

Fanatical Publishing's

Weekly Review

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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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LURK FITZGIBBONS IN: THE FORTRESS OF PRINCESS OUL

J.B. Hickock

Read the rest of Lurk's adventures here:

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

Lurk FitzGibbons in. . .

9 The Fortress of Princess Oul

The province of Swycya was ruled by a widowed marchioness, Princess Oul (she was the youngest daughter of a king, but a Marchioness in her own right). Despite her husband's recent death, Swycya thrived under her rule.

The capital of the province was the small town of Swycya, a populous market hamlet at a crossroads of trade, well-known for its taverns.

The town and province were ruled from Swycya, a large castle, built of black stone and set beside a lake and above the town.

Princess Oul was out upon the battlements, as she always was come morning, to see the sun rise. She was full-figured woman with wavy ash-blonde hair, light blue eyes and her smile, when she did smile, was a pleasant one. She wore now a sky-blue dress done up with a scarlet sash.

She stared off into the horizon, thinking on the future, and the past, and she felt despair.

Though Swycya was a wealthy province, much of its wealth was taken by the Romany tax-gatherers, who passed through every year like locusts, stripping away all they found. The taxes were due in less than a month, and this year, the Romany governor demanded enough to pauper the whole province.

Trying to evade the taxes, or -heavens forfend- resisting, was unthinkable: the last province to try was the nearby province of Fingor. Fifty years later, Fingor was still a barren wasteland.

#

It was unknown to Princess Oul that as she stood on her battlements, a small group of people had just entered her town. Well actually, lots of people entered her town, it was a populous market hamlet: farmers,

merchants, tradesmen, all sorts of people came to town on their business. But these people we are talking about were very peculiar.

To start with, one was a dark gray wolf with a pure black mane and red glowing eyes: her name was Heather. She was a werehuman.

Another of them was a tall Hitton, marked out by his gray hair and clear gray eyes; Abraham van Helsing was his name, he was handsome in a rugged way, and drew the eyes of women wherever he went; a scholar-turned-wandering swordsman, he wore tough traveler's clothes and a long sword belted at his waist.

The third was a thin, striking woman who wore a tattered scarlet tunic and little else. A witch named Zenobia Helborne, she had wide light blue eyes and dirty brown hair that tumbled down her back in tortured curls, and her left hand missed the smallest finger.

The last of them was called Lurk FitzGibbons, a barbarian from the western continent. He was short and thin, his face narrow and pinched, his stringy black hair held loosely in back by a leather thong, and he wore a hat.

A Hat: Lurk's hat by itself drew more notice alone than the rest of them put together. It was not a pleasant hat, it drew horrified stares and provoked surprised oaths from all who it passed.

How did they come to be together? Lurk came to the Romany Empire from the Western Continent, seeking his wife; along the way, the others kind of stuck to him.

Nobody knew where the Hat came from.

The small party found their way through the market day crowd to public a house, and arranged for lodgings for the night with the publican, Twiwa. Though he was clearly aging, his red hair was still bright, and his light brown eyes still sparked with wit..

Abraham paid for their lodgings and meals in advance with a double golden crown; a coin worth more than many people ever saw in a year. The publican stared with wide eyes as he took it, and while the companions set to eating, Twiwa whispered something to the tavernboy, who ran off into the bustle of the town.

If you're curious about the gold, Lurk and Abraham received a pretty store of it for overthrowing the tyrannical Editha of Styx and helping to install Farshul, the Ratman champion of the Arena of Doom, in her stead on the throne of Redhedge. Most of it was gone, spent or lost on various escapades since then, but Abraham still had some left; enough to pay their expenses here, at least.

They were just finishing their breakfast when the door swung open and the princess Oul stepped through, accompanied by a guard. Though they didn't know her, the companions easily recognized her as a woman of rank; she spoke quietly with Twiwa, then approached their table. "May I have the honor of your names?" she asked.

Zenobia looked her over thoughtfully. "Zenobia Helborne," she

replied.

Abraham rose to his feet and bowed. "Sir Abraham van Halsing, of Ballilael."

"I'm Lurk," the

Heather, being a wolf, didn't say anything.

"You are here for the auction?" the Marchioness inquired.

The companions shared a glance. "What auction?" Lurk asked.

"If you are not here for the auction, then what are wealthy travelers doing here?" Princess Oul demanded.

So they explained to her about helping Farshul to the throne, and how he rewarded them. "This is all that's left," Abraham said, and upended his wallet on the table: it was still more gold than most people could expect to see in their lifetimes. "So what's this about an auction?"

Princess Oul glanced around; their table was somewhat secluded in a corner, and she dismissed Twiwa with a glance. She told them about the Romany's taxes being due, and to raise the required money, she was auctioning many of her castle's furnishings, and her family's treasures to Romany magnates, many of whom were either lodged in the town, or guesting at the castle; come like vultures to grab the best of the lot at theft prices.

"Bastard Romany," Abraham cursed. His people, the Hittons, had fought more than a few rebellions against the Romany and so were imprisoned in the Desolation of Ballilael but for a few like Abraham, who found some employment elsewhere.

Princess Oul glanced about once more, and lowered her voice. "You are just come here, yes?"

"Yes," Lurk replied.

"Then perhaps you can help me," she said softly.

#

The reception in the great hall of Swycya castle was a very fancy affair; the people of Swycya were putting the best face on that they could. For pride's sake, and to try to charm the gentlemen and ladies to bid well in the coming auction.

The man by the door announced each guest as they arrived, lackeys in tow. "Sir Abraham van Helsing, and Mistress Zenobia Helborne!" he sounded out as Abraham and Zenobia stepped into the great hall, Lurk and Heather (human-shaped) right behind them.

Princess Oul's seamstresses had worked through much of the night to produce garb to their 'station'; dressed gaudily in bright reds and greens, they seemed the perfect image of nouveau-riches arrivistes. An image calculated to irritate the old-money magnates here today. The plan, as put forth by Princess Oul, was for them to emulate

the aforesaid new money, and bid on items being auctioned, to drive up the prices; only a few people, like Twiwa and his boy had made any note of their entrance, and the folk of Swycya could be trusted to keep that secret. As for the companions, of course Abraham was wholly in favor of any scheme to discomfit the Romany, Lurk thought any chance to lie and deceive people would be fun, Zenobia had nothing better to do, and Heather was curious what these people lived like.

Lurk and Heather were announced, and the late arrivals moved through the crowd, attracting more than a few glares as they went. "Offend them," Lurk had said; he had been a seller of information in his homeland, and knew a lot about conning people. "Make them hate us for being low, jumped-up peasants, until they cannot stand to see us get away with winning anything."

Ironically, Lurk and Abraham were both really knights: they'd been knighted by the king of Agrarnum for saving his daughter from the Avatar of the Hidden Darkness. Of course it must be said that they'd immediately afterward been driven out of Agrarnum when Abraham was found in bed with the princess, but that's beside the point.

Lurk and Heather injected themselves into a small group of gentlemen and ladies. "Say, haven't I seen you before?" Lurk said loudly, entirely ignoring what anyone else was saying.

The gentleman indicated looked at him somewhat like something found on the bottom of his shoe in the gutter. "No," he said, and turned away.

After only a few minutes, the group broke up and moved away, as people hurried to get away from Lurk, who went on talking obnoxiously non-stop until he and Heather were alone. He heaved a sigh and took a moment to get his breath back. "How was that?" he asked.

"Great!" Heather said with a grin. "Let me do next!"

Meanwhile, Abraham had inserted himself into a conversation composed of distinguished gentlemen, and driven them all away with a recital of the history of the Academy of the Lys Ancestors (where he had taught, until he met Lurk). All of them, that is, but for one elderly gentleman who held a deep interest in the Lys Ancestors, and the pair of them were soon locked deep in an intense discussion about- well. . . Zenobia frankly did not care enough to listen to what they were blithering on about. But while the two scholars delved deep into the past, the other Romany congregated elsewhere.

Eventually, she abandoned Abraham and wandered into a clutch of Romany ladies who clucked like just so many hens. The witch listened to their chatter in silence, then broke in with a piercing laugh. "Hee-hee-hee!" she screeched in her best witch's form, clutching at the arm of the lady who had just spoken. "That was so

funny!” she shouted shrilly.

#

In short order, every Romany noble there absolutely despised them. The servants and local dignitaries however, who were in on the game, had difficulty concealing grins as the evening wore on.

Finally, Princess Oul's herald rang a bell and announced the start of the auction.

The nobles filed into an adjoining room, notable for a low stage across one wall and the ranks of chairs facing it into which the notables sat, leaving a noticeable space around Lurk and his friends.

The first few items on offer weren't much: a few silver plates, recent artworks, nothing to get excited about.

Just before lot no. 7, Princess Oul's seneschal gave a discreet signal. Lurk spotted it, and nudged Abraham in the side. “Get ready,” he hissed.

Lot no. 7 was a tapestry portraying the Romany victory over the Treek rebels; it was over three hundred years old, the auctioneer (who was normally the butler) informed the dignitaries, and it immediately excited some interest.

Before the butler could begin the bidding, Abraham stood to his feet “One thousand crowns!” he called out.

Which was higher than the starting bid would have been: the perfect vulgarianism. Eventually, the tapestry was bought by a fat Carmatian merchant for 4,500 crowns; well over the expected price, and Abraham made a show of frustration at 'losing' the bid.

