica Harris  
of whiteangelofdoom@msn.com

I slowly force myself to unclench both my jaw and my fists. Keeping my voice low and calm, I call to my... Annoying companion.

"Ash? Why... For the love of anybody! Are we lost... Again?" I growl. I can sense the fear emitting from every pore in Ash's body as he cowers behind a tree.

"Uh... Well uh... You see..." Suddenly over his nonsensical ramblings I sense a strange presence. I spin away and search the surrounding area, probing but not recognising it as anything earthbound. I bark at Ash to quit his noise and to get the hell by my side. He squeaks shrilly and shrinks away some more before realising I'm actually serious when I flex my hand and smile slightly with the familiar sparking accumulating in my palm. He hurries over and raises his fists.

"What is that?" He questions, now being able to feel it over his fear. I shake my head slightly.

"I don't know." I mutter. "What I do know is that whatever it is, it's not going to be friendly." Ash swallows hard and clenches his jaw. The bushes right in front of us shudder lightly and both myself and Ash tense as we prepare to destroy whatever appears. But I falter as what does appear isn't what I saw in my mind's eye. A small snow white cat shakes a stray leaf from its back and looks at us with wide unblinking eyes the colour of a glacier. Three electric blue stripes rip through the white, tainting its pure nature and a horn the same colour protrudes from its forehead, a couple of inches long. As the rest of the cat creature comes into view, I straighten up, realising this isn't the same presence I'd felt. My face scrunches up as it sits on its haunches and leans its head back to lick one of a pair of electric blue leathery wings perched on its back. Suddenly the ominous presence returns and at the same time, the cat creature snaps its head up, terror in its eyes and scarpers. I crouch down again and wait. I don't have to wait long. A huge beast crashes through the foliage, stepping heavily on the ground where the little white cat was just sat and roars, a deep guttural sound that vibrates to my bones. I take a moment to sweep my eyes over the majestic animal. Standing at least fifteen feet high, it towers over us. It's dull orange coloured fur ripples with unseen muscles and huge talons the length of my arm gouges grooves in the hard mud. With paws big enough that they could squash me under them in one hit, I take a wary step back. The mane of purple that hangs around its large neck sways as it trains its gaze on me. It's deep

blood red eyes narrow and it pulls its lips back from its teeth, revealing fangs longer than my sword and probably more dangerous. Saliva drips from its mandibles and lands in wet puddles at its paws. I bring my sword up to my best known offensive position and get ready to take this creature down. A massive tail whips up a small tornado of twigs and dust as it sweeps across the ground behind it. I wet my lips and am about to leap into an attack when a shrill female voice cuts into my concentration.

"Wait!!" I plant my feet firmly back on the ground and glance in the direction of the voice. A girl, probably my age, is stood just beyond the tree line, shadowed by the canopy. Her long chocolate brown hair reaches down past her waist, a bit of a nuisance if you ask me, I think.

Hazel eyes glitter in the morning sunshine and her mouth is pulled into a downward turn. It doesn't look natural. She strides towards me and I automatically sink into my stance. I frown as she throws me a despondent look. Facing away from me she confronts the huge beast, who growls at the girl. She doesn't flinch. Lifting her fisted right hand she addressed the creature.

"You will not harm these two travellers." She says, voice dominating. The beast cringed back ever so slightly but then regains its equilibrium and growls again, showing its fangs. Its muscles bunch under its fur as it tenses them, performing a powerful jump straight over the girl, who flicks her right hand up and lunches a cloud of blue powder into the path of the creature. It flies through the blue and snorts as it inhales a vast quantity. The beast's eyes widen in shock and then slowly begin to close. It loses momentum and comes to a crashing halt on the ground, kicking up dust and stopping inches away from me. I smile and flick its snout. Soft snores emit from between its jaws. I turn my back on the sleeping animal and face the girl, who is brushing her hands together, removing all remnants of the powder from her palms. Her eyes flicker to me and a glint of something shines. She smiles. Now that looks natural.

"You don't recognise me do you?" She says. My brow furrows.

"Uh... Should I?" I reply. She shakes her head and sighs.

"I think you should Jess." She smiles again. I stare at her hard, trying to place where I've seen her before. It clicks.

"Rebecca?!" I gasp. She grins, showing pearly white perfect teeth, and nods. I'm stunned. I've not seen Rebecca in years...

Behind me, I can feel Ash almost vibrating from anticipation. I roll my eyes and face him.

"This is Rebecca, Ash. She helped me recover from an attack almost 10 years ago. She's the Sacred Keeper." I say. Confusion flits across his face. Annoyance flits across mine. "Becca, you explain it. I can't be bothered." Becca laughs lightly.

"Haven't changed a bit... Ash, as the Sacred Keeper I have the

responsibility of keeping the world chaos in order. Without me and my animals, this planet would be thrown into a miasma of terror and despair." As she speaks, a small variety of animals appear from the foliage. The cat from earlier slips through the bushes and sits by Becca's feet. A large canine is next, unusual in the fact royal blue gills cutting down its neck flex and pulse as it breaths. It's chocolate brown fur shines like its just been submerged in water and spines protrude from its lower leg, royal blue webbing between the sharp spikes. A fin twitches on the end of its tail. Through next is a huge equestrian. Tall antlers sit upon its head, curving forward into a crescent moons, sporting a large grass green orb seemingly held by the tips of the moon antlers. It's dark coat shimmers dully and it snorts as it stamps it's hoof against the ground. I'm amazed to see little shoots begin growing rapidly around its hooves and where it struck the mud. Dark ebony eyes stare, unblinking but soft with compassion.

A flare of light flashes above me and I instinctively drop into a crouch. I look up and relax when I see another animal above us, floating down on an immense expanse of wing. A dragonic head flows down to a long elegant neck into a muscular body covered in flame red feathers. It opens it's beak and reveals two rows of razor sharp teeth just an inch long. Devious looking eyes the colour of dried blood bores hole into my skull and I get the impression this dragon-bird doesn't like me. As it lands it ruffles it's tail, the mass of thin three foot long feathers rise, defying gravity as to not drag on the mud. A five foot patch of ground erupts into flames before extinguishing a second later, leaving a large scorch mark as the birds feet touch the ground. It fold it's wings in by its side and continues to glare at me. I turn back to Becca as Ash asked another question.

"So how do you have so many?"

"Each generation of Sacred Keeper has a new animal to call her own, as well as the offspring of the previous generation of Sacred Keeper. Understand?" By the look on Ash's face, I'd say not. I shake my head subtly at Becca, who smiles. "Ok, look at it this way. My great great grandmother started off the Sacred Keepers. She found her true love and together they made the first Sacred Animal with their Spirit, and that animal can equate to White-Ice's great great grandmother too," She says, gesturing to the little white cat. "Once my great great grandmother had had a child and the animal had had a kitten, both she and the animal passed away, my ancestor with her love. The child grew up with the cat, both second generation. The child finds her true love, they make a Sacred Animal and so on and so on. Does that make more sense?" Becca asks. Ash nods vigorously and grins. I roll my eyes again and clear my throat.

"Becca, what do you know about the Black Ravens?" she frowns, tainting her perfect face.



"I know a little. They are their own group and only have themselves, which, granted doesn't seem much but their strength is immense. They have managed to take down numerous groups of other demons, whose numbers far exceed their own. They draw their strength from the gems they wear, they use them to harness and focus their power. Alex is the main head demoness." I giggle to myself. That's the first time I've ever heard someone call a female demon a demoness. I'm used to just calling them scum and destroying them. Exhaustion begins to seep into my core. Asking Becca if we can stay with her for the night, she agrees.

"My animals will alert me if anything goes amiss." Ash and I set up a tent each, I crawl straight into mine, bundle my jacket under my head and am out like a light in seconds. Bear in mind my sense of awareness never sleeps.



R.Kain Fantasy Stories has released a new novella, **Flux Zone**, and, in celebration, is giving the title away for free at Smashwords until 3-1-2013 when you enter the code below.

**Summary:**

In a world of super heroes and villains, having superpowers doesn't necessarily make you a hero or villain. Sometimes you might save a damsel-in-distress on a whim. Other times you might rob a drug dealer blind and fleece an unsuspecting mark for cash. In my case, I'm simply out for revenge against Doctor Andros, a death dealer to villains everywhere, after escaping being experimented on for three years and developing powers of my own.

But I'm not alone. Several others gained abilities of their own and working alongside a team, we have to try and collect the rest of our allies before Andros gets his hands on them first. And we have to do it all without drawing the eyes of the Hero Coalition or other villains who'd love to find out just what makes us special.

This exciting action-adventure novella is over [27,700 words] and serves as the first entry into the Chasing Andros series.

Smashwords Link

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# OF WOLVES AND WINTER

Nate-Wallis  
of <http://nate-wallis.deviantart.com>

The boy had been told many times that death when it came was swift and secret, sneaking in to claim the soul and spiriting it away from under the noses of the living in so quick an instant that a man would be snuffed from life before he could guess what had killed him. But now he was about to die he realised that someone had got it all wrong for things seemed to slow to an inching crawl and the cause of his imminent demise was quite literally staring him in the face. Indeed, it had sunk its vicious teeth into his arm, slicing through flesh until they scraped against bone and held him so that he could do nothing but stare back.

A part of the boy's mind was sure that he was mistaken, that any second the reality of death would come rushing back around him and the jaws would release his arm in favour of ripping out his throat.

Another more fanciful part of his mind found a perverse amusement in the fact that in his short span of years he could not recall once having contemplated the strength in the jaws of a full grown wolf in its prime. And here he was, clutched in the jaws of just such a creature and taken by the realisation that there was nothing more enlightening than experiencing it firsthand.

And how strong it was.

The boy was well aware of the weakness of his own thin limbs, the frailness of his young body. He lived with the knowledge that the world was full of people he was powerless to resist, people strong enough to force their will upon him. The boy had always depended on the will of others rather than his own determination to survive.

In the end the wolf was not so unlike all the others who had steered his life due to their superior might.

All that marked it out as different was that it would be the one to end his life.

He was not at all frightened, but rather he was calmed by acceptance of the fact that he was about to die. This must be what they mean, he thought, when they say that your life flashes before your eyes. For now he was aware of memories pressing themselves upon his conscious mind, coming not in any chronological order but seemingly at random. Images of people and places all filled with emotion and the subjective significance that roots them in the memory of an individual, making them personal and precious.

He supposed that the parade of memories would be swiftly over, skipping through the few years of his life so as not to keep the wolf

from the prize for which he hungered.

How long could it take to tell the story that ended with him pinned down in the blood-stained snow by the dying fire, surrounded by the corpses of slain dogs and at the mercy of a hunter for whom the word had no meaning at all?

Kjartan spat on the palm of his hand and proffered it to the headman of the village with a forced smile on his face. 'So it is agreed,' his rich and deep accent betrayed his Skurngelder roots almost as readily as his carefully plaited beard and serious brows as he rolled the words of the low dialect on his tongue. 'You will allow us shelter, a ration of salted meat and free passage across your lands and in return we will bring to you the heads of the beasts that have cost you so.'

The headman, who's name no one cared to know, nodded vigorously as he dribbled into the upturned palm of his own thin hand and reached out to see it swallowed by that of Kjartan. For his part, the Skurngelder tried to force down the urge to spit again, only the second time into the feeble old man's face instead.

For one thing he was galled by the very act of sitting around the hearth in the headman's wattle and daub hut, bandying words with the frail and decrepit fool who in reality was nothing more than a jumped up farmer used to scraping a living from a few sorry fields full of nothing but frozen shit. For another the insult of asking for safe passage through his tiny lands was a wound to his pride as a warrior.

The boy knew all this as he watched from the corner of the huts solitary room. He knew it from the faces that the men made and the true feelings that their bodies betrayed despite their efforts. That had always been the way, watching and listening without a word until a man's unintentional hints became a language all of its own.

And of all men he knew Kjartan the best, as it paid any slave to know his master.

Now he watched with interest as Kjartan sought the approval of a man he could have split in two with a good swing of his blade. It was a hard thing for the warrior to bite down on his pride and play the diplomat, but for an outcast there was no choice in the matter. A man with such an impressive list of crimes after his name could be sent to the gallows by the accusation, or by the slaying, of even a wretch as low as this one.

'Yes,' the headman gurgled, 'yes.'

His eyes darted from Kjartan to the faces of the men who stood behind him, lingering on each of them as though still marvelling at the fact all four of them and their master were engaged to do his bidding.

He gazed first over Svein, stick thin and filled with disdain for the world. Not possessed of the same manners as Kjartan, he simply

scowled back through his black beard and made no attempt to hide his disdain from the headman.

Next he let his eyes crawl over blonde Gutrum, the youngest of Kjartan's fighting men and perhaps the largest man he had ever seen. Gutrum's fellows joked that in return for swelling his arms to such a size, the gods had shrivelled his brain and his prick so as to teach him his place among men.

Then came Ubba, as corpulent and given to laughter as Svein was slight and bitter and bald as an egg save for his thick moustaches. In the past many had made the mistake of marking the jovial Skurngelder down as a chuckling fool and realised their error only when they lost their lives at his hand.

And last was Ivar the Short, burly and bull-necked, but beaten in height by most women and a good number of gangling youths. The boy was thankful that the headman seemed too enchanted with the sight of them all to make light of Ivar's stature, that was a sure way to see why he had been driven out of the northern lands by his own people, forced to wear the bearskin shirt as a mark of shame.

Svein was cruel, Gutrum was strong as an aurochs, Ubba was killed as easily as he laughed, but Ivar was possessed of the rage that took the Skurngelder and transformed them into berserk madmen wanting nothing but battle and bloodshed. While the other men beat the boy when they were drunk or simply reckoned he deserved it, he only truly feared being caught by Ivar in the grip of one of his rages. He was sure that if he ever were then it would simply be the end of him.

But instead the headman just opened his mouth and smiled at them all with his idiot grin to reveal a perfect set of teeth, white and even in the poor light of the fire. The boy had not been expecting such a sight and found that somehow it disturbed him, that it somehow seemed wrong in one so old and so pathetic.

'But,' Kjartan's voice brought the headman's eyes quickly back to his own.

'But?' the headman asked stupidly.

'But we keep the pelts of every wolf that we kill,' Kjartan's face was suddenly hard and cold as stone, 'you will have the meat and the bones to do with as you will, but we keep the pelts; heads, tails and everything in between.'

The headman's Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he considered the quandary that Kjartan had laid before him. The bones and the meat would be useful enough, but the pelts could be offered to the itinerant trappers and hunters who drifted through small settlements such as this when the seasons turned. A well-inclined trapper would be quick to offer money for the pelts and the headman would have expended nothing but a paltry few days worth of salted

beef to claim it.

As greedy as he was for coin, the headman's reason won out and he nodded even as his eyes showed defeat. Kjartan for his part dropped the headman's limp hand and showed a smile as wolfish as those he was agreeing to hunt.

While he was sure that Kjartan and his men would not harm his person and his folk the headman had to weigh that against the realisation that they could simply mount up and move on. And if they chose to do the latter he would be left with neither meat, bones nor pelts, and worse still with the wolves alive and stalking the outskirts and edges of his village.

'Good, good,' Kjartan grinned back to his men and then turned back to the fire, 'now that we have an understanding, you will tell us the story of these wolves and why you cower indoors whilst real men hunt them on your behalf.'

The headman told his tale and the Skurngelder listened to him.

The boy stayed still in the shadows and watched them as he always had since Kjartan became the centre of his world.

The boy's first of my memories were vague, clouded by the passing of time. There had always been the image of tightly packed lines of houses, cheek by jowl, uniform under a dark sky. There had always been the impression of constant rain and the rare sound of far off, distant thunder. There had always been the memory of the dark cellar where the worshippers gathered in their drab and worn clothes, swaying back and forth through the air thick with the smoke of incense as they spoke quiet prayers together from the roughly printed books in their hands.

He had always thought that there should have been more, far more to those snatches of memory. But they remained incomplete and distant, forever out of reach.

So his story began in that cramped cellar, on the night when the chanting of the prayers was interrupted by the sound of hammering at the door. No more than a child, he recalled being seized by the most terrible fear, as if by some instinct he knew that the sounds at the top of the stone steps could be nothing but trouble of the worst kind.

Perhaps it was that the insistent noise of strangers on the other side of the door was so at odds with the nights of almost silent reverence that he had become used to in that cellar, nights which came to such a shattering end as men in uniform stormed down the steps. They were everywhere then, among the worshippers whom they set about with clubs and fists and without mercy.

Screams and cries filled the cellar as the men went about their

brutal work and others descended the steps behind them, bringing sources of light that pierced the smoke and shadows. In that harsh light he saw for the first time the red rewards of violence and the triumph of the strong over the weak.

There the memory faded into nothing and he could recall no more of the cellar, the quiet congregation and the final savage beating. His next memories were of slavery.

'The wolves have always been there,' the headman began, 'in the forests around Clachan.' He pronounced the last word with a reverence that bordered on the farcical, as though he were announcing the name of a king rather than that which he attached to his own tiny village. The boy, who had an ear for words was sure he had heard the term somewhere before and that it meant simply village or hamlet. 'They always were afraid of men in the past. Then at the end of the summer, things changed. The Turas Duine brought the curse when he came with the turning of the season.'

The headman's eyes lit up at the muttering and cursing the mention of the words Turas Duine sparked amongst his small audience. A landless people, the Turas Duine were reviled as wanderers and vagabonds by most and truly trusted by none. Men without a homeland of their own they drifted as they were able through those of others bringing trouble and upset in their wake. Stories abounded about their hoarded secrets and the curses that they brought down upon the unwary for revenge.

'A strange one he was, even for their kind. Claimed a fancy title that probably amounts to nothing more than a hedge wizard and gave himself some heirs as well. Demanded shelter, he did and food to fill his belly besides. "But what will you give us for it," I asks him. And at that he gets on his high horse and calls me choice names in front of all my folk.' The headman shook his head for emphasis. 'Then he damns me for not keeping the ancient traditions of hospitality. Hospitality, I ask you all, what a thing to accuse me of being without. "Your customs aren't mine," I told him and then I damned him right back and told him to be gone.'

If the headman had been expecting a round of approval from Kjartan and his men, he was disappointed. The mention of the Turas Duine had set the Skurgelder to listen intently, and the account that followed saw their hands move to show signs against the influence of evil and ill fortune. The boy watched them with keen interest, aware all the time of their superstitious nature and the consequences they would imagine for the headman's disrespectful treatment of the wandering mystic. If they had any doubts that they were dealing with a witless churl, the boy thought, now the headman had dismissed them



entirely.