As the evening wore on, the Romany aristocrats took great pleasure in denying the arrivistes anything from the auction: Lurk grew upset and frustrated as time passed, which only increased the Romany's enjoyment, to the point that he managed to raise the price of a silver plate to several times its actual value.

But all fun things must come to an end: the auction came to a close after an especially close bidding war between Lurk and a patrician of Gaedonnion; the aristocrats were quite pleased with their victory over the fuming vulgarians, who promptly departed under a cloud and in a huff.

Princess Oul presided over a banquet at the conclusion of the auction; she shortly departed, leaving the Romany aristocrats to their own august company, and repaired to balcony above from which she could watch them.

She found Abraham already there. “Hello,” she said, leaning on the railing and staring down.

“Hello,” Abraham said and cleared his throat. “So,” he said. “I have been meaning to ask you: where is the Marquess?”

She gave him a glance. "In the graveyard," she said calmly.
"Oh," he said, chastened. "I'm sorry."
She shrugged. "Life goes on."
Neither said anything for a while.
"Are your lodgings satisfactory?" she asked.
"Oh yes, thank you," he said.
"And your companions, are they well?"
"Yes, they're fine," Abraham gave her a meaningful glance.
"Though, to be frank, theirs is not the company I was hoping for, tonight."
She gave him a critical look.
Abraham shrugged and smiled abashedly.

#

Princess Oul was out upon the battlements, as she always was come morning, to see the sun rise. She wore a pleasant smile and the same sky-blue dress she had worn yesterday.
She stared off into the horizon, thinking on the future, and the past, and she felt hopeful.
A door opened, and Abraham stepped onto the battlement: he wore the same clothes he had on the day before; the two of them had had a late night.
He came up and stood beside her, staring at the sunrise.
"Good morning," he said.
She nodded to him, and gave him a tight smile. "Good morning."
"Any sign of our governor friend?" he asked.
She nodded, and pointed. "I think that is him there."
Long story short: it was him.
And his legion.

#

Governor Vibius Aelius Calvinus was short, serious-looking man with matted golden hair, blue eyes, and a high forehead, crowned with golden oak-leaves of a governor of a province within the Roman Empire.

His legion encamped by the town and the governor, with a small party of bodyguards and hangers-on, went to the castle to meet with Princess Oul.

The companions stuck around, wanting to see the meeting. They were all a little short on critical thought at that juncture, which was revealed to them with startling clarity when the governor's party strode into Princess Oul's court, and they saw several Roman

aristocrats who had taken part in the auction in attendance.

But it was too late to run for it: Lurk and his friends tried to blend into the crowd and avoid notice.

But while Calvinus and Oul engaged in the customary greetings, the Carmatian merchant happened to glance in their direction. His eyes widened on recognizing Abraham. "Thief!" he screamed, lunging at them.

Calvinus' men followed the aristocrat's lead; Oul's people shied away from them, and in a trice Lurk and his friends were grabbed by the Romany soldiers while the merchant screamed about conspiracy

The governor listened to the aristocrat's accusations in silence; a few others confirmed that the companions had indeed taken part in the auction, and were supposed to have left after it was over. Calvinus glanced them over, then turned to Princess Oul. "Marchioness," he said grimly. "You seem to have-

"Well I suppose it is time to come clean," Abraham interrupted him loudly and walked up to the governor. "You are absolutely right, my lord," he said calmly past the crossed swords of his bodyguards. "We are engaged in a criminal plot," he turned to Princess Oul. "We came here to rob you."

"What?" the Marchioness gasped, the pretty picture of hurt and amazement.

"Yes," Abraham went on sadly. "We took advantage of the marchioness' auction to slip into the castle and isn't that right, Lurk?"

"Oh yeah," Lurk agreed hurriedly. "We were going to take what we could while you were here, then slip away: anything missing would be blamed on you."

Calvinus' glare passed from Lurk to Abraham and back again. "Take them away!" Princess Oul snapped, before he could say anything. "Lock them in my dungeons until our business

As they were dragged off, Abraham glanced over his shoulder and saw the Romany still stared at Princess Oul with suspicion.

The companions were of course, dragged away to Princess Oul's dungeon which they were promptly thrown in to await their fate.

No-one said anything for a while after the door was slammed and bolted.

"You know," Lurk said, breaking the silence, "if I had a penny for every time I've been locked up, I'd have- let me see. . ."

Abraham turned away from the mathematical display of 'uhms'. "What should we do now?" he said.

Heather thought for a moment, then turned to Lurk. "So Lurk, remember how we got out of Zenobia's prison?"

He glared at her suspiciously. "Yeah?"

She grinned. "Do you think you could do that again?"

“No!” Lurk snapped. “Look, just because a bizarre thing happened once, don't think that I have some kind of mystic power to get us out of any jail cell we happen to find our way into!” he stood to his feet and stormed to the door. “Escaping from prison isn't so easy as knocking on the door,” he demonstrated, “-and shouting 'hey, let us out of here!' Then expect someone to open the door and say-”

A key clicked in the lock and the door flew open. “Come with me,” Princess Oul's seneschal said.

“Ow,” moaned Lurk, holding his head where the door banged his head.

“Well done, Lurk!” said Zenobia with a grin.

#

“Calvinus is sure the marchioness conceived a plot,” the seneschal explained while he led them to a back door. “She has managed to buy him off, but he will doubtless torture a confession from you, then come back and loot the castle anyway,” not said was the obvious fact that the Romany would kill anyone they could get their hands on, given the chance. “it seems the lesser risk to let you escape,” he whispered.

He led them to a bolted door that looked solid enough to stop a giant. “Go through there,” he said, pointing. “Now I must return before I am missed.

“Okay,” said Zenobia when he was gone. “Let's go.”

“Wait,” protested Abraham. “What about our effects? And we can't just go like this, leaving the Romany here: it will be obvious the Swycians helped our escape.”

Lurk sighed. “You don't want the Romany to stay here?” he said. “Okay. I've got an idea.”

#

The next day, their small party galloped northward as fast as their stolen horses could bear them. “You know, Lurk,” Abraham said. “I think I will have nightmares starting with you saying 'I have an idea.'”

“What?” cried Lurk. “You wanted our stuff back, and you wanted the Romany out of there, so we got our stuff back, and the Romany are out of there. What more do you want from me?”

“I don't know what he wants,” Zenobia interjected. “But I want them to stop gaining on us!”

Abraham glanced over his shoulder (something of a dangerous proposition on a galloping horse) and saw that the Romany legion was indeed, gaining on them. “Lurk,” he said. “Was it really necessary to hang the governor naked out his window?”

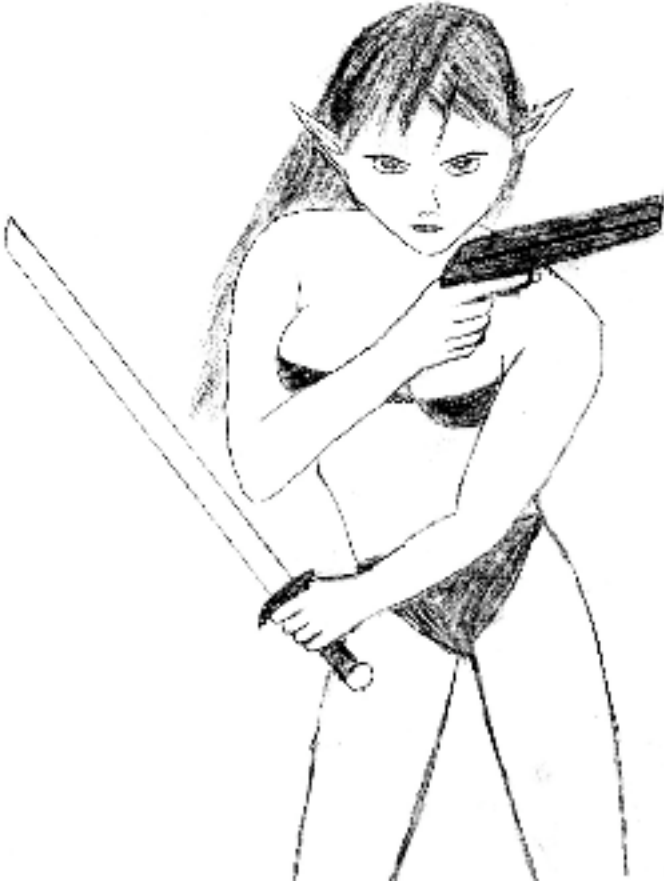
“I don't know,” Zenobia said. “I do think dumping his bodyguards into the garderobe was a nice touch.”

“You shouldn't have done what you did with the toads and the egg whisk,” Abraham insisted.

“Fine!” Lurk snapped. “You want them to stop gaining on us? I've got an idea. . .”

“Am I dreaming?” muttered Abraham. “I think this is a nightmare.”

FAN FICTION



or: Leanna's Return

Brought to you courtesy of Gunslinger, the wandering Vigilante.