Unsure for a moment, the headman decided to press on with his story. 'Then he puffs him up all big and important and proclaims: "Since you will give me naught, I shall give somewhat to you instead. I will give you a prophecy," only he calls it a wyrd as they do. "From out of the forest will come a beast who you will come to call Leir, and he shall punish you for your disrespectful ways. He will steal life from you until he steals from death, and until that day you shall have no rest from him." And with that he ups and leaves Clachan without a glance backwards at any of us.'

The headman swallowed hard.

'And then it came out of the forest with its pack. It started killing my folk, and it hasn't stopped since that day.'

Men call the folk that dwell beneath the mountains "Dwarves" in the typical human habit of defining others by their difference to themselves, as though those differences make them inferior and worthy of pity. In the years that he spent amongst them, and if he was honest for many afterwards, the boy could think of no other term to describe those creatures than devil or demon, so much did he hate the sight of them.

For the boy they were simply the creatures that first clapped irons on his ankles and drove him to work in their mines. In the dark holes where they plundered the depths of the earth for its minerals and metals, they seemed coarse and cruel creatures that drove their slaves to work harder and never spared the whip in the effort.

Clad from head to foot in dense leather garments to keep their flesh safe from the sharp rocks and shield them from the pockets of gas that the spark from a pick on rock could ignite in an instant, these were the dwarves of the deeps who kept their faces hidden behind the flaps of their pointed hoods of animal hide. This practice was a matter of strict observance for them and never did they allow a slave to gaze upon their uncovered bodies or faces. Any slave who broke this taboo was put to death without exception and in a second.

The boy drew comfort from the fact that he had seen no more of the dwarves than they would allow and knew nothing more of them than the harsh tones of their tongue and the rank smell of their bodily odour. So strong was the stench that he learned to smell them before ever he caught sight of them in the gloom of the tunnels. Every slave knew that the day he saw one of the faces behind those leather hoods was the day that he would die.

Time had no meaning in the tunnels. The dwarves kept their slaves working in tireless shifts under the lash until they collapsed from exhaustion heaving and hauling in carts the piles of rubble

generated by the constant swinging of picks against the virgin rock.

They lived only to be worked hard and to death.

The boy had no way of knowing how long he had been worked in the mines beneath the earth. He had no way knowing either how he had come to be there at all. Men had later guessed by his height and speech that he was maybe fourteen years old, which meant most of those years had been spent as a slave to the dwarves.

It was in those tunnels that the boy learned to keep quiet and truly watch the actions of others. He watched the dwarves conversing out of the corner of his eye when he was able and held onto the sound in his memory. Hearing the same words over and over again he slowly tied them to the mundane surroundings of the mine and its workings.

When one of the dwarves pointed at a pile of stones at his feet, the boy realised that the clipped sound that he was hearing was the word he had come to associate with the carts that the slaves pushed along the rails rather than the different word for stones. He watched another slave rush to the pile and begin to gather the rubble in his hands. The dwarf laid about the wretch with the butt of his pick, all the time cursing him and repeating the word for cart as if the blows from the tool would somehow hammer the lesson home.

So there he remained for the years that might have been his childhood. The boy kept his mouth shut and played the mute, not daring to speak his own tongue let alone that of the dwarves for fear of being killed on the spot. He had no one for company but himself as he crept through the dark tunnels guided by his uncommonly sharp eyes and wits made keen by constant fear of his callous masters.

The boy might have died there had he not been in that one tunnel when the dwarves working there brought the ceiling of boulders crashing down upon themselves. Alone in the silence after the cave in, the boy glimpsed the light far above him in jagged crack left behind when the ceiling fell.

Staring up at the wondrous sight, he climbed over the bodies of the dwarves and never looked back. He climbed until the light surrounded him, swallowed him and carried him to another world above the ground.

For the first time in his memory, the boy's eyes looked up the world above the ground.

'Leir,' Kjartan turned the word over his tongue as though he could taste its flavour like that of a wine. 'It's one of theirs,' he explained as he thrust his spear forwards, testing its feel and weight, 'a word of the Turas Duine. It means torment, if you translate it to the low Imperial or suffering in our own.'

'I do not like this talk of wyrd,' Gutrum sat on a log by the tiny

fire the boy had managed to light and around which they had pitched camp. 'Men like us and wolves I can kill, but the wandering folk,' he shook his head unhappily, 'I am scared of them.' While the young warrior was lacking in brains, he never failed to speak his mind and always honestly. Indeed there was little that was inside his head that failed to come out of his mouth sooner or later. None who knew him would have ever scorned what he said as cowardly; if Gutrum said he was afraid then he meant it, and anything that could frighten such a man was well worth worrying about.

Svein nodded in agreement from his perch on a rock across the other side of the fire, jumping in at the sign of a chance to vent his spleen as soon as Gutrum was finished. 'The lump is right,' he spat into the snow as if to emphasize the point, 'these dim-witted arseholes have grabbed a devil by the balls and given them a good hard tug. Why we're sitting around here tooling up to hunt down this demon of a wolf for them when we could just take what we need and leave them to it, eh? That's what I want to know?'

'I can't recall the last time we hunted wolf,' Ubba might have been enthusing about a night in the mead hall judging by the look on his face and the jovial tone of his voice. 'Nothing out there but the forest between our prey and us. Ah! I should have been a hunter instead of a fighter. All that fresh air, and its good exercise to boot!' He patted his belly with the flat of his axe and let out a chortle so sudden and loud that the hounds started up in alarm from their place by the fire.

The boy did his best to sooth them with the pats and scratching that reassured the dogs that all was well. In that moment he was as glad as he had ever been for the way in which Svein and Ubba each seemed to act as a balance and balm to the other. The thin man looked in disdain at the fat man and all his talk of dissent was lost as he turned his attention to instead mocking his comrade.

'Quiet, you fat bastard,' Svein shouted. 'I want to know...'

'What you want to know, hah!' Ivar had been saddling the horses and making a last check that the gear was ready for the hunt. Now he was standing behind Svein with his arms crossed over his chest. 'Since when has anyone cared a fiddler's fuck about what you want to know, shit-for-brains!'

Svein bristled at the insult, but he stayed seated all the same, not willing to draw a weapon on the shorter man for fear of his berserk rage. Seeing Svein back down, Ivar gave a derisory laugh and walked over to seat himself bedside Gutrum on the log.

'We could do as you say, Svein,' Kjartan leant upon his spear and made it clear that he was to be heard on the matter. 'Put a sword under their noses and carry off what we want...or who we want,' his eyes settled on Svein, who looked away and into the fire. 'But it never

seems to work out that simple for us, does it? Someone pulls a blade on us, tries to be a hero and then we have to start killing them all. And then there's you,' he jabbed the tip of the spear at Svein. 'The man who couldn't keep his prick in his pants and just got away with it in one piece. Remember what got you exiled in the first place. Keep your mind on doing what I tell you and off raping girls, or I'll be the one cutting it off. And you won't get away from me as anything other than a eunuch or a corpse.'

He let the harsh words sink in for a moment and simply stared at Svein as they burned him with shame.

'No more talk of rape and pillage,' Kjartan sought out each of his men in turn now, 'I won't have any one of you fooling himself that he's a big named man out to win glory. You're exiles, we all are. We're the ones that got cast out, the dogs that bit their master's hand and couldn't be tamed no matter what. We take what's offered until we find something better, and we will find something better. But it won't be here and it won't be now. So we'll hunt down this wolf that has these weaklings cowering behind their doors and then we'll move on to better things. But when we go on they'll remember our names and tell others about us, and in that way our stock will start to grow. We'll make a name for ourselves a bit at a time and soon enough we'll be the ones picking and choosing the jobs as we like the sound of. People will seek us out and open their purses to us like a whore opening her legs for coppers.'

Kjartan's men liked the analogy and lascivious grins spread across their faces in the dancing firelight. For his own part, the boy watched his master's performance with great interest from his position amongst the warmth of the hounds. He wondered at the way in which the image had married together the two things after which the men lusted most of all. It seemed that they could endure the cold of winter, the loneliness of their exile and the humiliation of exterminating wolves at the behest of farmers if they were well enough convinced of the rewards that lay ahead.

The boy knew his master well enough to see that when he spoke of honour and how they would not chase it he was lying. In the time he had served Kjartan, he had come to know the warrior's own story as well as he knew anything.

Kjartan was a lover of tales and liked nothing more than either hearing one told or telling one himself. Many times on a night the small troupe had been entertained by his recounting of the ancient sagas of his people, long and lyrical tales that told the stories of heroes and beasts in a fantastical age lost in the dawning of time. Sagas that for the most part the Skurngelder had turned their backs on and discarded as no more than useless children's tales. It was no coincidence that the people who had abandoned the sagas had also

found no use for the man who loved them so.

There had been a time before his people were known as the Skurngelder, a time when they had sailed the seas in their longships, the prows carved as ravening dragons and their benches filled with warriors at the oars. They descended with sword and axe, took what they wanted and sailed away without a backward glance. Their gods were warriors and wise men that saw far into the nature of Yggdrasil, the tree from which grew all the worlds. But all that changed when they came to know the dwarves of the mountains and to love the gold with which they traded.

In time they were enchanted by it and bound to the dwarves who in their reclusive xenophobia would trust and trade with no other nation of men. Some said that the dwarves forged magic into the gold that ensnared the spirits of the once proud warriors, other that they were simply greedy for the wealth offered to them. Rather than become warriors, they instead became merchants and moneylenders. They grew their beards long in the dwarven fashion. They came to believe that a short man was more fortunate than a tall man due to his closeness to a dwarf's height. They even abandoned their old gods and aped those of the dwarves.

They became the Skurngelder, literally the people of the dwarven gold.

There was no place in such a nation for men who made war and sought glory in battle. Sons were raised to be merchants or to ply a profitable trade and when there was fighting to be done it was the work of foreign mercenaries, work beneath a Skurngelder.

The men who clung to the old ways and to the old gods were of no use to their people. Most did not follow orders well enough to serve as guards to merchants or militiamen and there was always the deep embarrassment that was associated with them. No Skurngelder liked to admit that they were countrymen of such uncouth and useless men who bragged and brawled like savages rather than applying themselves to a respectable business. So most ended up as exiles either as a result of the crimes they committed when drunk and unruly or simply because they were unable to endure the stigma and the pitying glances from their closest kin.

The boy knew that Kjartan was an uncommon example of such an exiled Skurngelder, a man who had struck out on his own not for shame or the many crimes he was accused of in his homeland. Rather he was a man who had gone out into the world looking for the heroism of the sagas that he so loved and wanted to test the truth of. In those legends he hoped to glimpse the glories that had once been the goal of his people and to come as close as he was able to creating a legend for himself that might go some way to standing by them.

Memories of a wolf came to the boy as he watched Kjartan, a

great and terrible beast of the sagas, which had come at the ending of the world to ravage and destroy without mercy. In its way stood the old gods forgotten by the Skurngelder, but remembered by Kjartan. They fought the wolf in a titanic battle, defeating the monster and finally chaining it to the earth at great cost.

In his mind there was no doubt that the wolf they were to hunt had sparked images of the same legend in his master. Kjartan had seen the wolf as a part of his own intricate warrior's fate, or *wyrd* as the Turas Duine termed it, and he would let nothing come between him and the creature's slaying. For all his talk of grim reality, Kjartan was about to make what he hoped would be a grasp at his own immortality.

'We will hunt the beasts from horseback,' Kjartan's voice snapped the boy back to reality. 'Spears and wits will win the day for us.'

'Win the night, you mean!' Ubba laughed and gestured to the dusk that was falling quickly amongst the trees.

'Who will drive the hounds?' Svein asked in a pointed tone.

'The hounds we will leave here, with the boy,' Kjartan allowed the protests of his men to flow over him before he went on. 'They won't be of use to flush the pack out anyway. If what the headman tells us is true, a wolf that's bold as a rock hard cock leads this pack. He has no fear of men or fire and he'll come right into the village when the whim takes him so that he can carry off a choice bit of livestock or even a child if he can manage it. If we try to hunt him like any other wolf we'll be sitting out there while he helps himself after he hears the dogs coming a mile off. Hunting a beast like this is about waiting, not chasing. We set the bait, get well out of his way and then wait for him to take it before we swoop in and spring the trap.'

'And what, pray tell, do we use as bait?' Svein asked.

The boy waited for the answer, but when Kjartan remained silent he turned to see the warrior's eyes fixed upon him like gimlets in the firelight.

The world above the ground was white, wide open and whipped the boy with cold winds that stole the very breath from his mouth, turning it to streamers of mist the moment it escaped his chapped and bleeding lips. He staggered on through drifts of powdery white, which blanketed the landscape, seemed to go on forever. He hugged himself against the chill that reached right to his very heart as if the bundled rags he wore were nothing at all. He had no sense of where he was or where he was going, all that mattered was that he kept going so long as he was able.

In his more lucid moments, the boy supposed that the world above the ground made sense. Below the ground there had been

cramped tunnels, fire to warm tools and the dwarves who used them as well as an inky darkness that swallowed everything it touched. Here was the opposite of the realm of the dwarves in so many ways, save for the reality that it was yet another place where his life was as vulnerable as the flame of a lit candle.

He was sure that his death was near to him now and all that he hoped was that it would come when he was too far away to be found. If he could just get far enough so that the cruel dwarves thought it too far to venture out after him. Then he could lie down and die. He dared not contemplate the idea that he was not missed, that they had simply assumed him crushed by the falling rocks. To know that he could die without fear of being found would have been too much for him to take.

When his legs finally gave out beneath him and he collapsed onto his face, the boy was too far gone into a state of delirium even to notice. All that remained to him were the last disconnected thoughts flitting through his mind as he sank into unconsciousness.

Strange, he thought, to die lying face down in a thing so soft and yielding.

So cold and fragile.

With no name.

Then there were no more thoughts and he waited in silence for death to arrive.

The voices came maybe minutes, maybe hours later.

'Wrong,' a deep voice, 'he is still alive, but barely.'

'You're making a bad joke, friend,' a jovial voice, 'what could lie in the snow for so long and not freeze?'

The boy's eyes opened to the sight of a bearded face leaning over him, a hard face that regarded what it saw without any measure of fear or pity. A warrior's face that was grim in its expression, but at the same time he sensed glad that he lived. The eyes in the face followed the boy's own, reacting to their slow movement and the head nodded in satisfaction.

'He will live,' the man he would come to know as Kjartan spoke in a voice filled with satisfaction, as if he had been proved right against the world. 'The cold couldn't take him, but I reckon we will.'

'You've been staring into those eyes for a good long time,' this voice was disagreeable, edged with acid and could have belonged to nobody but Svein. 'Are you so addled from the wineskin that you can't see they're red, as red as blood?'

'I've seen,' Kjartan stood so that his head brushed the ceiling of the tent in which the men huddled. His hand was on the hilt of his sword, 'and I say that it matters not. I found him and I'll keep him to do for me. And you'll do as I say. Unless you want to start giving the orders, eh?'

As Svein slunk away the boy realised that for the first time in his

memory someone had stood between himself and danger, defended him from harm. And in that moment he swore that he would follow this man wherever he might lead him.

'You'll come with us, boy,' Kjartan said, 'do as I say, when I say and in return I'll make certain you don't die face down in the dirt.'

There was nothing in Kjartan's voice that might have suggested the boy had a choice in the matter, but he nodded his head all the same.

'Good lad,' Kjartan smiled, 'I have a feeling that you belong with us, that you're one of us. We won't roll over and die no matter how happy it'd make some to see it happen. And you're the same. Gods know how you kept yourself alive out there in the snow. But you did, and that took some fire in the guts. That took a survivor, boy, that took a survivor.'

Even as the words faded away into memory, the world came rushing back to the boy bringing with it the terrible reality of his peril. But there was still the echo of Kjartan's rare praise in his thoughts and now it sparked a realisation in the boy's mind.

So many times in his life he had come to the brink of loosing it, come so very close to death that it was right up in his face. Yet here he was, still alive and still drawing breath.

What if Kjartan was right?

What if he was a survivor?

What if he had the strength to fight back after all?

The boy's red eyes stared into the yellow eyes of the wolf that wanted his death with the endless hunger that urges the predator after the prey. In them swore he saw more than there should have been, more than a ravaging animal intent upon killing. Glimpsed in the wolf's eyes was a hint, no more than a glimpse of a mind that revelled in the act of the kill and savoured the moment as a man might savour the hunt.

Why not?

This was the wolf that had been given a name.

This was Leir, the beast who had been named Torment and took men as his prey.

And now he wanted the boy, so much so that the huge wolf had come out of the trees surrounded by his pack and killed every hound that stood in his path, leaving their bodies strewn behind him to leap at the solitary human being in sight.

Leir wanted the boy as though there were nothing else in the world for him.

You want me badly, the boy thought, but I don't have to make it easy.



His free hand reached out desperately towards the campfire whilst his gaze remained fixed on Leir's malevolent eyes. It thrashed in the snow for a second and he prayed that he had fallen within reach of what he wanted. Pain and the smell of smouldering flesh answered the question, but he gritted his teeth and closed his hand around it all the same.

'All well and good to have grown so bold that you don't fear fire,' the boy spat the words at the wolf, 'but that doesn't mean you won't burn.'

The glowing tip of the iron poker lanced upwards with all the speed that the boy could manage and sank into Leir's left eye. The soft sphere offered no resistance as the intense heat of the metal seared and boiled away the juices in a matter of seconds. For all the fear and dread that the wolf's baleful yellow eye might have inspired, it did nothing at all to stop the poker as it punched through the socket and into the brain beyond.

Had Leir's jaw been free and not clamped on the boy's arm, he would have dodged the poker with a mere flick of his head. But as it was there was nothing the creature could do to avoid the attack. In such close quarters his own eagerness to kill and the desperation of his prey had conspired against him. Even as he tried to pull away, the strength started to slip away from his limbs and his grip loosened on his prey until it failed altogether and the boy's arm fell from his jaws.

The moment his arm was free, the boy grasped the poker with both hands and rammed it home, burying it in the wolf's skull. All the time he screamed out loud from the pain of his mutilated limb and the intense heat of the metal. Letting go of the thing he barely felt the skin tear from the palms of his hands before he collapsed to his knees and plunged them into the snow.

His vision danced before his eyes and he only half heard the voices of Kjartan and his men as they rode into the clearing to spear the fleeing remnants of Leir's pack before they could flee back into the woods. All he could make out was the great shape of the wolf, black against the firelight and as dead as the simple length of iron that protruded from its singed eye socket.