Check it out: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/jb-hickock/gunslinger/ebook/product-18930890.html>

EDITOR'S NOTE: some adult content

ME₂ HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 20: EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED

Veyron722skyhook
of veyronmaster722@gmail.com

Kasumi hadn't spoken at all since coming back from Bekenstein. Even Kelly was a bit worried about her. The Yeoman reckoned however that with bait of time, she would eventually get over it. Austin didn't blame the thief for her depression. Losing a lover was not easy. In fact, Liara actually sympathised with Kasumi since she knew how the thief felt. She had felt exactly the same way when Austin had died two years ago.

As if Austin isn't have that to worry about, Miranda and Jacob's full defections had now been done. Because of this, the two ex-Cerberus operatives were now on board. Although it had been his choice that they be transferred to his crew, Austin was still uncomfortable having them on board.

Jacob was actually alright. In fact, reports of the interrogation said that he'd willingly provided any valuable information he could. Obviously, he'd been unable to tell them where the Illusive Man was; even the leader of Cerberus took precautions with his men. But the Intel provided had still been very useful. Plus, given that Jacob was once in the Alliance, Austin did suppose it was worth giving him a chance.

Jacob had requested to be posted in the armoury since he was pretty good with weapons and felt he would best be of help in there. Alpha Squad, and even Austin himself, had been rather uncomfortable with the idea of an ex-Cerberus agent having access to their weapons. Fortunately, Kraan had eventually said that he would stay in the armoury as well so he could keep an eye on Jacob. It had been two days now and surprisingly, Kraan had said that Jacob was good to have around. He was very friendly to the Krogan. In fact, during dinner later that day Jacob had sat down with Alpha Squad and had attempted to start a conversation. Alpha had been resilient at first, but after a few minutes they'd eventually been chatting very well with him.

Miranda on the other hand was completely the opposite. According to the reports, it'd been much harder to get information out of her. Although she'd willingly defected, she'd still shown a very negative attitude towards it. In fact, that attitude was present even

here. She was bossy, she always seemed to think of herself as having authority among the other crew and she had even at one point tried to order Alaara around. This had ended up in a very violent argument, so much so that Alaara had actually slapped Miranda very hard and told her to fall in line. Austin had managed to step in before it got any worse, but he had not been happy. Naturally of course, he had sided with Alaara. She was right after all. She was second in command, not Miranda. Still though, Miranda had argued that if she was to be a part of this team, she should have some authority. At that point, Austin had nearly shouted at her. Eventually, Miranda had reluctantly apologised coldly to Alaara and had promised that she would stop bossing everyone around.

Since Jacob had settled into the last vacant quarters, Miranda had set up hers in a separate room. There was a small office on the crew deck that had been left vacant ever since the Normandy had been built. Miranda hadn't actually complained about it though since she felt it was just to her liking.

Last on the dossiers was the Drell assassin, Thane Krios. It would still be a while before getting to Ilium again though. Still, Austin had plenty of people to talk to in order to pass the time. Though he didn't trust Jacob, he at least decided to have a go at talking. Who knows? Perhaps Jacob would be an okay person.

"Major Shepard. Good to finally be able to talk you in person." Jacob said as he saluted.

"You may stand at ease at ease, Taylor." Said Austin.

Jacob did so and relaxed.

"Thanks. There hasn't really been time to settle in and take stock. I wanna say that working with you is a great opportunity to do something that matters. It's a privilege to serve on the Normandy, Major." He said.

"Let's get one thing straight, Taylor. You're here because you were Cerberus. You're here so I can keep an eye on you and Lawson. Don't expect special treatment. You may work for the Helldivers now, but you still where Cerberus. I'll be keeping an eye on you." Said Austin forcefully.

Jacob seemed a bit disheartened by this, but did not try to object.

"Fair enough. I can't say I blame you anyway. I'll just have to earn you're trust." He said.

"Hopefully you will. I'm hoping we'll be able to get past our differences eventually." Said Austin.

"At least you're giving me a chance. Most Helldivers hate Cerberus on principle." Said Jacob.

"I'm one of them, Taylor. But under the circumstances, I am willing to give you a chance." Said Austin.

"Understood." Said Jacob.

"So, what's your story, Jacob? I'm told you served in the Alliance before joining Cerberus." Austin inquired.

"Yeah. 5 years in total. Stationed all over the galaxy. Even spent a couple of years as a Corsair." Said Jacob.

"Ah yes. I've heard of them. An Alliance initiative if I'm correct. Hired independent star ship captains and used them for missions that fell outside official Alliance jurisdiction." Austin asked.

"Yeah. Technically, we weren't part of the Alliance. I we got caught, they could disavow any knowledge of us. We were supposed to be free from restrictions and rules, but there was still enough red tape to sink a cruiser. I finally just gave up."

"So what brought you to Cerberus?" Austin asked.

"I guess I just got tired of never making a difference. So much of what we did in the Alliance just seemed pointless. I thought things would be different after the attack on the Citadel. But nothing changed. Politics, bureaucracy. Same bullshit, different leaders!" Jacob nearly complained.

"That's too far, Taylor. Calm down." Said Austin.

"Sorry, Major. It just irritates me so much." Jacob apologised.

"If you disliked it so much, why Cerberus and not the Helldivers? Helldivers have a lot less restrictions." Austin asked.

"At the time, things were different. Back then I wasn't very uncomfortable working with Aliens. That's mainly what led me to Cerberus. Now days though, I'm not so sure." Said Jacob.

"What did Cerberus do to make you doubt them?" Austin asked.

"A lot. They've been called terrorists, and with good reason. I think you of all people know what I mean." Said Jacob. Austin simply nodded in agreement.

"Glad you are starting to things in a different light, Taylor. With luck, we'll have no problem." Said Austin.

"Fair enough, Major. Let me know if you need anything." Said Jacob as he went back to work.

"Shepard." Kraan nodded to Austin as he left the armoury.

This time for returning to Illium, Austin decided on taking Liara with him again, followed by Kasumi, since Austin felt a bit of air might do her good and finally Miranda.

Since Miranda no longer worked for Cerberus, she no longer wore the cat suits she'd worn. She had thought about wearing a black one, but even that had been forbidden. Instead, Miranda was clad in a black set of armour. It had originally been Cerberus armour, but it had now been specially modified. It was black with yellow stripes on it and also had a Helldiver symbol on the right breast plate. Miranda also had a holographic visor over her eyes. It actually suited her rather well if Austin was honest. A bit embarrassingly though, it still failed to her

hide Miranda extremely sexy body. Her ass still stuck out and the armour's chest had had to be refitted so that her large breasts could fit comfortably inside. Still, at least now it wasn't skin tight and people weren't being distracted by her, even with her strutting.

Austin had no significant information on Thane Krios so he felt that another visit to Xun was in order. As they entered her office, the Helldiver information broker looked very happy to see her old friend again.

"Shepard! Good to see you again!" she said happily.

"You too, Xun." Austin nodded.

"Please have a seat." Xun said as she indicated to the chair in front of her desk. "So, what can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for Thane Krios. He's supposed to be here on Ilium." Austin replied as he sat down.

"The Assassin? Yes. He arrived here a few days ago." Said Xun as she read from a datapad in her right hand and held her metallic Chinese fan in the other, occasionally using it to fan herself. "My sources tell me he may be targeting a corporate executive, Nassana Dantius. He contacted woman named Seryna. Seryna has an office in the cargo transfer level. Perhaps she can tell you where Krios is."

"Thanks, Xun." Said Austin.

"Anytime, Shepard. If there's anything else you need, let me know." Xun smiled under Chinese decorated Helldiver helmet.

"So, how's your own work going?" Austin asked.

"Nothing new I'm afraid. Everyone needs information these days so much that it often holds me back from trying to find new leads on the Shadow Broker." Xun sighed. "Speaking of which, I still need that data I told you about."

"Oh, yes. Thanks for reminding me. I completely forgot." Said Austin.

"Not at all. Let me know when you hack those terminals." Said Xun.

"Talk to you later, old friend." Said Austin as he got up from his seat and left Xun's office.

"Spirits be with you, Shepard" Xun said in Chinese.

The system hacking was pretty simple. It simply involved hacking one server and then quickly uploading the data to another while it was open. After doing this about 5 times, Austin had finally got all the data uploaded. Xun's voice came in over his intercom.

"Shepard, this is Xun. I've got the data. Come by my office alter today when you have time." She said.

That would have to wait until later. Right now, Austin had a Drell assassin to recruit.

The group made their way to the cargo transfer levels of Illium, Sure enough; they found an office with two Asari at desks.

"Seryna?" Austin asked.

"Who wants to know?" replied a purple Asari. Austin guessed this was Seryna.

"Major Shepard of the Helldivers. Xun told me you might have information on Thane Krios." Austin replied.

Seryna stood up from her desk and turned to the Asari sitting near her.

"Tana. Cover for me." she said. She then turned back to Austin. "Over here."

They were now out of earshot of everyone else.

"Yeah, I know who Thane Krios is. I might have passed him some information, but I didn't hire him. What you want to know about him?" Seryna asked.

"Maybe you could help me find him." Austin suggested.

"I can tell you, but you won't stop him. When he contacted me, I checked up on him. The man never gives up on a job. I ran security for Nassana Dantius. Then I found out she was having people killed to cover up her dirty secrets. She fired me when I confronted her. Her loss. I might have been good enough to stop Thane from taking her down." said Seryna.

"Nassana... Nassana... why does that name sound familiar?" Austin said as he tried to remember where he had heard the name Nassana Dantius before. It sounded very familiar.

"She was a representative on the Citadel a few years ago." Seryna replied.

Then the Helldiver remembered. Two years ago, just before the battle of the Citadel, an Asari had recruited him to rescue her sister from kidnappers. It turned out though that the sister had actually been a slaver and had been blackmailing Nassana. The Asari had lied to Austin.

"Right. She had me kill her sister – the slaver." he said.

"I thought that was just a rumour. Well, you know what she's capable of, then. She has even more power here in Nos Astra. She uses it to keep her friends in check and her enemy's dead." said Seryna.

"So where do I find Thane?" Austin asked.

"The Dantius Towers. Penthouse level of Tower One." "There's a second tower, still under construction. If Thane is smart, he'll go in from there." Seryna explained.

"It doesn't sound like Nassana's just going to let us in." said Austin.

"She's as smart as she is paranoid. No one's getting in or out of there without a fight. I can get you in, but you'll only have one shot.

You'd better be ready." said Seryna.

"Let's get going, then." said Austin. He didn't really have anything else that needed doing at the moment. He could go back to talk with Xun, but he ultimately decided to get the recruitment done first before anything else.

"Good. I'm tired of this crap. We'll go tonight, as soon as the shift workers clear out of Tower Two." said Seryna.

Since they'd once again be dealing Eclipse mercs, Austin changed his choice to now have Alaara, Ventra and Grunt. Not only would he need Alaara's experience with Eclipse mercs, but Grunt's hard fighting styles and also Ventra's archery skills would mostly likely prove handy. True enough, Ventra had now switched permanently to his bow and arrow and hadn't made a request for a replacement sniper rifle. Austin actually approved of his. Now Ventra and Garrus could have slightly different uses. While Garrus could handle the sniping, Ventra would be able to handle situations better suited for a bow and arrow. If they were in a jungle for example, Ventra would be very good at hunting. The Turian could also do stealth kills. All sniper rifles these days weren't fitted with silencers anymore, which was rather disappointing.

Ilium looked extremely pretty at night time. The millions of bright and coloured lights reminded Austin of the times when he'd looked out at the vast city of Arkadia at night when he was much younger.

"Admiring the view?" Alaara asked.

"It reminds me of home." Austin replied.

"Home as in Arkadia?" Ventra asked as they climbed into Seryna's sky car.

"Yeah. Remember that I was born and bred in space. Arkadia's only ever been my true home." Said Austin.

The sky car doors closed and the car slowly hovered of the ground before speeding off into the slowly setting sunset.

"The towers are heavily guarded, and you'll find more resistance closer to the penthouse. So, this assassin—you planning to stop him?" Seryna asked.

"I'm just here to make sure he survives." Austin simply replied from the passenger seat.

"Hmm." Seryna simply replied.

At these sorts of hours, there were much less other cars up here in Ilium's high skies, so they didn't have to worry about being held in traffic or anything like that. Soon, two large towering skyscrapers could be seen in the distance. True to what Seryna had said, one of them was still under construction.

"There they are: the Dantius Towers. You'll have to get up the second tower and cross the bridge to the penthouse. Her mercs will

fight you every step, but it's your best chance." Said Seryna.

"Nothing we can't handle." Said Ventra as he checked one of his arrows.

"Why don't we just save time and take the shuttle up?" Austin asked.

"She's got mercs with rockets just waiting for you to try. You'd get maybe half-way up before they shot you down. Besides, your assassin won't go in that way. Best to go in low." Said Seryna.

"All right. Let's do this." Said Austin.

"Hold on." Said Seryna as she began steering the sky car away from the main crowd.

The car flew for several more miles before setting down on a small pad on the outside of the towers. Even at this altitude, it was clear this was intended to be the entrance when construction had finished.

"Don't linger too long: they'll be here to greet you soon enough." Said Seryna as they all got out. Austin briefly paused to just look at the sheer size of the tower as he went to close the car's door. "Good luck, Shepard."

The door closed and Seryna flew the car away.

Everything seemed mostly quiet, but for a Helldiver, silence was far from peaceful. They were always trained to sense danger in a way that many people would not. Some were even clever enough to use the training in such a way that they could predict a person's action before they even did them.

A shot suddenly rang out in the distance. The team looked in the direction. Two Salarian workers were attempting to flee from two LOKI and Fenris mechs. One was shot instantly while the other attempted to run. He didn't get far though before the mechs shot him as well.

The mechs quickly reloaded their guns as they suddenly noticed the three Helldivers and Grunt standing just outside the glass window covering the entrance. The mech dogs also took notice and immediately started running at the intruders.

"Enemies already. Good! I'll tear them apart!" Grunt roared as he unholstered his Claymore shotgun.

The three Helldivers did the same and unholstered their preferred weapons as they went into cover.

The Fenris mechs smashed through the glass window and ran at their targets. One of them jumped at Ventra as the other ran at Grunt. Ventra was quick to react to this situation as he stood up from cover slightly. As the Fenris mech nearly landed on him, he brought his bow up like a shield. Just as the robotic dog landed on his arm, he quickly flung it away in the other direction.

The other Fenris mech meanwhile ran directly at Grunt who wasn't intimidated by this at all and charged the dog.

The Fenris mech that Ventra had just counter attacked rolled around on the floor slightly before it managed to get back up. Once again, it ran at the Turian. But this time, Ventra was ready for it. He quickly took a stun arrow from his quiver and drew it back on his bow. He paused very briefly as he waited for the dog mech to get a bit closer.

Grunt meanwhile was now wrestling very violently with the other Fenris mech who was attempting to pin the Krogan to the ground. Austin and Alaara meanwhile were taking cover from the LOKI mechs who had now managed to catch up with their dog counterparts.

The other Fenris mech readied to jump at Ventra, but the Turian released his bow string. The stun arrow shot at its target and went right through the Mech's neck and embedded itself in the ground. The Fenris struggled as much as it could to get free, but it was no use. The mech was stuck to the ground.

With the dog unable to do anything, Ventra simply walked up and brought his left wrist back. His own omni blade activated and he plunged it into the mechs torso. The dog jarred for a minute before it then shut down and went limp. Ventra then pulled the arrow gently back out. He liked to reuse his arrows if possible. They were designed to be used more than once anyway.

Grunt meanwhile finally managed to pin the other Fenris mech to the ground, but found that he'd dropped his Claymore during the wrestling.

"Grunt, catch!" Ventra yelled as he picked up the dropped Claymore and threw it to the Krogan. Grunt caught and smashed the end hard into the mechs face.

"Too late! Now you're dead!" he yelled as he unloaded two rounds into it.

Alaara meanwhile was keeping the mechs occupied while Austin was cloaked and sneaking up behind them. The Major materialised out of nowhere right behind one of the mechs and grabbed it around the neck. The other LOKI mech took notice of this and went to aim at him, but Austin grabbed the gun arm of the one he was currently holding onto and aimed it at the mech. He fired several shots which hit the mech in the chest and finally managed to take out its head. The other one still struggled violently to break free of his grip, so much so that it even managed to give him a punch as its arms flayed about wildly.

"Ow! Shouldn't have done that!" Austin said crossly as he gave the mechs neck a violent twist and finally tore its head off.

"Guess it's too late to try and take it stealthily." Said Ventra.

"Come on. Let's get moving." Said Austin.

As they proceeded through the entrance, they found the body of one of the Salarian workers that had been shot earlier. However there

was only one.

"I could've sworn there were two of them." Said Alaara, puzzled as she looked around.

Then they suddenly heard a voice.

"Help..." it whimpered.

They immediately looked in the direction of the noise. Sure enough, there was the other Salarian. He was bleeding from his gunshot wound, but still alive.

"You're still alive?" Ventra asked.

"I can't feel my legs... my chest is killing me." The worker managed to say.

"Who did this to you? And why?" Austin asked as he knelt down in front of the Salarian.

"We're just night workers! Nassana... sent them after us... She sent the mechs to round us up, but we didn't hear... They just started shooting..." the Salarian wheezed. He sounded as though he could barely breathe.

"They just attacked you?" Alaara asked.

"Yes... we were too slow. It was horrible. Everyone...screaming... The mercs said there was no time. Nassana wanted us out of the way... immediately." The Salarian said. That was before he started to cough very badly, blood spurting out of his mouth. "Then... the dogs... I can't breathe..."

"Here. That should ease the pain and keep you alive until help arrives." Said Austin as he activated his omni tool and applied some medi gel to the Salarian's wounds.

"Really? This guy? Why?" said Grunt. The Krogan however fell silent when Austin gave him a cold stare from behind his helmet.

"We never leave innocents to die, no matter what their race." He said as he helped the Salarian worker. "How's that?" he asked.

"I think I'm better... Find the other workers. Help them." Said the Salarian. He sounded better now and could at least stand.

"We'll do what we can." Said Austin.

"Thank you." Said the Salarian as he limped off.

"Let's get moving." Said Austin.

They took it slowly so as to avoid attracting attention. They were also careful to make sure the coast was clear and also that there weren't any security cameras.

"It's a shame we can't bring everyone on these missions. Leena would certainly be a big help here." Alaara sighed as Austin threw a sensor grenade into the open. Nothing showed up.

"Keep your eyes open. I've got a feeling that we're bound to run into some mercs pretty soon." Austin advised.