He wanted to cry, vomit and sing all at the same time.

As it was he simply knelt in the snow until the killing was done.

The improvised bandages with which his hands had been bound itched like madness, but the boy tried as best he could to ignore the urge to scratch. Somehow it seemed beneath him after all that had happened. He was sitting on a battered stool in a hut that had been given over to the Skurngelder after some subtle threats, and the light of a small lantern allowed him to make out Kjartan's face a few feet

from his own.

The warrior wore a serious expression that couldn't bode well for someone.

'Healing?' he asked, not needing to point out where the wounds lay.

The boy nodded and looked at the floor.

'Here, I want you to stop all that here and now.'

The boy looked up at his master with a questioning glance.

'Staring down at the ground don't become a fighting man. And don't look at me like a fish pulled out of the water either. We both know what you did out there and it was well done for what you had to hand and the size of that brute. Maybe we should have been out of hiding and down on them quicker, but in the end we weren't and you fought him...and you killed him.'

He stopped for a moment and regarded the boy carefully before going on.

'In the end it was like the Turas Duine prophesied, if you ask me. He said the beast would keep on stealing life till he stole from death, and that's what happened. Don't ask me how or why, but I reckon death's got an interest in you, boy.'

The words frightened the boy even as they were spoken, as though they had a weight that made them as prophetic as the pronouncements of an oracle. For some reason he knew then that they would be with him for the rest of his life, but why he had not the faintest idea.

'And if death has an eye on you, it follows that you should at least be able to fight for your life no matter what the bitch throws at you, eh? As soon as those hands are able, you'll start learning the sword and we'll see how good a killer you really are. I said it when we first found you and I believe it now more than I did then. You're one of us, and it's time we started to treat you like it. You'll ride with us and fight with us as one of the men and do your share of the bleeding as well. When we profit, so will you.'

He heaved a sack over to the boy and nodded as he did so.

'You killed the wolf, so his pelt is yours by rights.'

The boy was visibly taken aback.

'No tricks,' Kjartan assured him as he pushed the sack forwards with his boot.

'The others were somewhat impressed with you as well. Though they decided that you needed a better weapon than a poker. Ivar thought that you should have this. He says that he has better, but as you have none it will do you more good than him.'

Kjartan placed a stout sword on the boy's lap. It was of medium length and solidly built, more a functional tool than an elegant work of art. The scabbard was bound in worn leather and the blade bore some

notches, but the boy knew enough to realise that this was a weapon upon which he could rely, solid enough to trust with his life.

'It's called "Fuachd Teine", or so Ivar tells me,' Kjartan shook his head. 'Took it from a Turas Duine he killed one time, but none of us can fathom the meaning of the words.'

'I will thank them all,' he spoke to Kjartan whilst looking him in the eye for perhaps the first time, 'they have given me a gift worth more than they realise.'

'There's one more,' Kjartan said, 'a gift from me.' He took a deep breath as though he was not sure of what he was about to say. 'If you're to be one of us, then you have to stop thinking yourself a slave. You're a free man who'll be judged by what he says and what he does. You're lower down the pecking order for sure, but you're one of us first and foremost. And as such I can't keep calling you "boy", so you need a name. I'm no good at all that. I never had a child of my own to name, see. Yet all the same I feel it should be given rather than chosen by you, means more somehow. Now that wolf killed all my hounds, left me with none to my name. The best of them was a beast I loved dear for the fierce bastard he was. I called him "Rakki" and I think that I could do worse than call you the same. What do you think?'

'I think that I can live up to the hound's memory,' said Rakki, 'and if you'll forgive me, with some luck live a lot longer.'

With that he strapped on the sword, wondering all the time what death wanted with him and haunted by the burning eyes of the wolf that had been his crucible in the very heart of winter.

# BLOSSOM FROM WITHIN

NaturalDreamer18  
of <http://NaturalDreamer18.deviantart.com>

All is silent in the castle of Brennenburg. This sort of thing is unnatural to the residents living inside since they are use to hearing screams of unfortunate victims. Usually the grunts and brutes would be patrolling the empty halls to find their prey. It seems they can't find one on the night of a full moon. Perhaps the humans are hiding in the darkness? No one knows but the humans themselves.

*Tap Tap Tap...*

Light footsteps disrupt the silence as they make their way through the dark corridor. Their pace is precise, yet there is tension in their footing. This person strides onward without a lantern as they come closer to a tall bare window. The moon's ray shines through the glass as the mysterious silhouette finally reveals itself.

A young woman...

She places a hand on the cool glass as her caramel eyes softly gaze at the moon. Her brown hair illuminates as if she's becoming one with the moon light. Closing her eyes, she leans forward and places her cheek against the glass. Comfort is the one word that describes the feeling she has right now. All she wants to do is rest after experiencing and dealing with a conflict that had stressed her mind for a long time now. While thinking about the conflict, she is always surprised on how she handled the situation in a mature, calmly manner.

A flower is blossoming within this young woman.

Opening her eyes, she steps away from the glass and continues to stare at the moon with a warm smile on her lips. Such a peaceful environment... Sadly it must come to an end when she suddenly hears a low growl to her right. Her head sharply turns to the right as she goes into her defensive stance. A grunt staggers out from the darkness as it slowly approaches her. Heart racing and adrenaline pumping through her veins, the young woman starts to take on another form. Her body crouches as excessive brown fur appear all over her skin. Fluffy black ears and tail appear along with the fur.

Standing before the grunt is a wolf in a prideful stance.

Her left paw steps forward before the wolf's eyes snap open to reveal sharp golden eyes. Illuminating proudly thanks to the moonlight, her appearance appear god like to the grunt. Yet, it knows no fear as it continues to stagger toward the wild animal. Raising her furry head, she releases a piercing howl, creating an echo in all of the empty hallways. That might have alarmed all of the monsters in the castle, though she doesn't care.

She will fight to the very end.

The wolf lowers her head once more before revealing her sharp teeth at the grunt. She goes into position before she leaps toward the grunt to begin a bloody battle.

# WISH CARRIERS: PROLOGUE

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"Are you sure you want to do this, Fens?"

The head of the Carriers glanced over at his Lieutenant, Miu as he donned his flight goggles.

"Yes, Lieutenant, I am. This mission is too dangerous for anyone but me," he nodded.

"Will you not even bring Quetzal?" She was close to begging. The General never went out alone, even on his most important missions. "The wishes will be too much for one bird to bear!"

"I'm sure. You know as well as I children's wishes are the most valuable. If this mission succeeds, we'll have enough wish energy to keep Greenbrook running for the next twenty seasons."

"I know, Fens, but something doesn't seem right about this," the female violet-crowned hummingbird replied. "It's great and all, but it seems too good to be true."

Fens looked at her, his face set in confidence. "I appreciate your concern, but I promise I'll send you a swift scroll every hour of every day just so you can know I'm okay."

Miu frowned at her old friend. They had been on the force since they both passed the exam back in the spring of the night-jar and raced to the highest ranking with the speed of a dragonfly, faster than even the founder of the Carriers, Lopi Lilly-Blossom, much to their rank-mates dismay. When Fens was named the new General of Carriers, and ignoring the looks of jealousy from the older rankers, the first thing he did was appoint his best friend, Miu Lotus, as his right hand feather and new Lieutenant.

"Alright, fine, you smart beak," she conceded. "Don't forget, or I'll send the Crows after you," she added with a smirk.

"Oh no!" he mocked. "Not those ghetto delinquents!"

"Oh shove off, feather face," she growled. "Just don't do anything stupid."

"I'm too experienced to fall for silly tricks," he answered with confidence.

"I should hope so," Miu replied, handing his his scroll bag. "There's an extra bottle of nectar in there in case of an emergency. I'll catch up on the Junk wishes until you get back."

"Don't worry your pretty little head," he smiled. And, with that, he set off through the launch window out into the rising sun.

# THE BATMAN CHAPTER 2: THE MAN

Avery Clark  
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He was right there, on top of me. A living, breathing vampire was sleeping on top of me. I couldn't hide this from Cake! Cake would just have to wake up to see this guy in my bed! First of all, he was a vampire, and second, it was a guy! There was a guy in my bed! His jet black hair was all over my face and his fangs were rubbing against my chest. I catch a glimpse of his vampire bites under his red collar, but I try not to stare at them. It was making me feel worse about the situation. How was I going to get this guy off me without waking Cake? Slowly I lift his head off me; there was drool on my chest, gross!

His eyes lazily open, looking around, trying to piece together where he was. Then he looks to me, smiling nervously. He seemed nervous, this guy better be, the sun would be rising soon, and rather he liked it or not, he was leaving, sun or no sun. Cake would absolutely flip out. First thing was first, I needed to get this vampire off me and conscious of the world. Then, I have to quietly get him out of the room, but this guy was looking around still, and looked super tired.

"What the junk, man? Get off me!" I whispered. The guy looked at me curiously, sitting up, but still on my legs, but at least I was able to sit up now, but it was still awkward. First of all, who was this guy? He had the nerve to play me for a place to crash for the night, but the small medical attention I had given to the 'wing' had turned into a sling for his right shoulder. He inspects it, before bringing his arm out of it, and it seemed to be fine.

"Thank you," he said, inspecting his arm. I thought he hurt his wing, would that even go into his human form? I nod curious about him, now, who wouldn't be about a stranger who woke up in your bed? He was wearing a black and red plaid shirt and some blue jeans. That formed more questions in my head, what happened to his clothes when he turned into a bat? Did they just disappear, because I didn't see any clothes on him in his bat form last night. I had tons of questions for this stranger, but he couldn't stay in the bedroom.

"You can't stay in here," I whispered. I pointed to Cake, and he looked over to her curiously, floating over to see her. She swats the air, but nothing big. "Follow me." The boy nods, and we go into the bathroom. When he comes in I shut the door behind us, to be sure Cake would think I was taking a bath or something. I wanted to make sure she wouldn't just barge in when I was talking to him. "First of all, who the glob are you?" He seemed to be in his late teens, and just looking at him I could tell he thought of himself as a bad boy. He



smiles, fangs coming out further, and his dark eyes become brighter.

“Marshall Lee the vampire king,” he said smiling. A King? This sneaky bad little boy couldn’t be a King could he? Where’s his crown? He didn’t dress like a king, he would have been at the royal ball, right? If he was royalty, well, I guess he was. That’s where he must have snuck in my purse. The question was, though, what kind of king sneaks into a girl’s purse at a party? A vampire, maybe, but I doubted he was a king.

“What the hell were you doing?” I asked. “What were you thinking? You... you... Vampire!” I couldn’t come up with anything else to call him... vampire. It was his species, I pulled that one together myself, but the fact that I couldn’t come up with something for him made Marshall Lee laugh, even his laugh annoyed me. I don’t know why, though, it just did. It made me want to hit him, it was mocking me. He was in my territory right now, so if he thought he was going to mess around with me, Aaa’s hero, he was sadly mistaken.

“If you must know, a certain someone shooed me in to your purse, and then Gum-Butt-”

“Gumball,” I interrupted. He looked at me, not understanding the point of my interruption. “Gumball. His name is Gumball. Don’t call him Gum-Butt.” Marshall Lee shrugs, not seeming to care how much I didn’t like it.

“Well, anyways, he handed it to you, and you know the rest,” said Marshall Lee floating in midair, leaning back like he was in a reclining chair. “You threw the bag, I got hurt, and we both know that sister of yours would have killed me on the spot if I came out any time later.” Was I really the reason Marshall Lee’s bat wing was hurt? I did throw the purse a few times, I guess I must have. Now I kind of felt pretty bad, but he wandered into my purse, so it was his fault. He should have been more careful on who he hitched a ride from.

“Sorry about that I guess,” I said, not truly caring myself. Marshall Lee shrugs, not caring either. Good, because he wasn’t getting any empathy from me. “But you can leave now. You seem to be all better now.” He came to the ground now, smiling. Damn that smile.

“Technically this is my house,” said Marshall Lee smiling. “I carved a ML in this tree a long time ago, it’s in the living room. I saw you covered it up with some picture...” There was a ML carved in the tree, I mean, I never thought much about it, but Marshall Lee. That made up the initials ML.

“And your point is?” I asked, pretending I had no idea what he was talking about. “My sister and I own this house, got it? Some stupid initials aren’t moving us out.” He laughs again, making me upset, again.

“I’m pretty sure it does,” he said smiling deviously. “What would that sister of yours say about arguing with a vampire? You don’t want to fight with me you know. I bet you know what vampires are well known

for.” He brings his fangs out, on purpose this time. He was threatening to suck our blood? Oh, no, this guy wasn’t intimidating to me, a little strange, but not at all intimidating.

Although Cake would be terrified and give this guy whatever he wants based how badly her fear on vampires has been lately. Even if I did want to stand up to him, it would be too loud and I would wake up Cake. I couldn’t risk waking her up right now. Not while I was trying to work my way around this vampire and find out his real business here. I couldn’t do that with Cake bugging me about the constant possibility of death, I was an adventurer with countless enemies, there’s always the possibility of death. Just because there was a very powerful creature among us doesn’t mean we’d have to back down in fear. We’re always going against strong folks, like the Ice Queen for example. We go against her almost once a week, and it just makes us stronger, also an advantage if we were going to need it the sun was starting to rise. So there was a number one vampire weakness right there.

I didn’t think this guy had any interest in biting me anyways. All night, he had the opportunity to bite me if he really wanted to. I woke up with no bites or anything, not that I know of that is. All that I had when he woke up was some drool, but that was something I could live with. He was not getting the upper hand in this argument, not this stupid vampire.

“This house was abandoned for years, Marshall Lee! So it’s ours! We pay taxes to the Candy Kingdom and everything!” I argued. It was stupid, but yes, Cake and I had to pay taxes to Gumball every once in a while. Once Gumball even let himself in to collect the money himself. That in itself was a little over the top, but I knew him, he would never take more than we owe. He was a very honest man. Unlike this guy, what did he want from me anyways? He had to have a bigger reason for wanting to stay. He could have gone through all hours of the night.

“Keep it, you good little girl,” he said, crossing his arms and a long snake like tongue coming out of his mouth. “Thanks for spending the night with me.”

“If my sister wasn’t sleeping!” I mumbled, trying my best not to yell at him. “I’d... you’d so be... undead to re-dead! Just... why... blarg!” Marshall Lee laughs some more, taking my hat. “Hey! Give it back!” Again his little laugh comes back, mocking me. Golden hair flows to the ground of the bathroom floor, and down my shoulders and over my eyes. This is why I wear my hat.

“Geesh, you’ve got some hair,” he laughed.

“Give back the hat. Now!” I jumped, trying to get him, but he just floated higher. This makes me grab his foot, and drag him down from his floating position, and I wrestle him down to the ground, before he

floats in the air, and I'm wrestling him in the air.

He spins, and I wrap my legs around him, I'm hanging upside down. However, that wasn't going to stop me from getting my favorite hat back. I kick him in the gut, and he doesn't seem to be effected. He uses his one free hand to tickle me, trying to get me to let go of him. I'm laughing now, and I was worried we'd wake up Cake, but it wasn't like I could stop my laughter. I even had Marshall Lee laughing, now. I was having a hard time hanging on, and was kicking at him to let me go. I guess I accidentally kicked him in the boingloins, and he hits the ground, the hat was mine.

"What the heck, Fionna?" he hissed. I didn't even care how he knew my name anymore. He seemed to be in a lot of pain.

"It's what you get!" I said smiling, putting my hat on again. He doesn't respond, and I don't even know if he heard me. I kneel down once my hat was secured back on my head, and my hair was tucked away safely. "Dude, are you okay?" He shakes his head, oh glob now I actually felt bad. Cake said to never kick a boy in the boingloins. She said it was very very bad for them. She wouldn't mind this right? "I'll get you some frozen peas!" Marshall Lee nods, as I run out the door to the bedroom ladder to the freezer. I was taking care of him again.

The peas were hidden under some old strawberry ice cream, I was hungry myself, so I grab that, before going to Marshall Lee again. Cake looked to be sound asleep, good. I go into our bathroom, and he's still on the floor, I must have kicked him harder than I thought I did.

"Here, I'm sorry," I said blushing, handing him the peas. He places them on his groin, slowly, and lets a small sigh of relief. "I didn't think I would kick that hard, and just, I didn't mean to kick you in the boingloins! The gut, maybe, but not the boingloins."

"I was asking for it," he laughed. "Want to hand over some of that strawberry ice cream?" That creep wanted some of my strawberry ice cream? He's lucky I got him a bag of peas, not that we were going to eat those peas now, I have to remember to throw them out when he's done. "Please, Fionna. I'm starving."

"I thought vampires drank blood," I said rather confused with his request.

"No, glob more vampire stereotyping, no, I drink the color red, which is why I was at the Candy Kingdom," he said, explaining some more things. "But that doesn't mean I'm not a villain. I'm not from here, I'm from the Nightsphere. So about that ice cream..." I sigh, handing him the spoon and the ice cream bucket. He digs in, and I basically lost my breakfast, fantastic. However, it beat having him suck my blood, not that I was worried about that at all.

"So, you're not a bad little boy?" I asked curiously. Marshall Lee stops shoving his face with ice cream and looks at me, not getting my question from the confused look I was getting from his face. "I mean,

you're not a villain like you said you were. The Candy Kingdom is full of red, so you weren't out sucking blood. You're not a total bad little boy, right?" Marshall Lee laughs, shaking his head.

"What? A bad little boy? No, that sounds so stupid," he laughed. "Good little girl, Fionna." He makes me laugh, and he smiles. "I'm more of a demon. Literally. I'm half demon."

"Half demon and half vampire? Cool, pretty cool," I said, and it was. Half demon sounded pretty cool, you'd never guess he was a demon, though. He looks nothing like a demon. He was pale, light pale, blue skin, dark eyes and jet black hair, he looked more like a human than a demon, other than his goblin-like ears. If anything, he was kind of cute... What, no, Fionna, stay focused. He is a demon. Demon.

"Yeah, I'm pretty rad," said Marshall Lee, going back to eating the ice cream. "I'm not starting to grow on you, am I, Fionna? That's what it looks like."

"No way, demon!" I said laughing. "You're just going to focus on that boingloin injury so you can get out of the tree house before my sister Cake wakes up so she doesn't kill you again and your whole 'half demon' reputation goes down the toilet." Marshall Lee smiles, another spoonful of ice cream going into his mouth.