They proceeded up a nearby ramp before arriving at another level.

There was a small tunnel just above their heads. Just as the door closed however, they suddenly heard voices coming from inside the pipe.

"Hey – I think he went in here." They heard a man's voice say.

"Well, go get him." Said a woman.

"You go."

"Get your ass in there. Nassana's not paying you to stay around."

"Fine... but I..." the man went to say, but he was cut off as there was suddenly the sound of a struggle of some kind. Then suddenly, the limp body of an Eclipse merc fell through the pipe and landed at their feet. Alaara and Ventra couldn't help but flinch slightly in surprise.

"Think that was the Assassin?" Austin asked as he examined the body. As Austin had suspected, the merc's neck had been broken.

"Must've been. Eclipse mercs don't turn one another just like that without good reason." Said Alaara.

At that moment, Ventra hushed everyone and told them to be silent.

"Hear that?" he asked.

Everyone listened for a moment. They could just hear the faint sound of voices. There were more mercs nearby.

"Take it slowly." Said Austin.

The four of them slowly made their way to look around the corner. As Austin looked around however, he found an Eclipse Asari staring right at him.

"Crap." Austin groaned.

Almost immediately, all the other mercs appeared out of cover and aimed their guns at them.

"Freeze!" the Asari yelled.

Austin looked at the others and simply nodded. Almost immediately, each one of them ran. Grunt and Ventra ran to cover while Austin and Alaara ran to either side of the lobby they appeared to be in. The Eclipse mercs instantly opened fire on them and the whole place was filled with gunfire, thermal clips, and loads of floor and wall plates being shot off.

Austin fired several shots from his Revenant as he ran behind one of the pillars and to the other side of the room. Even here though, the Eclipse had obviously been alerted somehow and they opened fire on him too. Most of the shots missed the Helldiver and simply hit the walls instead which made an absolute mess of everything as the air was filled with dust and concrete and many other pieces of the building materials that had been used to build this lobby. Some shots did manage to hit Austin, but his shields and armour were designed to absorb these and they simply bounced off. Nevertheless, Austin rolled behind one of the pillars so that his shields had long enough to

recharge. Though his armour could take this sort of punishment, it had its limits.

"Reloading!" he shouted as he disposed of his current thermal clip and put a new one into his Revenant. He also switched his plasma cannon on and turned the setting into automatic. It was times like these that he was very thankful that Dell had included this setting when he made the plasma cannons.

Alaara meanwhile had run to the opposite side of the room. Bricks and plates were flying everywhere from the constant gunfire. Two more mercs aimed at Alaara and fired. What the Asari Helldiver did next however, took them by surprise. Alaara ran at the wall and flipped right over their gunfire. She landed just out of their range and took cover behind the pillar she'd landed in front of.

The closest merc continued firing on the pillar as he advanced closer to it. As he did however, his rifle ran out and he quickly fumbled with another thermal clip on his belt. Alaara immediately made her move and ran out of cover.

The merc only noticed too late as the Asari Helldiver kicked the rifle out of his hands and then gave him two kicks in the face, the last of which broke his neck. An Eclipse vanguard then appeared and fired several shotgun rounds at Alaara as she ran back into cover.

Austin meanwhile was still pinned by behind the pillar on the other side of the lobby. Still he waited until they'd stopped firing to reload before he made his move. As the constant barrage of thermal clips ate away at the other side of the pillar, the Helldiver Major waited patiently. Finally, the gunfire ceased and Austin bolted out of cover, both his Revenant and his plasma cannon blazing. The combination of thermal clips and plasma fire managed to cut down at least five of the mercs.

The Vanguard who had shot at Alaara earlier had now aimed at Austin as he was advancing forward. Alaara noticed this and once again ran out of cover. Since the Vanguard was so focused on Austin, she never even saw the Helldiver coming. Alaara brought her leg right up and kicked the Vanguard's shotgun right out of her hands and then flipped it right over. With a lightning fast reflex, Alaara took the merc's shotgun in her hands and aimed it at the Vanguard's back. The Asari failed to react in time and Alaara shot her down instantly. Alaara even managed to gun down one of the other mercs before the rest noticed her and she retreated back into cover.

Austin meanwhile was still running as he was shooting. There were only about 3 of the mercs left now. Grunt and Ventra had taken care of the rest. As the mercs continued firing, Austin did a very fast roll. As he did, he unloaded his entire fresh clip into any merc he could. Now there were only two left as he got back into cover.

Once again, he waited until there was a break in their fire. When

it came, he once again bolted back out and fired a plasma shot. The Merc held targeted went back into cover and stayed there as Austin ran forward. The other one meanwhile ran out to try and help his friend, but Austin fired another plasma shot and this one caught him.

The final merc attempted to melee Austin by smashing the butt of his rifle into the Helldiver's face, but Austin brought his wrist up and blocked it. With his other one, he quickly activated his omni blade and thrust it into the merc's chest.

There was a long silence as everyone took a moment to get their breath back. At that moment however, Austin's HUD lit up to show three silhouettes in the next room. Everyone immediately went into defensive positions and Alaara opened the door.

"Please... don't kill us! We'll go... we'll go..."

There were 3 Salarians in the rooms, all of them workers. Austin quickly lowered his weapon and the others did the same.

"Hey, look... they're not Eclipse. They're Helldivers! You're here to help us... right?" one of the Salarians asked.

"It's one reason we're here. Come on out. It's safe enough." Said Austin reassuringly.

"Thank you. We are in your debt." Said one of the Salarians as he and the others calmed down.

"Maybe you can help us. We're looking for someone. Not a merc – he's on his own." Austin asked.

"Well whoever sealed us in here..." said one of the Salarians.

"When he found us, I thought we were dead. But he just closed the door and locked us in." said the other.

"Could be him, but that's odd behaviour for an assassin." Said Alaara.

"Assassin?" asked one of the Salarians.

"Here for Nassana, I bet. She's got it coming. You treat people like this; it always comes back to bite you in the ass." Said the other.

"If I were you, I wouldn't stay too long. It should be safe down on the lower floors." Said Austin.

"I was just thinking the same thing. Let's go everybody." Said the lead Salarian.

He and the other left, one stayed behind briefly.

"Thank you. And tell your assassin to aim for her head... 'cause she doesn't have heart!" he said coldly.

"Get moving." Said the lead.

The final Salarian left and now it was just Austin and the others.

The only way up now was by using the elevator.

"I've got a feeling that elevator isn't coming down empty." Said Alaara as Austin pressed the button to summon the elevator.

"We should get behind... stuff." Said Grunt.

The three Helldivers agreed and went into cover behind some

nearby crates and Austin took cover behind several staked floor plates.

After a few seconds, the elevator arrived at their floor. Austin's heart was beating rather fast in his chest as he kept thinking of what was going to be in that elevator and how many.

"Mezzanine. Have a pleasant stay." Said elevators synthetic female voice.

The doors flung open and two Eclipse engineers and a Krogan bounty hunter walked out. The whole place once again became a filled with gunfire as the team started shooting. The engineers fell rather quickly due to the fact that they'd been completely unprepared for the Helldivers, but the Bounty hunter proved more difficult.

That all changed however when Grunt suddenly did the same thing he'd done to Fenris mech before.

"I... am... Krogan!" he yelled as the two Krogan wrestled violently with each other. While the Bounty Hunter was much larger, Grunt was much stronger and he let his rage drive him. Within a few seconds, Grunt knocked the bounty hunter's weapon out of his hands and started using his Claymore like a club as he continuously hit the bounty hunter in the face. So hard in fact that Grunt was causing the other Krogan's face to bleed with each strike.

None of the Helldivers dared shoot in case they accidentally hit Grunt. Besides, it didn't really look as though the tank bred Krogan needed any help. The Bounty hunter then suddenly grabbed Grunt's claymore and attempted to push him back. Grunt quickly countered this attack as he head butted the bounty hunter so hard that he toppled over. Grunt didn't waste any time and pinned the Krogan bounty hunter to the floor and kept smashing the Claymore into his head non-stop.

After several hits, Austin finally grabbed Grunt and just managed to pull the Krogan away.

"Grunt, that's enough! Grunt! He's finished! You've done enough!" he yelled.

Grunt struggled for a bit, but eventually managed to calm down.

"That was fun." He panted.

Now that Grunt had calmed down, everyone filed into the elevator and Austin hit the up button with his forearm. The doors closed and the elevator began its journey up the tower.

The elevator doors opened to show one Eclipse merc. He was on his own and appeared to be talking through his comlink to someone.

"I haven't heard from Teams Four or Five. Don't worry; my team is always ready to go. I don't know where he is, not yet. Don't worry about it. We don't need any reinforcements. I'll take care of it." he said.

The group approached the merc very slowly so as not to alert him

"It's under control. I'll go down there myself." He said, still oblivious to the three Helldivers and Krogan now standing behind him.

"Let me handle this. I know how Eclipse thinks." Said Alaara. Austin simply nodded.

"Turn around, very slowly." He said as he activated his plasma cannon and pointed it at the merc. Ventra also drew an arrow on his bow and readied to fire, and Grunt also pointed his shotgun.

"Damn it!" the merc cursed as he noticed them.

"Tell us where the Assassin is, and we might let you live." Alaara demanded.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be wasting my time talking to you. You're clearly not one of Nassana's mercs. You're Helldivers. What do you want?" the merc replied back.