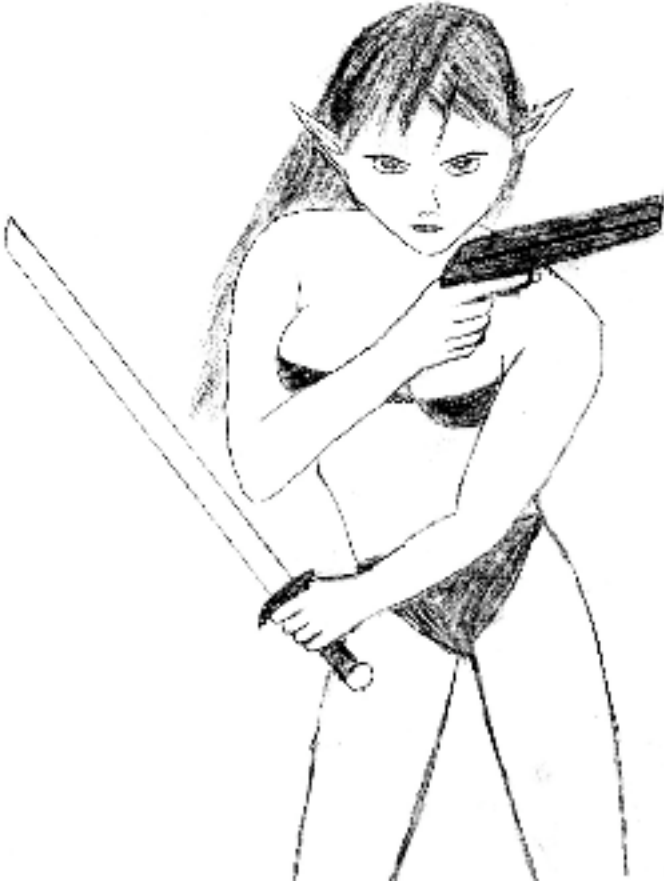
"You know, if I didn't know any better I'd say you don't mind having a vampire in the house unlike your sister," said Marshall Lee, now getting annoying.

"It's not the vampire thing, it's the whole sneaking in my purse and sleeping in my bed kind of thing that got me angry, besides, I told you, it's my sister, she'll try to kill you if she knows you're here, so you better get out of this tree house as soon as your loins feel better," I laughed.

"Fine," he sighed.

"I'm going to go check on my sister," I said going in my room, and just my luck, she was waking up.

# FAN FICTION



## or: Leanna's Return

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# ME2 HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 19: STOLEN MEMORIES

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The sky car zoomed gently through the clouds of Bekenstein. It was quite a pretty planet.

"You clean up well, Mr Solomon Gunn. Hock won't know what hit him." Kasumi smiled to Austin. She then turned to Sarah. "And you're looking good too, Ms Alison Gunn. Hock won't be able to keep his eyes off you."

Kasumi was driving whilst Austin was sat in the passenger seat and Sarah in the back.

"I take it we're wearing these get ups for a reason?" Sarah asked as she finished sorting her red hair out.

"You'd look really out of place at a society party in armour. Don't you think? Especially a Helldiver." Said Kasumi as she looked at Austin. She then looked at Sarah. "You look great. You should wear this stuff more often."

"Hmm. My eyes are up here by the way, Kasumi." Sarah joked.

At this, everyone laughed. Even Kasumi found the joke funny.

"British humour. Always brings a smile to my face." She said.

"So, I assume Solomon and Allison Gunn are our covers?" Austin asked.

"The two of you run a small but talented band of mercs out in the Terminus Systems. Precisely the type of people Hock respects. Xun and I took the liberty of giving you a reputation. Papers, witnesses, article in badass weekly. Just don't start talking business with him, and you'll be fine." Kasumi explained.

"Remind me, Kasumi: What kind of man are we dealing with?" Sarah asked.

"Hock's a weapon's dealer and smuggler. He killed my partner and stole his graybox. Other than that, he's not so bad. Rich, charismatic, willing to crack open a man's skull to get at the neural implants inside." Said Kasumi.

"Leave it alone!" said Sarah as she once again stopped Austin from scratching the prosthetic mask he'd had to wear.

"I'm sorry. But it's so itchy. Kasumi, is it really necessary for me to wear this mask? My battle scars hurt less than this does!" Austin complained.

"Trust me, Shep. This is for you and your sister's safety. Your scars

make you too recognizable. Outside Council space, it's not so bad. But we're in Council space. Last thing we want is Hock recognizing you." Said Kasumi.

Austin ultimately gave in trying to talk his way out of it. Kasumi did make a fair point after all.

"I guess I can't argue with that. Anyway, now's probably a good time to fill us in on the details." He said.

"You have been waiting patiently." Said Kasumi as she brought up several video feeds in front of him and Sarah. The first one showed the actual party and Donavon Hock himself.

"Our friend Hock is throwing a party for his closest friends. A couple dozen of the worst liars, cheaters, and mass murderers you'll ever want to meet, all bringing gifts as a tribute to the man himself." She explained.

Next, a new feed popped up. This one showed a gold statue of very familiar looking Turian.

"Our tribute is a lovely statue of your old friend Saren, rendered with loving detail and filled to the brim with our weapons and armour. I've also hidden your suit remover in there as well, Shepard. Shouldn't have any problems. You can both keep your pistols as long as they're concealed. They won't hassle you over side-arms." Kasumi continued.

Sarah cleared her throat embarrassingly. Kasumi seemed to somehow read her mind.

"You've hid yours on her thighs, haven't you?" she giggled.

"I'm not hiding them down my cleavage, Kasumi! I tired that a few years ago, it went badly wrong. I had to have an ice pack on my breasts for nearly a week. Sarah retaliated.

Austin simply remained quiet as Kasumi continued explaining the plan.

"Once inside, we'll make our way to Hock's vault door, somewhere in the back of the ballroom. Then we case the security and start peeling away the layers. The statue should be there, waiting for us to crack it open and arm up. Then we just waltz into the vault and take back Keiji's graybox. And I'll finally get a chance to say goodbye." She finished.

"This is starting to sound like something out of a James Bond film." Sarah joked.

Once again, this caused Austin and Kasumi to chuckle.

"Ha. Oh, you two really are funny together." The thief smiled.

"Sense of humour runs in the family." Sarah smiled.

"You've worked really hard on this. Keiji must have meant a lot to you." Said Austin.

"Was I that obvious? Keiji's graybox holds a lot of priceless, personal memories. It's all that remains of who he was. But the secret he discovered is dangerous. I wouldn't bring you here if it wasn't." said

Kasumi.

"This ought to be interesting." Said Austin, eagerly.

"That's what I'm going for." Kasumi agreed.

The sky car touched down and the doors opened up.

"This is our stop." Said Kasumi as they climbed out and Austin locked the car. Not that there was much point, but it was still best to appear normal.

"After you, Mr and Ms Gunn." Said Kasumi.

As the group started walking however, something quickly occurred to Austin.

"Wait, just so we've got this straight, she's still my sister, right? Because if we have to pretend we're married, this is going to be very difficult." He asked nervously.

"Don't worry. Even in this sort of situation, I wouldn't force that sort of thing on you. You two are still brother and sister." Kasumi reassured him.

"What about you? What part do you play?" Sarah asked.

"Me? I'm just your brother's pretty Japanese girlfriend." Kasumi smiled

"I hope Liara doesn't find out about this." Austin sighed. He knew that even if Liara knew about this, she'd understand. After all, Kasumi didn't really fancy him anyway.

"Relax! Think of this as dress up." Sarah joked.

"Oh grow up, you two." Austin groaned as the two girls giggled.

The statue was just being unloaded as they arrived at the entrance. To make sure he played the part, Austin had his left hand around Kasumi waist. While he wished it was Liara instead of her, he did admit that Kasumi did at least have very curvy hips.

"Just one moment, sir. There seems to be an issue with the statue." Said one of the Eclipse guards.

At that moment, Donovan Hock himself appeared in the doorway and walked down the stairs.

"Is there a problem here?" he asked in a South African accent.

"No, Mr Hock. Just doing a scan." Said the guard.

"I don't believe we've met. Donovan Hock." Hock said as he introduced himself to his 3 guests.

"I've heard a lot about you. Name's Solomon Gunn." Said Austin as he held his hand out. However, Hock didn't shake it.

"And I've heard a lot about you. You've been very busy lately if the extranet is to be believed." He said. He then noticed Sarah. "And I take it this is your sister?"

"Allison Gunn. A pleasure." Said Sarah.

To Austin's surprise, Hock then took Sarah's hand in his and kissed the back of it.



"Charmed, Ms Gunn." He said.

"Smoothie." Kasumi whispered.

"Shut up." Austin hissed. It took a lot for him not to tell Hock to keep his hands off Sarah.

"Sir, the scanners aren't picking anything up." Said the Eclipse guard as he finished his can of the statue of Saren. Hock looked at the statue, a hint of impress on his face.

"Hmm. I don't think our guests would come all the way here from Illium just to cause trouble. Do you?" he asked.

The guard simply shrugged and Hock turned back to Austin, Sarah and Kasumi.

"You may pass through, Mr and Ms Gunn, with my apologies. But I will ask your companion to remain outside. You understand, I hope." He said as he looked at Kasumi.

"Care to explain why my brother's girlfriend has to stand outside?!" Sarah asked sternly.

"I don't like the look of her, so she stays outside. Simple as that." Said Hock.

"No problem. You're the host." Said Austin politely. "Sorry darling. Seems things have changed." He said as he then kissed Kasumi full on the lips. This was only so that he remained in character. He just hoped that Kasumi wouldn't take this the wrong way, even with him fondling her ass.

"Enjoy the party." Said Hock as he went back inside.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" Sarah teased.

"I was acting." Austin replied sternly.

"Well, that didn't go as I expected." Said Kasumi, a bit surprised that Hock hadn't let her in.

"Any idea why he'd send you away?" Sarah asked.

"No. We've never seen each other in person, and no one knows what I look like. Just watching his ass I'm sure. I can't blame him." Kasumi replied.

"What do we do now?" Austin asked.

"We go on with the plan. You two will just have to do all the talking. I'll stay out of sight and stick with you both the best I can." Said Kasumi.

Both Shepards nodded and proceeded up the stairs with Kasumi bringing up the rear.

"We'll keep radio contact in case something goes wrong." She said as she activated her cloak and vanished from site.

"We need to find the door and case the security. We'll figure out the next step then." Said Kasumi over the radio.

Both Austin and Sarah made sure to stay close to one another to at least make sure that no one tried to suddenly flirt with them. After wondering around the party for a bit, they managed to find what they

were looking for.

The door to the vault was protected by a laser barrier and there were also two control panels next to it. Austin had seen enough security systems as a Helldiver to recognize one as a DNA scanner, and the other as a voice system.

"Very nice. There's more here than I expected." Said Kasumi.

As they walked in, Austin looked at the gold statue of Saren. He couldn't help but be a bit uncomfortable at the sight of the statue, remembering the Turian whom it represented. His mind though quickly snapped back to the task at hand as Kasumi looked around at the security systems.

"Password protected voice lock. Kinetic barrier. DNA scanner – looks like an EX-700 series. Everything a vault needs to be impenetrable." She observed.

"This gonna be a problem?" Sarah asked.

"Please. Remember who you're talking to. We'll need to get a voice sample for the voice lock. Sarah will have to go chat up Hock for that. We'll have to find a password, too. DNA? Child's play. We should find plenty of DNA samples in Hock's private quarters. And the barrier? Cut the power. Never fails... if we can find it. Keiji could get through a system like this in his sleep. And I'm better. Let's get to it." Said Kasumi.

As the two siblings walked out, Austin noticed what looked like a power cable. Kasumi noticed it too.

"It looks like the barrier's power cable runs under the floor here. I'll set your omni-tools to scan for electromagnetic fields." She said.

Sure enough, the cable now became highlighted in orange, even as it disappeared into the ground and out of sight. The two siblings slowly followed the hologram through the party, being careful not to bump into everyone. Eventually, they found that the cable seemed to end just behind a small statue.

"One sec." said Kasumi.

The thief unlocked and pulled down the statue which caused a small panel to slide away, revealing a generator of sorts.

"That should take care of the barrier." She said as she short circuited it and the orange hologram of the cable disappeared.

With that sorted, they now only had the voice and DNA scanner left. Austin noticed nearby locked door. He could immediately tell that this might be important.

"That door goes to a security room. I'll take care of lock." Said Kasumi.

A few seconds later, the door unlocked and opened.

"There we go."

Sarah then saw this as a good opportunity to get the voice recording from Hock.

"Austin, you can handle this. I'll go and help Kasumi get a voice print from Hock." She said.

"Just be careful what you say, Sarah." Said the Helldiver cautiously.

"Like I said, he looks at me wrong; he'll get more than just a slap from me." Said Sarah.

"Alright. Good luck." Said Austin as he disappeared through the door and Sarah went to go and talk with Hock.

Austin took his pistol from out of his jacket as he readied to breach the next door. With the original one closed, no one would hear the shots.

The door opened. There were two guards in the room. They reached for their own guns, but Austin was way too fast. Two quick shots, and they were down within minutes.

With the coast clear, Austin began looking around. He found a data pad and read it.

"—Nance:

I have that problem, too. So many passwords around here, can't keep them straight. The password for tonight is \*PERUGGIA\*, so it's not even that easy to remember.

It's not a big deal. That voice scanner means the passwords only useful to Hock, anyway.

After this party, want to grab some beers? Let me know.

-Samuels

"That was easy." Austin thought as he finished reading.

Sarah was now ready to start getting Hock talking for the voice print. Kasumi was hidden just behind a nearby pillar.

"There he is. All you need to do is keep him talking long enough for me to get a voiceprint. Pull out the charm on this one, Shep. Whenever you're ready." she said into Sarah's ear mike

Sarah nodded to Kasumi and the thief activated her omni tool.

"After you." she said.

"Ms Gunn. Good to see you. That scene at the door hasn't soured you and your brother's evening, I hope." said Hock as he took notice of Sarah and shook hands with her.

"Think nothing of it" said Sarah. "Oh yeah, real smooth, Sarah." she groaned in her head. What had she been thinking by saying that?

"I'm pleased that you weren't offended. Now, if you'll excuse me." said Hock as he turned back to the other guests.

"Not nearly enough of a sample. Keep him talking." said Kasumi.

"Oh, I know!" Sarah thought as she quickly thought up a few good

things to say to Hock.

"I was hoping to have a little more of your time." she said.

"You have my attention. Use it wisely." said Hock.

"I think we might have a few rivals in common. I'd like to find out if that's the case." said Sarah.

"No doubt you and your brother have built up an impressive list of enemies." said Hock.

"It's one of the costs of business in my line of work." Sarah smiled suggestively.

"Let's have a date after the party. Discuss the possibility of an accord." Hock smiled at her.

"Great. He's ogling me." Sarah groaned in her head.

Hock then turned and seemed to address everyone as he spoke.

"People these days want comfort, entertainment, love. They don't see that the galaxy is fragile. They only have to worry about simple luxuries. Why? Because people like me – and you – are doing the terrible things that keep the galaxy spinning. This party is for us. The Cleaners. The support structure for the galaxy's gleeful delusions of peace. This part is for us. The cleaners. The support structure for the galaxy's gleeful delusions of peace. May there always be a market for the things we do."

Everyone clapped and cheered. Hock simply nodded to them.

"I said get him talking, and you got him talking. We've got enough of a voice sample. Let him go." said Kasumi.

"I'll look forward to speaking with you later, Ms Gunn." said Hock as he turned back to his other guests.

"Dream on, you bastard!" Sarah thought.

A minute later, Austin came out of the door.

"Got something?" Kasumi asked.

"The password is "Perugia." Austin replied.

"Huh. That's the name of the man who stole the Mona Lisa. Nice. Now, I just take the voice sample we got from Hock, and... Got it! Now we can crack that voice scanner." said Kasumi.

As the group headed back to the vault entrance, they spotted a locked door. There was a guard standing in front of it.

"Mr Hock's private rooms are off limits to guests without security clearance." he said.

"I apologise. I'll go elsewhere." said Austin apologetically.

"Enjoy the party." said the guard.

"Private rooms? We need to get in there! That's the best place to find Hock's DNA." said Kasumi.

There wasn't any way they'd be able to get in through the front entrance. However, as they went outside, Austin did see a way in. Making sure no one was looking, he and Sarah jumped over the

railings. They landed on another bit of the building. Two guards were watching the area just in case.

Austin and Sarah took out their pistols and Kasumi did the same as she uncloaked.

"Deal with them quietly. We don't want them to know we're here." Austin whispered.

Kasumi nodded and cloaked again as she snuck up on the closest guard. Austin and Sarah meanwhile snuck up behind the other. Austin quickly grabbed the guard's helmet and gave it a violent twist. At the same, Kasumi uncloaked right behind the other one and did the same thing. With both the guards dealt with, they now had a quiet way into Hock's private rooms.

"Look for anything we can get usable DNA from. Just make it quick and quiet." said Kasumi.

The three split up and began looking in separate places of the room.

"Aha!" said Austin.

"Found a sample?" Kasumi asked.

"Nope, a credit chit!"

"No hair, no skin flakes." said Sarah as she examined the bed.

"The house keepers must be thorough." said Kasumi.

Austin then examined an empty wine glass.

"What about this?" he asked.

"Not a great saliva sample, but it's still useful." said Kasumi. "We're going to need more than this for the scanner, though."

Austin then noticed a cigarette tray and examined it.

"Empty. Too bad. A cigarette butt would have been a good source." said Kasumi

"I can't stand smokers. Disgusting habit!" said Austin

"You and me and me both, bro." Sarah agreed.

The N7 marine then noticed a pile of papers. Unfortunately, those too didn't have any DNA.

"Hmm. No DNA, but... looks like Hock's been trying to crack Keiji's graybox. Looks like he's missing something. He hasn't cracked the encryption yet." said Kasumi.

"What about these swords?" Austin asked as he indicated to a small glass exhibit containing some old swords.

"The cleaners don't dare touch treasures like this. We can get some skin cells from the dust. It's probably contaminated, though. We should find another sample." said Kasumi.

Sarah then noticed a nearby datapad and looked it. It looked as though it had only recently been placed there.

"What about this?" she asked.

"We can probably the Hock's DNA off the datapad. He seems to

have obsessed over this." said Kasumi.

"That should do it. Let's get out of here." said Kasumi.

As they were leaving the room however, Austin hand accidentally brushed holographic alarm clock next to Hock's bed.

"Good morning! Time to wake up!" it said as it buzzed.

"Sorry!" Austin said quickly as he turned it off.

"You're just lucky no one heard that." Sarah hissed.