"You've got two ways down: express or coach – your choice." Austin said intimidatingly.

"Look pal, even if I knew where he was, I wouldn't tell you." Said the merc.

"Not the answer I was looking for." Said Alaara.

"I've got nothing more to say to you..." the merc said, but before he could finish, Alaara gave him a sharp kick which smashed him through the glass window he was stood in front of and he was sent plummeting down, screaming as he fell.

"How 'bout "goodbye." Alaara finished coldly as she watched the merc fall.

"Harsh, but I guess he had it coming." Said Austin.

The group turned back. There were two doors on either side of the elevator they had just come out of. As they entered, they heard raised voices. There were more mercs and they appeared to be communicating with a female voice. Austin quickly recognised Nassana Dantius' voice.

"He's all over the place." said one of the mercs.

"What do you mean?" Nassana asked.

"We've got reports of him on multiple levels. We think he's traveling through the ducts..." the merc replied.

"I'm not paying you to think. Just find him. Now!" Nassana yelled.

"Take 'em." Austin whispered.

Ventra nodded and drew another arrow back. He let it fly and shot forward, taking out two mercs in the process.

"What the...?" one of them said. But before he could do anything, Austin fired a plasma shot at him and he was quickly disintegrated. Once again, the group noticed that there were more Salarian workers in the next room.

"Are you guys alright in here?" Austin asked as they entered.

As soon as he spoke however, one of the Salarians suddenly pointed a gun right at them.

"Get back! Get back... I'll shoot." He said.

"Drop the gun, lizard." Grunt threatened.

"I don't want to hurt you... but I will. I said get back! I'll do it! Please... don't make me do it." The Salarian said hesitantly.

"Hey, I'm not the bad guy here. What's your name?" Austin asked in a clam and gentle voice, despite his sinister voice tone from his helmet.

"I... I'm Telon. Don't... come any closer." Said the Salarian.

"Telon, I'm Major Shepard. I don't work with the mercs, and I don't work with the mercs and I don't want to hurt you. I'm here to help you." Said Austin gently.

"I... all right... here..." said Telon as he handed Austin the pistol. "I... don't feel so..."

Telon suddenly fainted. Another one of the Salarians ran up to him and kneeled down over him.

"Telon!"

"Slow and easy." Said Austin as his plasma cannon locked onto the Salarian's sudden move.

"He's my brother. I just want to see if he's alright. Are you the ones who... shot the merc?" the Salarian asked.

"I don't think so. We certainly didn't kill that particular one. Your brother didn't do it?" Austin asked as he looked at the dead body of an Eclipse merc.

"No. Telon was standing here with me." Said the Salarian.

"What happened, exactly?" Austin asked.

"The merc found us and shouted at us to move. We panicked, and he shouted more. I thought he was going to kill us... then... his head just exploded. Telon picked up the merc's gun, but we were too afraid to leave. Then you showed up." The Salarian explained.

"That's a clean head shot alright." Said Ventra as he examined the merc's body.

"There are still mercs up here. You should get to the lower levels" said Austin.

"No need to convince me." Said the Salarian. He then gently helped Telon back onto his feet. "Telon... come on, get up."

"Can we go home now?" Telon asked.

"Yeah, we're getting out of here." Said the Salarian. He then turned to Austin as they left. "Thank you."

The group headed back out as the Salarian's left. Nassana's voice could once again be heard shouting over the radio for her mercs to report back.

"Where is everyone?"

"Will somebody please give me a report!"

Austin walked up to the panel and accessed it.

"It's about time! What's going on down there?" Nassana asked.

"I'm afraid your men aren't able to respond, Nassana." said Austin.

"Damn it!" Nassana cursed and the transmission ended.

The group continued their journey towards the bridge. They were now so high up that was starting to get very windy. Pretty soon, the bridge was in sight. As expected, more of the Eclipse were waiting for them.

"I don't care what you do; no one gets across that bridge!" Nassana's voice yelled over a loud speaker.

The mercs opened fire and the whole thing now turned into a bridge battle. Despite this though, the Helldivers were slowly pushing forward.

"What the hell are you waiting for? Just kill them!" Nassana yelled.

The mercs now started using rocket launchers and one of them deployed two security drones.

"Heavy fire! Get to cover!" Austin yelled as he ducked behind a nearby crate on the bridge. The bridge in particular suffered from the worst of the wind and it was now extremely difficult to keep balance. Even Ventra's aim was being thrown off and his arrow's weren't hitting their targets as the wind kept blowing the arrows away when they were fired.

Despite this though, the group eventually managed to make it to the other side. Now it was just a matter of finishing the rest of the mercs off.

"I'm sending in reinforcements." Nassana yelled.

Sure enough, an Asari biotic came out of the nearby door. Austin fired on her, but she had a biotic barrier up. Clever.

Austin dove back into cover to avoid the Asari's biotic attacks. At last now, they were all out of the wind.

"Can you take her?" he asked Alaara.

"Maybe. She's a tough bitch." said Alaara.

The Asari Helldiver came out of cover and launched her own biotic attack at the Eclipse Asari.

The two biotic attacks smashed into each other and now both Asari were locked as they attempted to overpower one another. Anything that wasn't fastened down was caught in the biotics field and floated around.

"Damn it! Finish them off!" Nassana yelled.

The Eclipse Asari groaned and attempted to overpower her opponent. Sweat dripped from her skin and her nose bled slightly due to her severe amount of concentration. Alaara however, didn't budge and gave a mighty push. Her immense biotic powers overloaded her

opponents and the Eclipse Asari was flung against the wall. She hit it hard and fell to the floor dead.

"Good work, Alaara." said Austin.

No more of the mercs were left now. Nothing would stand in the way now of reaching Nassana.

Now they were in the penthouse. Sure enough, behind a large desk, stood Nassana Dantius. There were a few other Eclipse soldiers with her.

"Shepard? But... you're supposed to be dead!" she said, rather surprised to see the Helldivers.

"Oh really? Am I not?" Austin said sarcastically as he pretended to examine himself. "Well, I guess I got better."

"And now you're here to kill me." Said Nassana coldly as her mercs loaded their weapons and pointed them at the group. Alaara, Ventra and Grunt did the same and also drew their own weapons. Now both sides were in a Mexican stand-off.

"Maybe. Perhaps I just missed your generous company." Said Austin sarcastically.

"Screw you, Shepard!" said Nassana irritably.

"Still charming as ever, I see." Austin smiled sarcastically.

"I'm sure you find this all very ironic. First you take care of my sister, and now you're here for me. Well, you made it this far. Now what?" Nassana asked.

"You really think I'm here to kill you?" Austin asked back.

"Do you have another reason for destroying my tower? Decimating my security?" Nassana retorted.

"I'm just looking for someone." Austin replied.

"What the hell are you talking about? Is it credits? Is that what you want?" Nassana asked coldly.

"All the credits in the world won't make this problem go away, Nassana." Said Austin as he heard the very slightest sound of some bumping in the ceiling. He knew what it was almost instantly.

"Who the hell gave you the right to play god?!" Nassana retorted angrily. "I may not be perfect, but look at you. We both kill people for money. What's the difference?"

"You've brought this on yourself. I wouldn't stop it, even if I could." Austin said coldly as he crossed his arms.

"What do you mean? Of course you can stop it. Just don't..."

Nassana went to say, but again the bump happened, louder this time. Nassana noticed her mercs were looking around. "What?" she asked irritably. As if she didn't have enough problems.

"I heard something." The Asari merc replied.

"Damn it. Check the other entrances!" Nassana ordered.

As the Asari merc left however, a figure suddenly dropped out of

the vent right behind Nassana and the others.

"You... stay put. When I'm finished dealing with this nuisance, you and I are going to... Who...?" she said, as she suddenly noticed a Drell assassin snap the neck of one merc, punch the throat of another, shoot the last and then fling her arm aside as she drew her gun. Only too late did she notice the Drell's other arm had his own pistol pointed at her stomach. He pulled the trigger. Nassana groaned in pain as the bullet became embedded in her skin and she slowly felt the life leave her.

Thane Krios slowly laid the Asari's body gently on the desk.

"So, this is our guy? Good." said Grunt.

Austin waited for a long moment for Thane to say something. To Austin's surprise, it looked like he was praying. Very strange.

"I was hoping to talk to you." Austin said as he finally broke the silence

Thane looked up at Austin for a moment before he finally spoke.

"I apologise, but prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken." he said. He had a somewhat raspy voice.

As Austin stepped a bit closer to Thane, he finally saw the Drell properly without the sun in his eyes. He had light green skin and was dressed in some sort of dark grey outfit. It was fairly tight fitting, obviously designed for fast and flexible movements.

"Don't bother! You honestly think she deserves anything less?" Austin asked uncaringly. He shared no concern for Nassana's death.

"Not for her. For me. The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you, for instance. All this destruction... chaos. I was curious to see how far you'd go to find me." said Thane as he circled the desk until he was now on the other side. "Well... here I am."

"How did you know we were coming at all?" Alaara asked.

"I didn't. Not until you marched in the front door and started shooting. Nassana had become paranoid. You saw the strength of her guard force. She believed one of her sisters would kill her. You were a valuable distraction." said Thane.

"You used me. So you could kill her!" said Austin, a bit cross with that.

"I needed a diversion; you needed to speak with me. You certainly fulfilled your end of the bargain. What would you like to discuss?" Thane asked.

Ventra, Alaara and Grunt finally lowered their weapons as they finally saw that Thane wouldn't be a threat to them.

"Someone's been abducting entire human colonies. We're going to stop them. We already know the culprits – a race called the Collectors." said Austin.

"I've heard of them. Attacking the Collectors would require

passing through the Omega 4 relays. No ship has ever returned from doing so." said Thane.

"They tell us it's a suicide mission. I intend to prove them wrong. Plus, to be fair, they told me it was impossible to get to Ilos." said Austin.

"A fair point." Thane laughed slightly. "This was to be my last job." he said as he looked out at Ilium's still setting sun. "I'm dying. Low survival odds don't concern me. The abduction of your colonists does."

"I hadn't heard that. Is there anything I can do?" Austin asked concernedly. The dossier hadn't mentioned at all that Thane was dying.

"Giving me this opportunity is enough. The universe is a dark place. I'm trying to make it brighter before I die. Many innocents died today. I wasn't fast enough, and they suffered. I must atone for that." said Thane. He then turned to face Austin and held out his hand. Austin shook it. "I will work for you, Shepard. No charge."

Thane walked into the comm room to find Austin, Alaara and Jacob waiting for him.

"I've heard impressive stories, Krios. Sounds like you'll be a fine asset to the team." Said Alaara welcomingly.

"That is if you're comfortable having an assassin watch your back." Jacob added.

"I've accepted a contract. My arm is Shepard's." said Thane calmly.

"Uh-huh. Don't know about you, but I'm loyal to more than my next pay check." said Jacob coldly.

"Obviously he is, too. He's doing this mission gratis. What's your concern, Taylor?" Austin asked.

"I don't like mercenaries. An assassin is just a precise mercenary." Jacob replied.

"An assassin is a weapon. A weapon doesn't choose to kill. The one who wields it does." "Where shall I put my things? I'd prefer someplace dry, if anything is available." said Thane.

"The area near the life support plant on the crew deck tends to be slightly more arid than the rest of the ship." Said EDI as her robotic avatar popped out of the table.

"Ah. An AI? My thanks." said Thane. The Drell bowed and then left the room.

"He seems quite civil." said EDI as her avatar disappeared.

"We need all the help we can get. He's not what I expected in an assassin. He may surprise you." said Austin.

"Yeah. And he may not." said Jacob.

"Mind your attitude, Taylor." Said Alaara coldly through gritted

teeth.

"Still having a bit of trouble with him?" Austin asked as Jacob left the room.

"Jacob's alright. He's doing okay with everyone else. Miranda's still the same old Cerberus bitch ice queen." Alaara groaned slightly.

"That sounds more like something Jack would say." said Austin.

"She and I ended up talking for a bit while training in the simulator. She even joked that she wished she'd been there when I slapped Miranda for mouthing off to me." Alaara chuckled slightly.

"Yep, that sounds like Jack." Austin sighed.

"I should get back to work, Shepard." said Alaara as she saluted and went to leave..

"Alaara." Austin acknowledged as his second in command left the comm room.

"I'm surprised by Thane's spiritual side. His psych profile mentioned little of it, and he carries himself with such cold confidence. I'm not sure if I find him scary or sexy." Kelly commented when Austin came to talk with her.

"A lot of women like bad boys." Austin smiled.

"That is a dirty stereotype." Kelly laughed.

Now that the team was finally complete, Austin simply had to wait until the Collectors made another move. In the meantime, there was still plenty to keep him busy. Zaeed still had his own mission after all and Austin got the feeling that soon some of the others would have a certain thing that needed taken care of if they were to focus on the mission.

Since the Normandy was en-route to Zorya, Austin once again decided to have another chat with the crew. Samara was his first choice since he was starting to like the Justicar. There was something about her that brought out the best in him. The only other person that he knew could do that was Liara.

As expected, Samara was still in the observation room as was in the exact same meditation pose where she had been left. Still she was maintaining a biotic field of energy as her eyes glowed.

"Shepard." she said as she acknowledged his presence.

"I wanted to check in." said Austin.

"I am always happy to talk with you." Samara smiled. Her biotic field disappeared, but her eyes still remained glowing.

"I'm interested in hearing more about Justicars. The one my team worked with told us much, but she was rather young. I felt you might have more experience." said Austin.

"But of course." said the Justicar as she motioned for Austin to come closer. "I sense you are tired. Come and meditate with me. It

will clear you're head." she said as the Helldiver walked up to her.

"Err... okay." Austin said hesitantly as he sat down next to Samara and mimicked her meditation position. Surprisingly it did actually seemed to help as Samara held his hand briefly and seemed to send some sort of mental imprint into his mind. His mind instantly relaxed and he felt calmer than he had for a long time

"Justicars hold a unique place in Asari culture. Justicars are from another era. Young Asari grow up watching vids about our adventures. Pure fiction, of course. Some Asari are uncomfortable with us, but so few Justicars exist that most have never met one." Samara explained.

"There are only so few?" Austin asked, surprised.

"Few Asari wish to make the sacrifices necessary to become one of us. And the training has a high casualty rate." said Samara.

"I know what that's like. Helldiver training is hardly what I would call easy." said Austin, remembering how the training pushed its soldiers to the limits. The Arkanes after all needed the best to wear the Helldiver exosuits.

"But it is worth it end the end, isn't it, Shepard?" Samara asked.

"Yes. Though I would say that while my side is about freedom, yours is more about justice." said Austin.

"Quite right. It is a life of constant danger. Throughout the entire galaxy, there are only a handful of us at any time." said Samara.

"I mean no offense by this, but why would anyone want to be a Justicar if it's that dangerous?" Austin asked.

Samara's expression seemed to sadden a bit before she eventually replied to the question.

"It is a deeply personal matter. Sometimes the most brutal path is the only honest one." she said.

"I know what you mean. Some Helldivers I know have joined for very personal reasons." said Austin, sharing Samara's feeling.

"It is fair to say that you and I are very much alike, Shepard. Both of us serve an order and fight for a noble cause." said Samara.

"Very true." "Can I ask about the Justicar code? It seems central to your life." Austin asked.

"It is five thousand sutras, and covers every situation one can encounter. I have memorized every word. There is only the Code." Samara explained.

"Sometimes justice calls for mercy." said Austin.

"It does not exist to bring about spiritual enlightenment. Its purpose is to punish the wicked and protect the innocent." said Samara.

"Strange. The Helldiver code is similar." said Austin.

"How so?" Samara asked curiously.

"We are granted certain freedoms from restrictions and rules to enable us to do our mission properly, but we still have a special set of

rules to obey to make sure that we don't become corrupted by that power or attempt to abuse it." Austin explained.

"I am starting to notice a lot of similarities between our two orders." said Samara.

"Well, I'll bet Justicars existed before the Helldivers did. Maybe your order was an inspiration for them." Austin suggested.

"I would think so. You and your crew are honourable worriers to fight alongside. It is like working with other Justicars." Samara smiled.

"The Asari I've spoken to seem conflicted about Justicars." Austin inquired.

"In this age, people see shades of grey everywhere. The Code of the Justicar is black and white. I might seem a hero to many, but I would kill all of them if I had to." Samara explained.

"That seems a bit cold." said Austin sternly.

"Does not mean I take no pleasure in doing so." Samara finished.

At that, Austin understood. He was very much the same too. Just because killing was common in his line of work, it did not mean he had to enjoy it.

"So, what role do you think Justicars have in Asari society?" Austin asked.

"I would certainly say that they are very similar to your Helldivers. In human terms, I'd say the closest equivalent is a knight errant, in your medieval lore. Perhaps mixed with a bit of Samurai." Samara replied.

"You know about knights errant and Samurai?" Austin asked. He was pleasantly surprised that the Justicar knew so much about human culture and history.

"When I knew I must leave Asari space, I made sure that I visited Arkadia first. There, I stayed a few years and studied the history, culture and morals of new species. When I was a maiden wandering the galaxy, humans had not yet arrived, nor did the Helldivers yet exist." said Samara.

"What did your studies tell you about my people?" Austin asked.

"You are more individualistic than any other species I have encountered. If three humans are in a room, there will be six opinions. I like your species; I am curious to see what you will do." Samara smiled.

"What does your code say about killing?" Austin asked.

"I am compelled to kill the wicked. If a Justicar is involved, peaceful solutions are long past." Samara replied.

"You make killing sound so casual." said Austin, a bit surprised that Samara would be used to this sort of thing. Then again, he couldn't necessarily argue. He was the very much the same.

"I remember each being I have slain. They are always in my thoughts." Samara replied.

Austin decided to just leave it at that and pick another topic.

"Does the Code forbid romantic involvement?" he asked.

For a moment, Samara hesitated before replying.

"It does not. However, I would never be interested in such. That part of my life is well behind me." she said.

"You could meet someone who reawakens those desires." Austin suggested. He quickly realised how that might sound however and sincerely hoped that Samara wouldn't take that the wrong way. To his relief however, Samara remained clam, and there was no hint of anger or shyness in her voice.

"I am nearly one thousand years old. I know myself and my desires." she said. The Justicar then smiled slightly as she looked directly at Austin. "But your curiosity is quite welcome."