The group quickly went back the way they came. They couldn't risk going through the door since that would raise questions, especially with the guard outside. When they got back to the vault, the barrier was down. All they had left now where the voice prints and ID panels.

"DNA identification affirmed. Welcome, Mr Hock." said the first scanner.

Kasumi then turned to the other one.

"Password required." it said.

Kasumi activated her omni tool and played the recording she'd got of Hock's voice which she'd now configured to speak the password.

"Perugia." it said.

"Voice ID accepted. Welcome, Mr Hock." said the scanner.

Almost instantly, the door opened.

"I'll check for security cams. You two go ahead and get dressed." said Kasumi.

While Kasumi sorted out the security cameras in the elevator, Austin and Sarah walked up to the statue of Sarah. Both siblings activated their omni tools. A small compartment on the base that the statue was stood on opened up and Sarah's N7 Defender armour and Death Mask slid out.

Austin unzipped his suit's jacket and trousers and pulled them off, revealing that he'd been wearing his suit mesh underneath it, much to Sarah's annoyance since she would have to take her dress off and strip to her underwear briefly.

"Oh, that's not fair! You wore your suit mesh under that?!" she said, shocked.

"I had to. At least you weren't hot in yours." Said Austin as he folded up his suit

"At least you don't have to strip naked!" Sarah complained as she unzipped her dress.

"Stop arguing, you two. We don't have much time." Said Kasumi as she risked a quick glance at Sarah's black bra and panties.

"You sound like our mother when you say that." Said Sarah as she started getting her armour on.

The golden statue of Saren then seemed to change from as the several arms of a Helldiver suit remover appeared out of it with bits of the statue attached to them.

"Good old Dell." Austin smiled as his suit was slowly built around him piece by piece.

After a few minutes, the final piece was in place and Sarah put her Death Mask on. Austin then opened the compartment on the statue's base that contained their weapons. Kasumi took her SMG and pistol while Austin threw Sarah's N7 weapons to her.

Once everyone was armed up, they walked into the elevator, Sarah and Austin banging fists as they did so. The doors closed, and the elevator began its decent into Hock's vault.

The doors opened and the three comrades found themselves inside a massive room filled with all sorts of rare artefacts and treasures. Among them were some very famous ones such as Michelangelo's David and the head of the original statue of Liberty after it was damaged by terrorists many years ago. The statue had obviously been rebuilt shortly after, but this one was a brand new different version. The original one had been left in pieces, one of which was now right in front of them.

"So this is Hock's vault. Very nice." Said Kasumi as she looked around impressed by the vault.

"This scanner will hone in on the graybox. It's not far."

The scanner started beeping and got either faster or slower depending on how close they were to the graybox. As they got closer, Austin spotted an interesting looking pair of SMGs on a nearby table.

"That's a Kassa Locust. No, THE Kassa Locust!" said Kasumi.

"The gun that killed two Presidents. Gorgeous." Sarah smiled as she picked up one of them.

"It even comes with a perfect copy, too. I'm sure Hock won't mind if we borrow these." Kasumi smiled naughtily.

Kasumi took the other Locust for herself. Then, on another nearby table, Kasumi saw what she had come for.

"Oh my god. There it is!" she said as she activated her omni tool and began moving the files and memories to her own graybox.

"Don't bother Ms Goto. Its code locked." Said a familiar voice.

Sure enough, a large hologram of Hock's face appeared at the far end of the vault.

"I had a feeling that was you at the door. I knew if it was really you, you'd get through anyway." He said.

"You know me. I don't like to disappoint." Said Kasumi.

"I need what's in your graybox, Kasumi. You know I'm willing to kill you for it. I'll admit your skills are impressive. You, a Helldiver and an N7 marine got into my vault like I'd left it open. But you're still going to die screaming, just like your old friend." Hock taunted.

Just before he could finish however, Austin suddenly activated his shoulder plasma cannon and fired a shot at a nearby antique vase. The

antique smashed to pieces immediately due to its fragile state.

"No!" Hock yelled.

"Have we got your attention?!" Sarah taunted.

"Ha! That shut him up." Kasumi laughed as the download finished.

"Kill them!" Hock yelled.

Almost immediately, the door at the far end opened and several Eclipse troopers came in, guns blazing. Austin, Sarah and Kasumi all went to cover and returned fire. Kasumi in particular put the new Kassa Locust to the very good use on the mercs while Sarah fired upon the heavy troopers with her N7 Typhoon. Like her brother, Sarah too preferred a light machine gun over her other weapons. The Typhoon in particular was her favourite. Austin meanwhile just stuck with the weapons that Dell and Sill had given him. In fact, he too had taken to nicknaming his M-76 Revenant, Revan, just as Sill had.

A fierce fight raged within the vault. So fierce in fact that nearly every single shot either hit an Eclipse merc or one of the antiques. Austin couldn't help but smile a bit as he thought of what Hock's expression would be if he saw this now.

Finally, Austin delivered the last killing blow to Chief Roe and the vault was clear.

"Checking blueprints..." "There's a landing pad to the east. Let's get out of here." Said Kasumi.

"Joker, send the Hellhound in. Now!" Austin said into his comm.

The trio made their way out of the vault and into some underground tunnels. They were filled with a lot of vehicles and machinery. As the neared the tunnel that would take them to the landing pad however, the stone doors suddenly closed.

"They're out of the vault. Seal them in!" came Hock's voice over the loud speaker.

"Damn it! We have to find another way!" said Kasumi.

"Austin, can't you just punch through the wall?" Sarah asked.

"My armour's not strong enough to do that. Besides, these walls are concrete. I'll just break my wrist." Said Austin.

Fortunately, there was another way out. Unfortunately though, it was crawling with more Eclipse troopers. Another gunfight ensued as the trio battled their way through. Things started to get a bit harder when the Eclipse soldiers started using heavy mechs as well. Though this made things a bit more challenging, it was still nothing that the three couldn't handle by working together.

Once they'd cleared another room, they found themselves in a dead end. On the far side of the room where several large fuel tanks, and they look flammable.

"It'll take heavier weapons than that to blow those tanks." said Kasumi as Sarah fired a few shots from her Typhoon which hardly



made a dent in the tanks.

Austin however wanted to be sure. He activated his plasma cannon and fired a shot at the tanks. It left a mark, but still nothing happened.

"Didn't she just say...?" said Sarah.

"I just thought I'd try. Plasma packs more of punch." said Austin.

"What about this?" Kasumi asked.

Austin and Sarah looked round to see a massive tank a few feet away from the fuel tanks. The tank had a massive gun on the top.

"Well, only one way to find out." Austin shrugged as he climbed up onto the tank and activated gun. A large beam shot from the gun and the fuel tanks completely exploded as the beam hit them. When the smoke from the blast had cleared, there was now a massive hole in the wall.

"That got it." said Kasumi.

"What the hell are you people doing down there?!" came Hock's voice over the speakers.

More Eclipse mercs quickly flooded into the tunnels. Austin and Sarah unholstered their weapons again and went to cover.

"Kill Solomon Gunn! But spare his sister. Bring the girls to me!"

"Over my dead body!" Austin yelled as he fired a plasma shot at the heavy mechs head, causing it to overload and explode in a small mushroom cloud explosion. This managed to make things easier for Sarah and Kasumi as the blast took out half the toppers.

"Don't fight me, Kasumi. You know what happened to your boy toy when he fought back." Hock taunted.

"You don't talk about Keiji like that! Murderer!" Kasumi yelled as she shot down two Eclipse vanguards with the Locust.

"Keep them busy. I'll take care of this myself." said Hock.

Austin, Sarah and Kasumi finished off the last of the guards and made their way for the door.

"Take it slow. I imagine Hock's got a surprise for us. We're not out of the woods yet." Austin advised.

Both Austin and Sarah looked around, scanning the area for enemies. For a moment, everything seemed clear. Just as the two siblings relaxed however, a faint humming sound suddenly sounded from under the landing pad. It got louder and then a gunship suddenly flew into view.

"Incoming! Get down!" Austin yelled as the gunship opened fire on them with its gun and they all went to cover.

"You could've done this the easy way, Goto. Allow me to show you the hard way." Hock's voice echoed from the gunship.

More Eclipse mercs soon joined the fray as the gunship lay down surprising fire.

"This is bad!" Austin yelled as he rolled from his previous cover to a new one as the gunship's firepower compromised him.

"We've had bad before!" Sarah replied back as she briefly popped out of cover and shot down two Eclipse heavy's with her Typhoon.

"This is worse." Austin finished.

"Got a plan at all?!" Kasumi shouted from where from an Eclipse trooper had her pinned.

Austin thought for a moment before he set his plasma cannon to automatic and it shot the trooper surprising Kasumi, allowing the thief to move to new cover.

"You two, take care of the Eclipse. I'll deal with Hock. I've got enough firepower to take that ship down!" he ordered.

"Roger that, Major." Sarah replied in agreement as she went over to join Kasumi while Austin moved to try and get a better shot at Hock's gunship.

"What did you tell your friends, Kasumi? You're doing this for love?" Hock taunted as his focus shifted to Austin.

The Helldiver returned fire with two plasma shots, which Hock managed to dodge. These however hadn't been intended as an attack. They'd merely been so Hock would move the gunship into a better shooting angle for Austin. The Helldiver let his Revenant loose on the gunship as it flew into view. Unexpectedly however, the shot's impacted on the gunship's shields. Austin hadn't counted on this. Gunships like these often just had armour. Hock had obviously made some upgrades, clever. Austin fired both his Revenant and plasma cannon at the same time, which managed to wear the shields down a lot. Before he could finish Hock off though, the gunship vanished from sight.

Sarah and Kasumi meanwhile were working well together against the Eclipse. Kasumi's tech skills coupled with Sarah's soldier and N7 training were making them a match for their opponents.

"Not bad shooting, for a thief." said Sarah as she threw a grenade out, which obliterated a nearby fuel tank and set several Eclipse soldiers on fire.

"You're not so bad yourself. You certainly live up to the expectations of being the sister of a Helldiver." Kasumi smiled back at her as she used an overload on an Eclipse engineers shields, allowing Sarah to finish him off.

Hock's gunship flew into view once again. Austin's HUD annoyingly told him that the gunship's shields had charged back up.

"Even if you escape, I'll scour the galaxy for you!"

"Not if I can help it!" Austin yelled as he once again opened fire. Despite his best efforts though, he couldn't wear the shields down quickly enough before they repaired themselves.

"If I can get to the ship, I can take down the shields!" Kasumi

yelled to him.

Austin immediately understood now. If all the Eclipse mercs where out of way, Kasumi would be able to get to Hock. The Helldiver abandoned his attack on the gunship and retreated back to where his sister and the thief where. Despite Hock firing at them, they soon managed to gun down the final merc and the landing pad was clear.

"Got a clear shot! Here we go!" said Kasumi.

The thief ran out of cover as Hock attempted to shoot her. Kasumi jumped up onto some nearby pipes. Austin and Sarah where amazed by her speed and agility. Austin had never seen a non-Helldiver move like that before. Kasumi then jumped up onto the net level of pipes and ran at the gunship. Just as she reached the end, she jumped at it. She landed on the gunship's cockpit and activated her omni tool.

Her overload immediately shorted out the shields and the gunship briefly spun out of control before Hock managed to regain control of it. Kasumi slid down the windshield to the very bottom. Hock glared at her from inside. Kasumi then gave a mocking salute and jumped off. She flipped in the air like a gymnast before she landed back not he pad. Both Austin and Sarah where left speechless by this.

"Helldivers could learn a lot from her." Austin thought.

"Shields down! Let's tear that thing apart!" said Kasumi.

The two Shepards smiled and popped back out of cover for a clear shot at Hock. The contestant gunfire quickly caused several bullet holes to appear in the gunship. The combined force of an M-76 Revenant and an N7 Typhoon was just immense

"No one escapes from Donovan Hock!" Hock yelled from the gunship.

Sarah holstered her Typhoon and picked up a rocket launcher from one of the dead Eclipse mercs.

"Well we do! This is for trying to flirt with me!" she yelled as she locked on and fired.

The rocket zoomed towards its target. Hock attempted an evasive manoeuvre, but it was in vain. The rocket simply altered course, still locked onto its target. The gunship exploded into loads of pieces as the rocket hit's target head on. There was no way that Hock could've survived that in any way.

The three came out of cover and took a moment to catch their breath.

"Good moves, Kasumi. That was very impressive." Austin panted.

"I try." Kasumi simply smiled.

The Hellhound dropship then came into view and slowly set down on the landing pad. Austin, Sarah and Kasumi didn't hesitate to get in and the dropship quickly took off again.

On board the Hellhound, Kasumi was examining the small device

that had the graybox files now stored in it. Austin and Sarah were at a small terminal so that they'd be able to see and hear what she would as well as she examined the files and memories. Austin nodded and Kasumi inserted the device into a small slot not far from the wall. A holographic projection appeared over Kasumi's eyes and she almost seemed to black out as her head went limp.

Kasumi opened her eyes to find herself in a holographic reality. Standing in front of her, was Keiji.

"Kasumi. If you're seeing this, it's because I'm dead. The information we found is all here. It's big Kasumi. If the Council ever got wind of this... the Alliance could be implicated. Kasumi, I... I encrypted the information to keep it safe. And I uploaded the encryption key to your graybox, so now one could get the whole package." he explained.

Kasumi walked around a bit and opened one of the memories. The memory showed her and Keiji kissing before she then threw him down on the bed and they began making love. Kasumi smiled as she watched the romantic sight.

"But if I'm dead, and if anyone knows about this... then I've made you a target, my love. I'm so, so sorry." Keiji continued.

"Keiji..." Kasumi sighed sadly.

"I know you, Kasumi. You'll want to keep these memories forever. But you don't need some neural implant to know I'll always be with you." said Keiji "Please, Kasumi. Destroy these files."

Kasumi immediately reacted to this with shock and ran to where the hologram of Keiji still stood. "There's nothing more I can do to protect you."

"I... I can't do that! This is all that's left!" Kasumi said, almost on the point of tears.

"Goodbye, Kasumi. I love you." Keiji finished as Kasumi hugged him.

The hologram around Kasumi's eyes vanished and she came back to reality.

"Is there any way we can just destroy the information?" Austin asked.

"No. Keiji's a master at encrypting files. He laced the information into his memories. You can't get one without experiencing the other." Kasumi sighed.

Austin gave a very heavy sigh. He hated to do this, but he had no choice. He could only hope that Kasumi would understand.

"You heard him, Kasumi. He'd want you to destroy the information save yourself." He said.

"Sarah looked surprised at Austin for saying this, but she didn't say

anything. She could tell that her brother took no pleasure in this, and she understood why he had made this difficult decision.

"I know. I just... I can't! This is all that's left of him." Kasumi whimpered, her voice cracking as a tear streaked down her cheek.

"If it makes it easier, I'll help you do it." said Sarah as she put her hand reassuringly on the thief's shoulder.

"I... okay. Just help me get it over with, please." Kasumi sobbed, just managing to regain her composure.

Sarah held Kasumi's hand as the thief pressed the buttons not the holographic display. Kasumi gave one last look at Keiji's face before the image crackled and finally went blank. The files were destroyed.

"Th... thank you." Kasumi whispered as she sobbed into Sarah's shoulder.

"There, there. It's alright." said the N7 marine gently as she hugged Kasumi to her. The two sat down together while Austin sat down separately.

"I'm sorry, Kasumi. I really am." he wanted to say it, but he ultimately felt it'd just be better to let Kasumi be. Given time, she'd come round.

# BROKEN WINGS CHAPTER 6

by Tiffany Kennedy  
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NARUTO (-???)Masashi Kishimoto & Shueisha.  
Original Characters & plot belongs to me.  
Broken Wings -Re-Write-  
A modern day Naruto Fanfiction.

"I miss having a little sister around here! Can't you bring her back Gaara? I miss female company," Temari cried as she searched for something in the lounge room. Gaara grunted. Itachi had taken her home almost two weeks ago and even he was missing her around the house. He missed her touch, how she slept, and the way he could communicate with her. I think it's safe to say that he missed her. Gaara walked down the stairs and towards the kitchen to grab his wallet.

Aoi dragged herself down the stairs to look around for her jacket. She saw Sasuke in the kitchen eating. They still looked at each other in an odd way. She was stuck with him because of Itachi. She never thought of it as living under the same roof as a rapist till now. She almost barfed at the thought of it. She heard foots steps come down the stairs and she knew it was Itachi.

"Itachi can't I go back to Gaara's? Please!" she begged.

"You aren't going near him okay; you are staying here with me. Where I can keep an eye on you," he squandered. She sighed taking his wallet once again and grabbing her bag before heading down to Starbucks as usual.

-x-x-x-

Gaara grabbed his English book from his locker before heading to Kakashi Sensei's class He didn't have this class with Aoi which he was kind of upset about, he didn't even know if the feeling was being upset but either way, he just didn't know how to show it. He walked over to the class and sat down right at the back, as he usually does. Gaara knew Aoi had Sasuke in her class this period and he was kind of worried about that. He didn't even know why he was feeling so concerned. He took a moment to reassure himself that she was able to take care of herself. Naruto ran over and sat next to Gaara. Sure they talked, Naruto was set on helping him and before Aoi, Naruto was the only person that he actually spoke to that wasn't inside his family. Now they were deemed friends, according to Naruto. Gaara wasn't so sure if he wanted to be his friend but he had been modelling himself to be more like Naruto.

While Naruto was making paper planes and shoving them into Gaara's hair and face like a two year old, Gaara wasn't able to pay attention to anything. He muttered a curse.

"Naruto, you and Aoi are friends...right?" Gaara asked trying to make a conversation. Usually he would just sit there and be quiet and brood about something. Even when Aoi was at his home he could concentrate more than this.

"Yeah of course! We went to the mall just the other day! Man that was so much fun, she actually paid for my food! My other friends don't do that...Then we went to the arcade! That was brilliant, she beat me in DDR though," he continued going on about his time at the mall.

Gaara drifted off into a daze for a while till everyone heard a band. Kakashi sensei headed right out of the room racing for some other classroom. He ran fast, like he was flying in the wind. Gaara frowned, that bang sounded close. It was in Iruka's class room. Gaara realised that was the class room Aoi was in. He rushed out of the class room; a bunch of kids followed him. Sasuke was on the floor gripping his nose tightly. Blood was streaming right down it.

"Stop being such a whiny bitch, okay!?! I'm already doing everything you fucking say!" Came a familiar voice. Gaara saw the blue haired girl looking like the devil. He sighed. She had taken a few more weeks off while being at Itachi's and when she decides to come to school it's all drama. Sasuke stood up weary. Aoi snarled and grabbed his shoulders, bending him down as she kneed him in the balls. She still had hold of him.

"We need to fucking talk about this," she whispered to him before letting him fall to the floor. As he did he grabbed Aoi's hand and pulled her down to. She growled.

"About what?" he squelched.

"A truce," she replied before getting up. She glared at Itachi and left the room. Gaara stood against the door frame for a second as Aoi walked out. He felt the urge to follow her. He felt a hand on his shoulder. A bent over Sasuke had his grip on him.

"Leave it dude, don't follow her," he held on to his balls from sheer pain.

"Fuck you," Gaara punched Sasuke in the stomach, "You've already done enough."

This was a low point for the Uchiha. His reputation was in pieces and would probably never live again. He couldn't live up to being the amazing uchiha after this. If he could, it would probably be a miracle. Sakura walked slowly towards Sasuke. He was bent over but still standing, gripping onto the wall and himself. Gaara had already printed down the hall way. Sakura took Sasuke into her arms holding him tightly.

Gaara kept sprinting. He couldn't find Aoi anywhere. She wasn't

inside the school. She must be outside. He walked out the doors and looked around. She wasn't there. He sighed and looked up. There was something on the roof. He squinted. Aoi was on the roof. Of course she was on the roof. He stood on the bench and jumped up, grabbing the gutter. He swung himself to the pole and wrapped his legs around it in support as he pulled himself up.

"You didn't have to come find me," she didn't even bother to look at him, "I kind of have multiple personalities, and disorders."

Gaara heard her laugh. It wasn't one of those cute pleasant laughs that filled him with joy and took him away from the pain which is reality. It was a cruel laugh that made him shudder.

"Aoi, he's done enough already. We both know that," he looked at her, unsure if she wanted to hear what he was saying or not, he just wanted to try and comfort her, "Why don't you tell me more? I think I want to help you."

She still didn't look at him. He moved and sat down beside her.

"Are you, uh, busy tonight?"

"No," she pulled her legs up and hugged them.

"Come over for dinner?" he blinked after he said it, he had said it with so much confidence it confused him, it was just a spare of the moment thing, "uh Temari, she uh misses you, so do you think it would be okay if you came around? I know she would like that."

Aoi smiled to herself, she knew Gaara had trouble asking things like that. She agreed to it simply. How could she turn him down? They climbed back down off the roof and she stayed close to his side. She knew people would ask questions and what not. But most of all, he made her feel safe. As soon as Gaara saw Sasuke he became different. A side that Aoi hadn't really seen of him. He moved closer to Aoi, becoming more protective over her. He kept his guard up. She held his hand and squeezed it to assure him it was okay. Gaara frowned at her but she only smiled. Aoi skipped away towards the aching Sasuke. Once Gaara had walked to his class she started speaking.

"A truce," she proposed.

He laughed, "I don't tell and you don't tell. That's a truce, isn't it? Well it's not enough for me."

His laugh was soft but dark as he clutched the wall in order to not fall. Aoi noticed that Sakura was waiting for him nearby, she was scared, worried. It made Aoi feel bad.

"What else do you want?"

"I want a favour. I'll call you when it's needed," he smiled. He turned away and limped off. Sakura by his side to make sure he was alright, even within all his protests and how much he pushed her away. Aoi on the other hand had no choice in the matter. She just had to go along with it.

She got into Gaara's car after school to drive off to his house. She



had assured Itachi that everything was going to be fine after they talked about the whole Sasuke thing. It was just an outburst. After Gaara checking if she was alright, several times I might add, they decided to enter his house. No one was home just yet so they both sat on the ground and played Xbox. They were playing the new taken game. She sat on the couch and he sat on the floor in front of her. She demanded to be on a higher seating position because she was a better gamer. Well she said something like that. He moved his head trying to make her not see the screen. She growled and moved her Xbox controller in front of his eyes so he couldn't see. He yelped at her but didn't really do anything about it. He started moving his head again. Aoi was getting really annoyed and moved around to try and see. She moved her head up and forward. Her head was almost resting on his. She didn't realise that her breasts were right up against Gaara. He could feel it and his face went full on red. Without thinking he dropped the controller and moved suddenly out of the way. He turned facing Aoi. She fell and landed on top of him. Her hands stretched out to stop her from crushing him but her body and his were still touching. She squeaked. Her face was almost as red as his was. They both just stared at each other not knowing what to say or do. They heard the door open and their heads turned instantly.

"Well hello their children, I didn't realise your girlfriend was here for dinner," Kunkaro winked before moving away. Neither of them corrected him on what he was saying. Aoi and Gaara were there like that for a moment before Aoi moved away quickly. They both sat on the couch in silence and continued to play their game before Temari got home. When Temari did return home she practically jumped on Aoi and complained about having not enough girls around here.

Aoi had been in Konoha for months now and she felt like these people were like family. She would never get tired of coming here. They all sat around the table and ate fish and chips for dinner. They talked like they were the happiest family that had known each other all their lives. They were just comfortable, even Gaara looked less awkward or brooding. Aoi had forgotten what family dinners were like, she never got them at home with her father since he wasn't actually at home most of the time and the Uchiha's weren't much for family values. After they ate Aoi offered to clean up. She took the plates to the kitchen and Gaara helped her.

"Gaara never does the dishes," Kunkaro whispered to Temari.

Gaara grabbed the detergent and put it in the running water. They continued to clean the plates as the foam arose. Aoi doing most of the cleaning because Gaara really didn't know how to. Aoi smirked as she felt Gaara watching her. She grabbed some foam and threw it at him.

"Hey what was that for?" he laughed a little. He half smirked as he grabbed some foam and threw it at her. She gawked and grabbed the

detergent bottle. A wicked smile across her face. She squirted it all over Gaara's shirt. He moved closer to her where the sink was. He grabbed the cups and started throwing water over her. She splashed him back, missing more than once. He moved away trying to run with the detergent bottle. The water was overflowing a little and there was foam and detergent all over the floor. She laughed and moved towards him, chasing him almost. She slept and fell into his arms laughing. He looked at her with a smile and helped her back up. His arms still remained loosely around her. They had no idea that Temari was leaning against the door of the frame till she started laughing. They both looked at her and moved away. Aoi smiled sheepishly. This is why Gaara never does the dishes.

## WEEK OF LOVE CHAPTER 4: DECORATIONS

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Two weeks later was Aang's 14th birthday. Katara wanted to do something special for him, and in the past two weeks she had been busy. They had stayed at the Southern Air Temple ever since that catastrophe with the Council. After meditating for a couple of hours, Aang became more chipper than usual. It might be because he was back where he belonged; the very place he was raised. Katara wanted to make this as special as possible for Aang. He deserved it, the chance to be young instead of what others wanted him to be.

The sun was just rising, the colors fanning out like the silk of a fan. Aang groaned and covered his eyes, not wanting to wake up yet from a wonderful dream. It had flowers and an isle, with seats reserved for those closest to him. He was dreaming about a wedding for himself and Katara. He would have to wait for 2 years, but it would be worth it when all is ready for the day they become husband and wife.

As usual he woke up alone, but he sort of expected it. Katara had been waking up earlier than him for some reason. He trusts her though. She had saved his life countless times; there was no reason to not trust his own girlfriend. Stretching his arms above his head, the now 14 year old boy looked out the window, watching as the colors grew brighter and became more blended together. Gyatso had once told him that the sunrise was the best time for reflection. He thought about his past, present, and future. He thought about his old friends and teachers from a hundred and two years ago. Sometimes he wondered if it had been the right thing to do, to leave his home when they were about to be attacked by the Fire Nation. The responsibility of being the Avatar had been too great for him. He was only twelve at the time. How was he supposed to react to this big news? If it hadn't been for Gyatso, Aang wouldn't have had any friends at all. The man had been like a father to him.

Then he thought about all they had been through. From the moment he had opened his eyes, he thought the world was the same. It wasn't until he and Katara went to the frozen ship that he realized the truth: there was war; he had been in the iceberg for a century. Then came the fact that he was the last of his kind. He had been so heartbroken when he found Gyatso's remains.

In the Crystal Catacombs, when he and Katara fought Azula and Zuko, along with the Dai Lee, he thought it was hopeless and he

forced himself to let Katara go in order to go into the Avatar State; only to be shot at by that cold blooded Firebender and killed. But he had been brought back to life by the Waterbender he calls his girlfriend. He really wasn't sure what he would do without her.

Then he thought about the final battle; Sozin's Comet. It was one of the most challenging and life threatening fights Aang had ever been in. If he hadn't achieved the Avatar State, he would have died. It seemed that luck was on his side. But when he was about to strike the man that had helped cause the world so much pain and anguish, he had come to his senses and stopped the attack before he did something he would regret. Taking a life, even the life of a power hungry man, would have scarred the boy forever. So instead he had taken Ozai's Bending away, leaving him helpless. He and his army had lost, while Aang and his friends took out the fleet and saved the world from destruction. Now, two years later, everything and everyone was becoming together again, like it used to be when he was growing up.

He didn't hear her come in, but he knew she was there watching him. His Earthbending Sense had become more clear, stronger as he trained. Katara was standing outside the door, waiting for him to respond. She knew he knew she was there. When he didn't respond, the young Waterbender walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. They watched the sun climb higher over the horizon. It was going to be another beautiful day today, which was perfect, since it would ruin everything Katara had planned today for the Avatar's birthday if it decided to rain.

She kissed his cheek. "You're thinking again," she murmured in a sing song voice.

Aang turned his head and smiled; though his eyes held a little sadness. She knew what he was thinking about, and hopefully she could erase the sadness for a little while. She knew there will always be a part of him that longs for his people. But someday she would help fill that void in the future.

Aang shrugged. "You read me too easily. Maybe I should find a way to block my thoughts from you."

Katara rolled her eyes. "The only way that's going to happen is if you controlled your expressions. But you and I know both know it's impossible. You're like a book waiting to be read."

Aang laughed and stood up, bringing her into his arms. "I guess I should start practicing the 'neutral face'." Katara laughed and he brought her closer, closing as much distance as possible. "You know, I really like it when you laugh," he breathed, making Katara shiver. "I brightens my world like ten suns." When she felt his hands in her sides, Katara knew instantly what would happen. She tried to turn away, but he only brought her back and started tickling her. She laughed and he couldn't help laughing with her. They fell onto the

bed, him tickling her until she couldn't breathe properly.

"Okay, okay," Katara gasped out. "You win!" Aang tickled her a little bit more before stopping and lying down. Katara was breathing heavily as she caught her breath. Her sides hurt from the torture they had just endured. Then she turned on her side and gazed at him. She touched his warm cheek and kissed him. Aang brought her closer, deepening the kiss.

"Happy Birthday, Aang," Katara murmured against his lips.

He broke away and said, "Thanks." Then he started playing with her hair, watching as he curled a lock around his finger.

Katara giggled. "Why do you do that?" she asked.

Aang looked up at her. "Do what?" he asked, confused.

"Why do you make it seem like your birthday isn't important?" she clarified.

"Ooooooh," Aang drawled out. Then he shrugged. "The monks used to teach us not to get sentimental about these kinds of things. I guess I'm used to it. We achieve enlightenment by not having any kind of earthly attachment." He smiled sheepishly. "I was supposed to learn how, but then I learned about being the Avatar. And Avatar Yang Chan told me that my soul duty as the Avatar was to the world; not to what I want. Besides, when I met you, I knew I wasn't going to achieve it anyway, because you keep me grounded. You're the reason I wake up everyday, just to see your beautiful face and smile." Katara smiled. "There it is. The smile that brightens every shadow. You're the reason I'm alive right now. I have never been so grateful to have someone like you around."

Katara laughed as tears went down her face. "Why do you have to be so charming when we should be celebrating your fourteenth birthday?"

Aang shrugged again. "I told you: I'm not big on bragging about myself, let alone having parties of any kind."

"Well, that, Mr. Avatar, is going to change for today. So I want you to get up, get dressed, and..." She ran her hand on his head and smirked. "Shave your head. It's a bit prickly." And before he could respond, Katara was already out of the door, running down the hall. Aang, feeling confused, ran his hand over his scalp to learn she was right. There were tiny prickles scratching his palm. He got up and went into the bathroom across the hall. When they had moved here, Aang and Katara did everything they could to make the temple as homey as possible.

After he shaved, Aang changed into his Air Nomad outfit. Since he had grown, he had it tailored so it would still fit his frame. As he went down the stairs, he thought about what Katara might be doing. She seemed very excited today. He was wondering if she had something planned for him when he got downstairs to see a traditional Air Nomad breakfast. There was fruits, vegetables, steamed rice, and fruit pies,

only the centers were flat. What really surprised Aang though was what his girlfriend was wearing. She had a traditional Air Nun dress wrapping around her slim figure. The mixture of red, orange, and rich yellow fabric made her seem like she was glowing like a goddess. It was the most beautiful thing Aang had ever seen. He was awestruck.

Katara walked over to him, the dress flowing around like the element she commanded. She was blushing a bit, wondering what he was thinking. Did he like what she was wearing? Or did he resent her for wearing something that belonged to his people? They were face to face and Aang was still gazing at her.

But she needn't have worried for he said, "You look beautiful." Katara smiled shyly, which he found adorable. It made her look like a little girl. Then he looked at the food before turning back to her. "Did you do all of this?"

Katara nodded. "Yes. I wanted to do something special for your birthday. Besides; I thought it would be better than lying around doing nothing for the day."

Aang shook his head in wonderment. "You didn't have to do this, Katara," he said. "You've already done so much for me."

"I know I didn't have to; but I wanted to. You deserve a celebration because of the things you did for this world. Besides, it's not every day you turn fourteen."

He chuckled and wrapped an arm around her waist. He was glad he was a little taller than her now. He didn't need to look up at her now. She had to do that. "Sometimes I really do wonder how I got you," he said softly. "You're like an angel the Spirits blessed me with."

Katara gazed at him with love. "Sometimes I wonder the same thing about you," she said just as softly. "How could a simple peasant like me get someone as powerful and loving as you?"

Aang brought his forehead to hers and sighed. "You're not simple," he said. "You're extraordinary. Always have, always will."

She kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Aang." Then her stomach growled and his followed a second after. They laughed. "But now, let's eat! I'm starving!"

Aang laughed as they sat down. "You're starting to sound like Sokka," he said, smirking.

Katara smiled back. "It runs in the family at some point." She pushed one of the fruit pies towards him. "Can you lift the gooey center? I would have done it the old fashioned way, but I wanted this to be as authentic as possible."

Aang nodded and flicked his wrist. Instead of just one pie, all the gooey centers went up, and they started eating. They joked and talked about the good times they had spent together with their friends.

After they finished eating, Katara gestured for him to follow her. Aang was puzzled, but shrugged it off and followed her out of the

temple toward the stables where it was housing Appa. The place was much cleaner and the hay was fresh. Appa was sitting on the ground with his saddle on. Aang had no idea how that could be since he remembered taking it off of him when they had arrived.

Katara climbed onto Appa's head and took the reins before patting a spot next to her for Aang to hop on. When he Airbended himself on, he noticed there were a few packs in the saddle. Then he turned to her and asked, "Are we going on a trip?"

Katara turned to him with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. "You'll see." And with the usual "Yip, yip," they were in the sky, soaring over the Temple and Patola Mountain Range. Aang had no idea what had been planned; but he might as well just enjoy the ride.

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A few hours later, Katara spotted an island and made for it. Aang had fallen asleep next to her, the wind pulling him into its embrace that every Airbender had come to respect. She took the moment to study his face. He looked so cute, almost like his old twelve year old self. His face was peaceful, the bruises under his eyes long gone. It was still a wonder to her that someone so sweet looking could be so powerful. Aang has grown up faster than most people; yet he still had this aura around him that made anyone around him feel good.

*'Well, almost everyone,'* Katara thought, remembering the night when he was shot by Azula. Sometimes she would still have nightmares about it: his body falling from the air, her catching him, looking at the burn as she tried to heal it. A few tears leaked out of her eyes. But she brushed at them angrily. This was no time to go into the past. Today is Aang's birthday. He's here, alive and well, and she wasn't going to let anything ruin this day for him.

She brought Appa in for a gentle landing, trying not to wake the sleeping Airbender. She had to make sure everything was in place. So sliding off of Appa's, Katara wandered into the forest, making sure the surprise was in place.

\*\*\*\*\*

Aang woke up to the sound of someone humming. He opened his eyes only to block them from the sun that was shining down. Waiting for his eyes to adjust, his senses became stronger. He could hear the faint tinkling of a river; he could smell flowers and other sweet things. He opened his eyes cautiously and looked around. He was in some sort of clearing, trees surrounding him like an army awaiting command. There was a river about ten yards away. He looked down and saw he still on Appa's head. They must have landed while he was asleep. Looking in the sky, it must be close to the afternoon, if the sun was any indication. But where was Katara? He looked again and saw her by the stream, humming and Waterbending. He took the time to admire her. She was graceful like the water. She moved fluidly, the water

following her effortlessly. It was like they were one.

Katara felt eyes on her and she turned around, meeting Aang's gaze with her own. She was still wearing the dress. They stared at each other before Aang jumped off of his companion and came to her. Katara smiled and he smiled back before hugging her.

Katara laughed before she said, "Well, hello to you too."

Aang laughed too and lifted his head to gaze at her. "Sorry; it's just instinct. You know I hug you every time I wake up." He looked at the sky again. "By the way, how long was I asleep?"

Katara shrugged. "A few hours. It took us two hours to get here. I decided to let you sleep, knowing you would wake up an hour later."

"Why didn't you wake me up sooner?" Aang asked curiously.

Katara smiled, a mischievous glint sparkling. "I had to take care of something."

Aang furrowed his brow and tilted his head, puzzled. "Like what?" he asked.

Katara shook her head. "Sorry, Aang. You'll have to wait and see later."

Aang pouted in that really adorable way. "Come on, Katara," he complained. "You know I hate it when you keep stuff from me."

Katara stood her ground. "Nope. You'll just have to wait and see." She grabbed his hand and pulled, leading him into the forest. "Come on; we're going on a short walk. You know, see what nature has to offer." Aang shook his head but followed her anyway, wondering what in the name of the Spirits was Katara hiding.

They walked for about half an hour, the multicolored canopy proving the perfect cover from the Fall sun. The air was unusually warm; but it made the walk more pleasant. Aang breathed in the air and thought about his old mentor. Growing up, Gyatso had made fruit pies every year for Aang's birthday for as long as he could remember. Half the time they would eat them; other times they would throw what was left of them at the Council and have a good laugh about it. Aang chuckled at the memory and Katara looked at him.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

Aang shook his head, smiling. "I was thinking about the old times I had growing up. Every year on my birthday for as long as I can remember, Gyatso used to make fruit pies. We would eat some of them; then throw the rest on the Council member's heads." They both laughed at that.

Then Katara said, "I can picture you doing that. You will always be a goofball."

Aang grinned at her. "But I'm *your* goof, right?"

Katara chuckled. "Yes, and you always will be." She tugged on his hand. "Are you ready for your surprise?" Aang looked around, and that was when he noticed they had been following the river. It was



glistening on their left, his side, with different colors blending into the blue. He nodded and she led him farther in the trees.

After another five minutes of walking, Katara stooped them and told him to close his eyes. When he did so, she made sure they were closed before grabbing his hands and walking backwards through an open space in the trees. She took one last look around before saying softly, "Okay. You can open your eyes now." When he did, he was stunned with what he saw. They were in a smaller clearing than the one they had left. There was a picnic blanket spread out on the forest floor with a covered woven basket on top of it. The trees were more closely compacted, shooting colors like decorations. But what really struck Aang the most was the spring in the middle. It was big, already filled with water, with some kind of tube sticking out of the ground next to it.

Aang turned to Katara, who was beaming, and asked, "Did you do all of this?" He sounded awestruck. This was the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for him.

Katara shrugged. "I had a little help." She turned to the woods. "Come out guys!" she called. There was a few rustles and all of Aang's friends stepped out of the trees. There was Zuko, Mai, Toph, Teo, Sokka, and Suki. He was struck by how odd this seemed to be; but he smiled as he received hugs from all his friends and an arm punch from Toph.

"Heys, guys," he laughed. "What are you doing here?"

Sokka answered. "We're here to celebrate your birthday. Duh!"

Suki frowned and smacked him upside the head. "Be nice! It's his birthday, so you better be respectful."

"Okay, okay!" Sokka complained. "No need to get all defensive." He then turned to Aang and grinned. "So you're fourteen now, huh? Congrats! You're almost a man." He gave Aang a brotherly noogie, which Aang easily got out of, laughing.

Zuko was observing them, making comparisons; then he said, "Something is different here." He leaned forward, closer to Aang, before saying, "Is it just me, or has Aang gotten...I don't know...taller? And does his voice sound a bit deeper?" His friends crowded around him to look for themselves. They looked from Sokka to Aang, making comparisons as well.

Then Toph whistled. "You know what, Sparky: you're right. Aang *bas* gotten taller. I can tell from his weight."

Sokka seemed to notice for the first time and did the height comparison with his hand. He took a step back and said, "Jeez, Katara! What have you been feeding him? What happened to the pipsqueak? He's at least an inch shorter than me now."

Katara, who had been silent with amusement, shrugged and said, "Fruits and vegetables. Only he seemed to eat more than normal, now

that I think about it."

"Hey!" Aang protested.

Everyone laughed before Katara took his hand and said, "Don't worry; you're not fat. Besides, you could never out eat Sokka."

Sokka crossed his arms as everyone laughed. "Come on! I need my food! I'm a growing warrior!"

Mai rolled her eyes. "Some warrior," she said and turned to Aang, not bothering to hide her amusement. "When we were setting this up, Sokka heard something from the bushes and thought we were under attack. He took out his sword and prepared to strike when a rabbit showed its face. Then he squealed and fell to the ground."

Everyone save Sokka laughed so hard tears started falling from some of their faces.

When everyone calmed down, Aang shook his head and said, "I can picture that, actually." A couple of chuckles and a snort sounded. "So you guys helped with this?"

Sokka nodded. "Yeah," he said and continued explaining. "Toph made the pool, Katara bended the water from the stream to fill it up, me and Teo worked on the mechanism concealed in the tube there, and Zuko blew fire into it to make sure the fire reached the bottom and stayed there. And voila: you have hot spring!" He thought for a moment before saying, "Oh yeah; and Mai and Suki set up the lanterns in the trees and around the pool."

"Lanterns?" Aang asked before looking around. Now that the subject was brought up, he did notice the yellow, orange, and red lanterns blending into the trees, and a few surrounding the pool a few yards away from the water to keep them dry. Tears started gathering in Aang's gray eyes and he swallowed the lump in his throat. "I don't know what to say. Thanks guys. You have no idea how this means to me."

"And that's not all," Zuko said before calling, "Uncle! Come here!" Aang watched as the old man came out with a Sungi Horn and a padded stool. He waved at Aang and smiled before sitting down, waiting to play. Aang was seriously amazed. His friends took the time to do all of this for him? What had he done to deserve such great friends?

He looked at each one of them. "What did I do to deserve this?" was all he could manage.

Katara grabbed his hand. "You gave us fun."

Sokka grabbed her hand. "You gave us a reason to believe in life."

Toph went to Aang's other side and grabbed his hand too. "You gave us a chance to be ourselves."

Zuko grabbed hers with Mai's hand clasped in his other hand. "You gave us a reason to fight for good." Mai nodded in agreement.

Teo wheeled over and grabbed Mai's hand. "You are the reason

everyone in the world is free."

Suki walked over to Aang and kissed his cheek before going to Sokka and grabbing his and Teo's hands. "You gave us hope."

Aang was really crying now as he looked at all of his friends. He took a shaky breath. "Thank you," he whispered. "You guys are the greatest friends I could have asked for."

Katara squeezed his hand and he looked at her. "We're not just friends, Aang," she said, smiling. "We're your family now." Everyone nodded in agreement.

"You are wise beyond your years, young Avatar." That was Iroh's voice. It was the first time he had spoken throughout the whole thing. "Many people believed the war would carry on. The Earth Kingdom thought the world would be burned. But you have helped save it; therefore, you are a hero, and everyone is grateful for what you have done."

Aang nodded his thanks, unable to speak. Then all his friends hugged him in a group hug, wishing the boy a happy birthday. This is the greatest day of the young Avatar's life.

After they broke the hug, Sokka said, "Alright, now that that's out of the way, LET'S PARTY!!" The Gaang laughed, and the party began. Zuko lit the lanterns while Iroh played a fun tune in his horn. Katara and Suki set out the food, all vegetarian, and everyone sat down to eat. Conversations took place, remembering old times, catching up with one another. Aang still couldn't believe this was really happening, having all of his friends together in one spot, celebrating his birthday. It was too much to hope for.

After the plates had been cleared away and Aang had made his wish, Katara announced, "Time for presents!"

Aang shook his head. "You guys didn't have to get me anything. You being here is more than enough."

Katara grabbed his shoulder. "Trust me, Aang. I think you're going to love these." She turned to Teo. "You go first."

Teo reached behind his chair and brought a cylinder out. He handed it to Aang, who was looking at it curiously. "I wasn't sure what to get you, so I looked around the Temple a little more and found this. You might find it useful."

Aang opened the case and tilted it. A scroll came out and he observed it before having a shock. The handle holding the scroll had an Air Nomad insignia on either side. "No way," he breathed before turning to Teo with shining eyes full of happiness. "This isn't..."

"It is," Teo said, grinning. "This, my friend, is the scroll for the thirty sixth level of Airbending."

Aang opened the scroll carefully and looked at its contents. It was still readable, even after all this time. He looked at Teo. "Thank you."

Teo nodded and was about to move back to his spot when he said,

"Oh, I almost forget!" He reached behind him again and brought out a book of some kind. "I found this in one of the guest rooms." He threw it to Aang who caught it and examined the cover. It was a wooden book painted a darker brown with the symbol for Air on it. Curious, Aang lifted the cover, and saw the name Gyatso on the first blank page. He touched the name, hardly believing what he was holding.

"This was Gyatso's journal," he whispered. He looked a little uncertain, like he wanted to read it but wasn't sure if he should.

Katara read his thoughts. "You don't have to read it, Aang. When Teo told me he had found the diary and saw the name, we thought it might be better if it was with someone who could take care of it. Besides, we wanted to make Gyatso to be a part of this."

Aang hugged her. "Thank you so much," he murmured. Katara nodded and smiled. Teo moved back.

Katara said, "Toph, your turn."

The blind Earthbender dug in her pocket and brought out something that was wrapped in brown paper. "I went to the market to find something Air Nomad like, and one of the merchants recommended this. I hope you like it." She tossed it to him.

Aang caught it and opened it to reveal an authentic wooden statuette of a meditating nun. He smiled and said, "Thanks, Toph. I love it."

She snorted. "You better love it. It cost me 150 gold pieces." The Gaang chuckled, knowing that Toph could care less about the price.

Then they moved onto Sokka and Suki. They gave Aang a package, and it opened to reveal an Air Nomad outfit similar to what he used to wear when he was twelve, only longer. "We thought you missed your old outfit," Suki explained, "so Sokka and I went to a tailors shop with measurements sent by Katara to get this made."

Aang was beaming. "Thanks!"

The couple nodded and sat back as Zuko and Mai gave their present. "We really weren't sure what to get you either," Zuko said, "so Mai and I decided to get something made for you." Mai handed over a box about the length of Aang's forearm and twice the width. He weighed it before opening the package. He gasped. Inside were two cuffs that wrapped around the forearm. It was brown fabric with orange straps for the wrists and top opening. The Air Nomad sign was engraved in gold on top for each arm, with a darker brown stripe running the length, going under the coin.

Aang's smile was huge, he looked like a kid again, having fun with his friends. "Thanks a lot, guys," he said. "I'll treasure them forever." He looked at all of his friends in turn. "Thank you everyone. This has been the best day of my life. I honestly don't know what I would do without you."

Katara hugged him tightly. "We can tell from your reactions," she

said. "And you know that if you ever need help, you can ask us. We'll be there for you." Their friends nodded. The sun was starting to go down, casting pink and orange of all shades across the darkening sky. The lanterns glowed against the leaves, their light becoming the only things keeping the forest from total darkness.

Sokka stood up and stretched. "So, anyone up for hot spring?" He then stripped himself to his boxers and jumped in before thinking. He came up shivering. His friends tried to hold in their laughs. He glared at Zuko. "A little Firebending would be nice right now!" Zuko snorted and stood up before he bent fire into the tube. There was a hatch inside that kept the fire from coming out. After the water was warm enough, the rest of the Gaang went in. When it started cooling down, more fire would be shot into the tube. Iroh played soft music as the young heroes relaxed.

After some time of relaxation, the water became cool again and everyone got out to get dressed. Then Sokka, Suki, Mai, Zuko, Toph, and Teo left to get to Appa, leaving Aang, Katara, and Iroh in the glow of the lanterns.

He turned to her. "Thank you," he said softly.

"You're welcome," she replied quietly before nodding to Iroh, who started playing a slow love song. Katara held out her hand. "Would you like to dance?" Aang nodded and grabbed it before being pulled to a clear part of the clearing. He placed his hands on her lower back as she placed her arms on his shoulders. They gazed at each other as the music swirled lightly around them.

Katara placed her ear on his chest to listen his heart beat. She felt him kiss her head before placing his own on top of hers. They stayed quiet for a few moments before Aang said, "Thank you, Katara."

She looked up at him. "What for?"

He gazed at her. "For everything you've ever done for me. From freeing me, to teaching me, to bringing me back. And for loving me. Sometimes I wonder if this is some kind of dream, one that I would wake up from. So far, I'm happy it hasn't happened. You have no idea how much it means to me to have you here. I would be lost if it wasn't for you."

Katara was crying and she wiped away the tears. "I could say the same thing. If me and Sokka hadn't found you, we would still be in the South Pole, wondering if peace would be restored. But I never lost hope that you would one day return. I'm so proud of you. You've accomplished so much in such a short time. I bet even the past Avatars are amazed by your deeds."

Aang chuckled. "Maybe. Even though some of them might be a bit hardheaded to admit." Katara laughed and Aang grinned before placing his head on her shoulder. "I love you, Katara. I always have, and I always will."

Katara smiled softly. "I love you too, Aang. Now and forever." And they shared a deep kiss that spoke of that love. In the end, Aang and Katara sent Iroh back to camp where the others were. Katara brought out pillows from the huge basket and lied down. She and her lover fell asleep under the decorations, the flames and stars shining like beacons. This had been the best birthday ever.

# A TRICKSTER'S OLD FRIEND, CHAPTER III

Amber Watkins

For more of my works visit me on Fanfiction.net or on Deviant art both under Drade666

For comments please email me at Shadowraider666@yahoo.ca please be kind! Thanks

Several months had gone by with Drade and the boys working together more and more then Dean died torn apart by a hell hound. For a while Drade hunted with Sam but he eventually stopped contacting her via a necklace amulet she gave him all he needed to do was squeeze before thinking her name in order to summon her Bobby had one as well. Drade was sitting in a small hotel she'd put herself up in while on a hunt when she felt the burn of the summoning necklace go through her body...it was Bobby. Gathering something' of hers Drade waved a hand forming a large purple glowing circle that grew to the just the size for her to step inside when she stepped out she was in Bobby's house. Both Bobby and Sam had gotten used to this ability a while ago having seen her use it time and again.

"Hey Bobby" Drade greeted as she placed a backpack full of supplies on the floor

"Hey Drade! It's good to see you again" Bobby said voice a little tense as he shook her hand it was shaking slightly which made Drade take notice

"What's wrong?" Drade finally asked as Bobby stood looking at her

"Well...Um..." Bobby started but couldn't quite get the words to form

"Hey Bobby! You really should get some new soap it's starting to..." Dean started as he came down the staircase in the foyer before stopping in realization to who was there

"Dean?" Drade finally said her eyes wide in surprise. She had pretty much seen everything, which meant there was very little in this world that surprised her anymore but someone coming back from hell looking as new as a newborn was defiantly new one on her.

"Hey Drade" Dean said a smile crossing on his face at the sight of her

"Bobby?" Drade asked glancing over to him wondering what had happened

"Relax I've already gone through the motions it's really HIM!"

Bobby emphasized

“But how?” Drade asked now a little more relaxed

“That’s what we were hoping you could tell us,” Bobby said looking at her with hope she new what had brought Dean back

Dean, Bobby and Drade moved to the kitchen sitting around the small table while coffee brewed in the background.

“Sorry boys I can’t help on this one, it wasn’t me and I don’t know of too many THINGS or spells that could bring a man back from the pit in one piece” Drade stated bluntly as she sat back of her chair against the wall her legs crossed in front of her, one arm resting on the table while the other sat across her lap. Bobby was sitting forward hands woven together on the top of the table and Dean had turned his chair around so the back was towards the table while he straddled it.

“But you do know some things right?” Dean pointed out

“Yes I have been around a while, heard things here and there,”

Drade stated agreeing to her own statement

“Then list them,” Bobby said bluntly

“There are a couple spells but only someone like myself or a demon could perform them and considering I didn’t do it plus the demons wanted you in hell in the first place well...” Drade trailed off tilting her head sideways with a quirk on her face to emphasize her point

“Okay what about THINGS?” Bobby asked

“Well there are a few pagan gods, demons, reapers, Death, Angels...” Drade started before being cut off

“ANGELS?” Dean scoffed tilting his head to look at her

“Yes Dean, angels” Drade said bluntly looking at him with confusion as to his reaction

“Please there’s no such thing” Dean said in disbelief sending a shocked and surprised look over Drade’s face.

“Okay well we can deal with your denial later, did it leave any thing as a clue?” Drade finally asked

“Oh yeah there’s this” Dean stated as he lifted the shirt sleeve on his right arm past his shoulder revealing a raised hand print that looked like it’d been branded into his flesh.

Drade’s response was a gasp then a hasty retreat from the table as she sprang from her chair practically running from the kitchen. Bobby and Dean tried to ask her what was wrong but she simply told them that she had something very important to attend to immediately. After Drade left leaving both Bobby and Dean very confused they tried to figure things out for themselves leading them first to Sam who they thought may have made a deal to bring Dean back but that was a bust although both brothers where happy to see each other again. There next stop was a psychic friend of Bobby’s named Pamela she agreed to help them but soon found herself without eyes from glimpsing the



being that pulled Dean from the pit but it did get them a name Castiel.

Soon Dean was tired of trying to find this thing and with Drade apparently MIA not answering either Bobby or Sam's calls he decided to take matters into his own hands. After summoning the THING to them Dean learned that it was an angel of the lord named Castiel although he didn't really believe it, which finally lead to a visit from Drade. Bobby, Dean and Sam were sitting in his study/kitchen arguing about whether or not it could be an angel when Drade suddenly appeared leaning against the kitchen counter behind Dean her arms folded, legs crossed and a very unhappy look on her face.

"It is an angel," Drade said nearly giving Dean a heart attack cause he didn't know she was there

"DON'T DO THAT!" Dean yelled at her claspng his chest

"Drade where have you been?" Bobby asked completely ignoring Dean's over reaction

"Busy" was all Drade said before walking from the counter to the doorframe between the kitchen and study where she took her stance again.

"How do you know for sure?" Sam asked

"Because this isn't the first time I've seen one especially this particular one" Drade stated firmly with an unhappy tone to her voice

The entire room fell silent for about a moment so as everyone could absorb what was just said then just as Bobby was about to break it there was a sound of fluttering wings before Drade was tossed through the front door of Bobby's house.

"What the H..." Before Dean could finish he saw Castiel walking through the door

Drade had been caught off guard now laying on the ground outside she began to get to her feet but it wasn't easy the angel had tossed her with such force it broke her leg when she hit the ground. Still Drade managed to stand in a little pain but nothing to drastic she was used to it.

"UGH! Hello Castiel good to see you again" Drade said smugly standing with blood running from her head, mouth and leg.

"Hey what are you doing?" Dean demanded running up beside Castiel

"Stay back Dean, that women is wanted in heaven for crimes she has committed" Castiel stated firmly

"Yeah well I've wanted a rematch with you to after all you did stick your HAND IN ME!" Drade said matter of factually brushing her trench coat slightly to the side so everyone could see a large jagged scar on her side.

"What?" Dean questioned as he stared at the scar on Drade's side then looking to Castiel

“You have stolen souls that rightfully belong to heaven, give up or face the consequences,” Castiel warned holding a silver dagger towards Drade

“Please don’t threaten me BOY!” Drade warned back letting her trench coat fall back into place. Suddenly Castiel made a move towards Drade with that she leaned down pressing one hand to her inner calve while her other hand hit the outer of it with force causing a crunching sound. Drade had shoved the bone in her leg back into place before reaching to her waistline to draw her own weapon. Castiel attacked once close enough the blade catching the light as it moved for it’s target but just as it looked like Drade was finished she hit one knee and Castiel’s blade hit another.

“Not...this time” Drade stated as she held a sword beautifully engraved along the blade with a golden hilt adorned with a purple gem in it. Finally pushing Castiel off her Drade took a swipe of her own which Castiel dodged simply enough but it did allow her a distraction to get to her feet.

“HEY! KNOCK IT OFF!” Dean finally yelled getting in between Drade and Castiel

“Dean! MOVE!” Drade insisted

“This does not concern you!” Castiel also insisted

“Like hell it doesn’t! She is our friend...” Dean started Drade couldn’t help but feel a little strange being called that she hadn’t heard the sentiment in a long time except from Gabe.

“And I’ll be damned if I let you hurt her” Dean stated again staring right at Castiel who simply sighed before lowering his weapon realizing probably that he wouldn’t win this argument. Suddenly he was gone in a burst of rustling feathers but Dean new that he’d be back when he could attack Drade with out them being there.

Drade sheathed her sword before walking well limping up to Dean.

“Are you okay?” Dean asked as he grabbed Drade’s forearm to help balance her

“Yeah...Ugh!” Drade moaned as she grasped at her leg that had been broken

“Here hang on we’ll get you inside” Dean assured her as Bobby and Sam who had been watching from the porch ran down to help. Dean threw Drade’s arm around his shoulder while Sam placed an arm around her waist so as to help get her inside. Once inside they sat Drade in the study on the big brown chair in the far corner, she groaned as they sat her down forcing muscles that didn’t want to work to bend. Normally the boys wouldn’t worry about Drade she some how had the ability to heal instantly from any wound inflicted on her but this time something was wrong. During the fight she had suffered not just a broken leg but also some knife wounds neither of which seemed to have healed.

Dean stayed by Drade to get her comfortable while Sam and Bobby rushed around seeking items to fix her up. Dean first placed a footstool by her feet before gently easing Drade's leg up onto it causing a hiss to stream from her mouth. Next Dean slowly pulled her forward to ease her coat off but this instigated an instant reaction from her though as she shot him a glare that defiantly meant death if he continued.

"I have to remove it to get a better look at your wounds" Dean insisted then with a little more force that eventually got him what he wanted. Once the coat was off though he stared unintentionally at the scars that seemed to blanket her body including the one that ran from her collarbone down to her navel.

"Staring is impolite...ugh...Dean" Drade said gritting her teeth against the pain she was feeling

"Sorry...um so why aren't you healing?" Dean asked as Sam brought in a bowl of warm water and one of cool water both with cloths in them. Shortly behind Sam was Bobby with a med kit both stared also at the scars.

"Because an angels blade...actually anything angel is the only thing that can hurt me" Drade said gritting her teeth again as Dean removed her boot before yanking up her pant leg to expose where it had been broken.

"And this?" Dean asked knowing that Castiel hadn't touched it. It had simply broke from the angle she landed on it.

"That did heal unfortunately not properly," Drade explained

"What do you mean?" Sam inquired kneeling down by Drade's one side ready to help Dean clean her up

"When I popped the bone back into place I didn't get it all the way in to the right place but it still healed none the less" Drade explained further as both Sam and Dean exchanged a look of beginning to understand

"So now it's at the wrong angle right" Dean stated

"Yep, that's what happens when you rush things" Drade stated as she panted slightly from the pain running through her body

"Take it easy, what can we do?" Dean asked softly still examining her leg

"There's only one thing to do, you'll need to break it then reposition it properly" Drade stated flatly she was no novice to this she new sometimes her swift healing could be a curse. Dean and Sam new it to they just weren't looking forward to doing to her but eventually they started positioning them selves so they could put the leg in the right spot. Dean straddled her leg near the thigh while Sam held firmly just above the ankle, Dean placed a hand to her inner calve then one to her outer calve slightly higher similar to the position she'd taken outside. Both Dean and Sam new this would hurt like a son-of-a-

bitch but they also new that it had to be done so with a nod from Drade as she braced for the pain Dean hit the side of her leg with as much force as he could muster with the palm of his hand easily cracking the fragile bone and forcing a scream out of Drade as her body arched from it. Drade fell back to the chair gritting her teeth as the boys moved swiftly to set the bone back in place right when they had it a satisfying click came as the bone was finally set and already healing.

Drade released her fingers from the chair having gripped so tight she actually ripped it then began to pant heavily as sweat dripped from her forehead. Dean swiftly grabbed up the cool washcloth to dab against her forehead as she laid back into the chair. Sam meanwhile got to work using the warm cloth to clean up the knife wounds that wouldn't heal on their own.

“So what did you mean when you said Castiel had stuck his hand in you?” Sam finally asked catching a glimpse of the scar on Drade's side as he continued treating her other wounds.

“Exactly what I said, it was a torture technique to get me to confess the location of the souls I stole” Drade explained briefly still breathing heavily

“I was being tortured by Uriel before that but even he couldn't get me to confess because no matter how much pain he inflicted as long as I had that brief reprieve between pain I could easily out last him” Drade explained further

“You mean like when a knife stabs you then pulls out,” Sam stated as he stitched up a cut on her forearm

“Exactly, but Castiel is sly he can pin point a weak spot in anyone so when he observed one day he was able to conclude how I was holding on and how to remedy it” Drade continued

“He rolled up his sleeve then cut a small opening into my side before shoving his whole hand up to the wrist into me but that wasn't the worst of it cause then he left it there” Drade scoffed as both Sam and Dean looked horrified at the prospect

“We sat like that for 74 hours while he questioned me and occasionally wiggle his fingers inside me to cause further pain I still didn't give up the information though” Drade finished with a hint of cockiness in her voice

“So what happened after that?” Sam finally managed to choke out as he finished stitching the last wound before cleaning it up; Dean was still rubbing her forehead with the cool cloth occasionally dampening it again in the water bowl.

“Eventually even Castiel gave up trying to make me talk so I was put into a cell until the NEXT session but I didn't even give them that chance, I escaped then hid until now...Ah!” Drade jolted as the

whiskey hit her wounds cleansing them

After finishing with her wounds Dean and Sam stood up trying to think of how they could prevent Castiel from getting a hold of her until she healed but Drade had other plans as she stood painfully from the chair holding her side in agony.

“Drade! Don’t you idiot!” Dean yelled as him and Sam moved just in time to catch her before she fell grabbing both her arms

“I’m not sticking around to be Castiel’s rag doll okay! I’m out of here...Ugh!” Drade groaned hardly able to stand even though her leg bone had healed already the flesh was still healing around it making it painful to stand for any length of time.

“No your not now sit back down” Dean insisted pushing her back towards the chair

“Just let go of ME!” Drade emphasized even though it was still a little muffled seeing as she was breathing so heavily from simply standing. The argument was at a stale mate with Drade refusing to back down but the boys weren’t such pushovers either when a surge of energy was felt through the room one that Drade recognized immediately.

“Gabe?” Drade asked as she looked up through her crimson red hair that had fallen forward in her face

“Hey Drade, Boys” Gabe said with a slight grin until he took a good look at Drade. She was barley standing mostly leaning on the brothers cause her leg had given up trying to hold her, her hair was hanging down her shoulders and what was around her face was wet from the sweat dripping from her forehead, she was out of breath and weak.

“Drade, come on just sit down!” Dean insisted again feeling her wait on him now he knew she wasn’t able to walk anywhere under her own power

“Do as they say Drade” Gabe finally spoke up in a gentle yet stern voice that struck everyone in the room. Drade couldn’t fight anymore she gave into the boys pressing on her finally sitting back into the chair her body exhausted, dripping with sweat. Dean and Sam looked up after letting go of Drade to see Gabe walking slowly towards her before stopping in front of her.

“What do you want anyways?” Sam asked now watching him carefully after all he had killed Dean multiple times the last time they met

“I came because I sensed Drade was in trouble” Gabe spoke flatly as he looked right at Sam in a way that made him back down slightly

Gabe knelt down in front of Drade cupping her cheek in his hand feeling the extreme warmth coming from her. After a couple of minutes he stood back up then looked back at Sam and Dean before raising his fingers in that traditional snapping motion he loved he said “I’ll take it from here”.

# POETRY

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John Mahler's Quotes of the Day

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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!

# APHASIAC

Makenzi Marshall  
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Makenzi Marshall is college student currently residing in a smoke-filled apartment in Humboldt county with her roommate, two Pit Bulls, and a grumpy, rather vocal cat. She is midway through an English degree (with a minor emphasis on psychology) at Humboldt State, and when not writing, being buried with homework, or sleeping, her hobbies include long boarding, drawing, spinning poi, and adventuring in the Redwoods. If interested in reading more of her works, they are posted to her account: Cerberin-Crosses.deviantart.com

She sits alone at the dusty table, collapsed against the back of her chair like a marionette that's had its strings cut. Her fingers trace the burn-kissed wooden surface, pushing blindly thorough the wadded paper, cigarette butts, and ashes piled around her until they come to rest on a pen-scratched book of matches and a crumpled pack of Marlboros. A flick of motion, and the top of this tiny casket slides open like the creaking of bones. The air is broken to pieces by her softened voice as she finds it empty. "Fuck."

She casts aside the ruins and fumbles in the overflowing plastic ashtray for one of the half-smoked remains, tasting the anointed sting of age-old nicotine blessing tired lips, turned dark from the sun. A sharp hiss, and the smell of sulfur fills the room; the orange cast of fire traces hauntingly along the gaunt lines of a face grown old, so far before its time- a witch in the body of a princess, hag behind the face of a queen- memories of What Once Was. So many days ago (they felt like years), the eternal brush of Beauty lingered there; haunting, perhaps in its own special way, like plasticine cast over a paper heart. But no longer. Now, there is only dust, and ashes.

Smoke curls towards the ceiling, lyrical and cancerous in all its fallen grace as she lights the cigarette perched lovingly between spidery-pale digits; 'artists hands,' you called them once, she remembers with a twitch of Absence. Another breath of smoke is sent dancing through the stagnant air and she turns her head, gazing wearily towards the sheen of mirrored glass on the wall before her with all the enthusiasm of a funeral march. Her face holds an empty

expression, glass eyes in a porcelain face, and she sits motionless against the growing oil-slick blackness of the oncoming night, watching its tendrils fast drowning the sun. For a moment, those last fading traces of golden light staining the untouched sheets and scattered papers that coat the floor behind her seems almost ominous, and those wrinkled pages of white look all the more like a carpet of shattered teeth- a nest carved from mornings spent drenched in Whiskey and Thorazine. It is a warning the light whispers to her, silent and omnipotent as always; a memory cast aside and left to wither upon the shards of time, a reminder of days past when the stanzas she wrote were her own, days when those splinters of Desperate prose and Butchered syntax spilling onto a silvered screen with all the grace of a runaway train could bring to mind a Voice other than yours.

Another drag of her cigarette and she sighs, smoke trickling out through trembling lips; fog from a the smoldering embers of a funeral pyre. She hasn't slept today, staring-without-seeing at the empty letter in front of her, and the rush of Words abandons her like rats from a drowning ship; leaving her inside the Stygian abyss of airless throats and lungs gone stale, alone. She thinks of you, You in all your Sacrilegious glory; you, the one whose eyes once stole such hateful prophecies right out of her smoke-drenched lungs and melted them into Songs, Curses turned to Verses in the wake of what might-have-been. But now- now, in the harsh after-dark light of a fluorescent reality kept illuminated by a single bulb burning with moths, those false words and brightly-colored prophecies mean nothing; lies and slander done up in a pretty bow. Eulogies spoken for the mute, their own tongues being long-since bound.

In the wake of these memories, in the shadow of this empty page, she thinks of you -of course- and smiles, the vacant gaze of an empty Mind. You left, and true, she felt nothing; but with the sultry crash of a glassine door breaking to pieces, you still left- and took her Voice with you. Now, these words remain unclaimed, and the ink-blot stains marring her bony fingers trace emotionless scribbles on the tabletop before her; oil tarnished with a glint of gold, the literary aspersions of a silent Child. Turning her dreams into nightmare solely for the chance to feel, again, like you once did- but it means nothing. All of it, and none of it; nothing but lifeless scribbles of black, globbing together like the tar that's been built up in her lungs. By now, she'd almost gathered enough to hide behind.

One more sharp gasp of inhalation followed by another rush of smog from her crematorium lungs is all it takes to drive these thoughts from her mind; demons exorcised by her own useless apathy.



Her eyes fall blank, empty gaze fixed straight ahead, still transfixed by the oily shine of that mirrored glass; her own eyes thoughtlessly reflected back at her. For a moment, she feels like she's watching God, for it was those eyes- hers alone- that you once lauded, as any True worshiper would. You compared their shadowed hue to the depths of the sea- the Ancient Cliché, the Dual Irony- the sort of blue that seems to be, really, more like grey, once you takes a closer look.

The same kind of illusory lie that used to drive you mad; the floodwaters rising, spreading, consuming everything and burying it all leagues-too-deep, like they did on the day you stole her Words.

And so she sits, immobilized; Vanity drips down her face like wax ,and the mirror before her glints with the limpid vacancy of one who could sense that the End was near but had not the voice with which to cry warning. A modern-day Cassandra, singing in the voices of Ghosts and crafting frail Rhymes from the wings of broken birds, sky-high and alone up in her lofty tower of Glass; the spiraling voice of Madness set ablaze to sing the Verses of an unsung art, crying Wolf to the endless sky. Like Cassandra, they did not listen- you did not listen- and the pitiful rhythm she'd lovingly tapped out with her nails against the curves of whitewashed ribs meant nothing to those without ears to Hear it.

A smile ghosts across her weathered face as the cigarette burns out; single, glowing ember falling down to scar yet another black mark on the ageless table before her. The ink on her hands seems to glint in the fading flicker of orange light, and the streaks of black could have almost been alive as they circle her fingers like the twining heads of a Hydra, staining the bone-bleached paper before her with the tidal flood of Resistance. You left, and you took her Words with you, but in the shattering silence of Absence- the sort of dull acceptance felt when one loses something they never thought they'd actually need- in this wake, backlit by the glowing embers of fires long since burned out, she knows exactly what she has to do to get them back.

# FINAL FAREWELL

Sarah B.  
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The Fire in your eyes scare me,

Long ago they were filled with unyielding love,

But that was long ago-

I can't bear that look you give me now;

It tears me apart, smashing my soul

But...

Maybe one day,

Maybe one day that burning fire in your eyes won't be there

Maybe you'll move on...

Maybe I'll move on...

One day you will forget my name,

One day you will forget me

That's the day you'll move on

But me,

Me, I'll always remember you,

I'll always remember how you used to smile at me

I'll remember the time we had

The *Good Times*, The **Dark Times**...

Oh, this is my Final Farewell,

Go on, forget me...

I've kept you in this cage,

Please forget that I ever existed, *please*...

*Your better off that way...*

# WASTED WORDS

Kela Lewis-Morin  
of kelathewriter@hotmail.co.uk

Wasted Words.

We wait for the last possible moment.  
Even when confronting our opponents.

To reveal,  
How we truly feel.

We hide behind our counterfeit expressions.  
Conceal and contain our countless confessions.

Failing to announce,  
What our mouths long to pronounce.

We purposely squander opportunities.  
Maintaining our positions within our communities.

Avoiding any disclosure,  
Reducing the risk of exposure.

We use humour to dilute what we actually say.  
Because the truth does not have to be revealed today.

We know there always is a tomorrow,  
So today has not got to be filled with sorrow.

We wait and wait.

Stall and prolong.

Until it's too late

And the moment has gone.

time.

There is never a convenient

minds.

For us to say what is really on our

bed.

It takes the sight of a death

said.

For us to say what needs to be

# AFTER A CHASE

AgentB-7  
of <http://agentb-7.deviantart.com/>

irens are fading, fire's extinguished,  
A chase now is over and culprit's in cuffs.  
Dawn is coming, it's 4 of a morning.  
We did some tough job, but what's here for us?

Salary bonus? Had plenty of them.  
Just let us go home and wish a sweet dreams...  
“Guys, you did great! But you're still on duty.  
Debriefing at 8 downtown. Dismiss!”

# DREAMS

Zuko54444  
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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!

I've always wanted to blast into space;  
Exploring unknown planets and those that are known,  
Searching for life on our neighbors  
Confirming it's safe for us to move in and expand our territory.  
I've always kept that dream  
Even though America didn't.

I've always wanted to help others become better,  
Human or animal, doesn't matter  
From wrapping up a sprained leg  
To giving life-saving heart surgery.  
I want to be the one people turn to for aid  
When they can't find it elsewhere.

I've always wanted to play with the pros;  
Work my way up to the hall of fame  
And be the best ball-player of all time,  
Be a team player to share in the glory  
Of winning the World Series.  
I'm as much of a fan of the game as much as the next  
I just want more from it.

I've always wanted to build the next big thing,  
Tinkering with whatever's at my disposal  
Looking for how I can make an engine run cleaner, cheaper;  
Create something to better our nation, our race  
Something as small as the next high-speed camera  
To the next stealth missile for the US Airforce.  
I like to solve practical problems  
If it isn't broken, take it apart and make it better.

They say to follow your dreams  
To keep your eye on the prize;  
But may I ask,  
If I don't know what my dream is  
How can I follow it?



# HEARTBROKEN

Alizée Butel  
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My name is Alizée Butel. I'm turning 15 in march. My deviantart is FallenInsaneAngel but I rarely go on it anymore.

I've never been perfect, neither have you, But that never stopped me from loving you. Never saw it coming, you stole my heart away. Minutes spend with you, I dreamt them away. When on my own, I think of you, dream of you. One day I decide, to tell you the truth, my feelings for you, you're flattered, a smile spreads on my lips, my heart beats fast. Then it crashes, breaks in a million pieces. You like another girl, my best friend of them all. I bottle up in my own world, I hide my feelings, lose hope. I start to hate myself, my friends call me depressed. "You're amazing ! Don't hate yourself !" I start wondering "What's wrong with me then ?" Everyone around me says "Nothing !" It is not fully agreed... I seek my defaults, try to change them. Listen to sad music to cry my thoughts away. All troubles in my life finally come alive. How can a heartbreak destroy every hope I've had ? I take the decision to cover up the pain, mask the scars with a smile, act positive and happy. It work well but some nights, I need to let the tears flow, I free up my pain, show the scars, be myself. After a while, the scars heals, the pain creeps away. You think about it, how desperated you were, laugh at it, pity yourself for falling so low. Decide from now on it won't be so, and walk away from this pain called LOVE...