Austin couldn't help but avert his gaze for a minute as he attempted to get rid of the image of a nude Samara out of his head. Samara seemed to notice his embarrassment.

"Do not worry about being embarrassed, Shepard. Many young males of your age fantasize about Asari like me being naked. I am used to it these days." Samara said casually. She did look as though she might just be laughing a bit.

"Before I go, do you have any suggestions about using some of the resources we've gathered?" Austin asked.

"I can use some of them to increase our fuel reserves so we can explore further. Shall I tell you what is required?" Samara replied.

"Sure. What's it gonna take?" Austin asked.

Samara showed Austin what it would take to make her design for the fuel upgrade. It only really required a lot of Element Zero and the right scientific expertise to build it. Nothing that Mordin, Dell and Sill couldn't handle.

"Thank you for the talk. Also, thank you very much for allowing me to meditate with you. It's helped a lot. Let's do it again sometime." said Austin as he stood up.

"It had been my pleasure, Shepard. I'm glad we spoke." said Samara as she went back to her own meditations.

"Hey, Shepard. Come for another chat?" Jack asked as she noticed Austin.

Once again, Austin had decided to have another chat with Jack. She still seemed cold to him, but her attitude certainly seemed to be improving.

"Tell me something I don't know about you." said Austin.

"Nothing to tell. Why?" Jack replied.

"I like to get to know the people I'll be working with. If you'd really rather not, I'll just go." said Austin. If Jack really hated him talking to her that much, he'd just leave her alone. After all, he knew

what her temper was like and the last thing he wanted was to piss her off.

"No, stay. I hate to admit it, but I think I'm getting used to you talking with me." "Something you don't know, huh? Obvious stuff like what's up with my ink, or something else just as boring? You're not really interested unless it affects you. I've been through all this shit before." said Jack as she stood up and once again leant against a nearby pole as she usually did during their talks.

"You're a hard person to like, Jack. Such a shame." Austin sighed as he crossed his arms.

"Really? I had no idea. What other amazing insights do you have that I'm too stupid to see?" Jack asked in a somewhat teasing manner.

"I'll bite. What's with all the tattoos?" Austin asked as he looked at the ones he could see. It wasn't easy now that Jack was wearing her new, less revealing outfit.

"Some are for prisons I've been in. Some are for kills. You know, good ones. Some are for things I've lost. Those aren't your business. They're nobody's business. And some are because, hey, why the fuck not?" said Jack.

"You're tough, but you can't have survived alone all these years." Austin inquired.

"When I was starting out, I ran with this girl Manara and her boyfriend. They knew their way around. I thought they'd help me. Right. They helped me into their bed. And when we finally did take down something big, they helped themselves to my share of the take. I knew where it was heading, and I got them first. Never bothered with friends after that." Jack explained.

"You work pretty hard at not letting people get close." said Austin.

"I've been with lots of people. If you're asking about a boyfriend or girlfriend, no. It's a waste of time and it never works. You let someone get that close, it just means they need a shorter knife. Lonely and alive works just fine, thanks." Jack replied.

"Seems like you miss it a little more than you want to admit." said Austin.

"Pick every little word apart if you want, but it doesn't change the way the galaxy works. Come on, you've been around." said Jack.

"I have to go, but we should do this again." said Austin as he turned to leave. Before he could however, Jack stopped him.

"Wait. My turn with the questions. People usually walk by now. Why are you really asking all these things? You eyeing me up? Because if this is just about sex, maybe you should just fucking say so." Jack asked.

"No! Let me get this straight tight now. I am not looking for that. I appear to have given you that impression, then I'm sorry. You're an

okay person, but I don't feel that way about you." Austin said sternly, making sure he made his point well and truly clear.

"Should hope so. You're Asari certainly wouldn't approve of I suddenly threw you down on this table and peeled you out of your uniform." Jack teased.

"And I certainly hope you don't try. I may be a polite person, but I'm not afraid to hit a girl if I have to." Austin said confidently.

"Just maybe, you're starting to become okay, Shepard." Jack smiled, impressed by Austin's willingness to stand up to her.

"Jack?!" came a voice.

"Kelly?"

Sure enough, the Yeoman herself had stepped down into the hold.

"Oh, hello, Major. I hadn't realised you were down here. I came to talk with Jack." said Kelly, a bit surprised to find Austin down here.

"It's fine. I was just leaving anyway." "Actually, before I do, I have one more thing to ask, Jack." said Austin as he turned to leave.

"Fine. Shoot." said Jack.

"I've picked up a lot of resources. Can you use them to help against the Collectors?" Austin asked.

"Since you mention it, yeah. I ran across the schematics for making L5X implants, still got 'em in my head. Wanna know what I need? Not usually my thing, but I've learned how to get things done on my own." said Jack.

Austin examined the schematics and approved for them to be built. He decided that he'd talked long enough and left Kelly and Jack to their talks. He couldn't help but notice the way the two women were looking at each other as they started talking. Could it be? Maybe. Jack and Kelly. It was certainly an interesting combination.

Anyway, Austin went back to his quarters. He felt it best to just have a little nap before Zorya. If he was lucky, Liara would be there and he could hopefully get a cuddle with her on the bed. As the elevator went up, it suddenly stopped and opened again. Speak of the devil, Liara then stepped in.

"Hello, Austin. Heading up to our quarters?" she asked as she planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Just fancied a nap really." said Austin.

"That's funny. I figured you'd be more interested in a shower with me." said Liara seductively.

"I didn't realise that was on the list." Austin smiled.

"Oh, it definitely is." Liara whispered into his ear as her hand reached down and touched his member through his trousers. He could already feel himself stiffening a bit.

Austin simply smiled and pressed the button as he and Liara began kissing one another very passionately. This would be just what

he needed.

BROKEN WINGS CHAPTER 7

by Tiffany Kennedy
of withoutcause@hotmail.co.uk

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

I've lost my grasp on time. I see no point in it any more. I don't know how long it's been since I've last been at Gaara's house or how long ago we had dinner. That's okay. Not knowing the time of day is fine, it makes everything timeless; you can do more with that, there's less worrying. No setting dates for things, you know? It's like I'm free in a way. I know that sounds insane but still.

I sat down where I usually do in Kakashi Sensei's class. English is my favourite subject, other than art but we don't really have an art teacher right now, just different relief teachers. I sat down in the back next to Sakura. When I'm with Sakura I put a different personality on, like a façade. It makes me feel fake because I don't know what I'm actually like. I talk to her like we are best friends; we talk about boys, dates, make up, I can't do that with Gaara. With him, I talk about everything in general; there are no specifics on it, just the truth and atmosphere. When I'm with lots of people I have this insane energy, like I feed off theirs. When I'm with Sasuke I drown in fear perhaps, just fear of what might happen. When I'm drunk I don't even know what I'm like. But it used to be worse. I used to be completely evil. It's weird to say I know but it's true. I was just dark and everything was game, sure I had different personalities but none of them were truly nice.

"So when are you and Gaara going to get together?" Sakura popped my bubble of thoughts.

"W-what? It's not like that," I replied. I had no idea why she thought that. He is very attractive though, and we get along so well and-oh gosh I can feel the blush forming on my cheeks- I looked away quickly.

"Oh come on, you're even blushing! Look, you might not be able to admit it but I know you like him and guess what, I think he likes you too."

"Right," how could he even like me?

There was an uncomfortable silence for a while.

"What about you and Sasuke?" I asked trying to change the subject.

“It’s complicated.”

“Nothing’s too complicated Sakura.”

“It’s different alright? Sasuke is the high man here; call him a king if you will. He fucks a different girl every week to keep that status you know; I think he’s fucked practically every girl here. But for some reason I can understand it, I just I don’t know. I think it’s because I know he likes me and I like him. It’s like he’s saving me in a way and he doesn’t want me to be a part of that but I’m not going to be his ‘fall back’ girl. He has to man up but I don’t want him to lose what he’s worked for. I don’t want to take him away from that, he worked so hard to be better than his brother in everything and he’ll continue to. Then there’s you and Gaara, Gaara was a low class guy, I mean we all thought he was a killer, we thought he went to juvie but you proved that he was different, that all of it was just rumours.”

“Why do you think it’s different from me? Gaara loved his little ‘killer’ rep. Even if he won’t admit it, he misses being the killer. He misses the times when no one pestered him. Don’t you think he misses being that?”

Sakura stopped talk and faced the board. We started writing the notes that were on there and in about half an hour she started talking again.

“You’re right I’m sorry,” she said before leaving the classroom. I packed my things and left as well. My next class was maths; at least Gaara was in this class. That was the only good thing about maths. I’m so bad at it. I moved to the back where we usually sit and took out all of my stuff. Gaara soon joined me.

“Hey,” he said as he took out his books.

“Uh, hey,” I replied trying to act cool. Damn he makes me feel weird.

“Did you do that homework?”

“Nope.”

“Me, neither,” he laughed a little. Apparently before I met him he never showed emotion, he was still deadly. I do remember him being anti-social, he’s still a little bit like that but he’s changed. Everyone can tell.

“Do you want to go to the Akatsuki concert next week?”

“Only if we get a limo,” he joked.

I bumped him slight and he bumped me back. We had a relief teacher today; it was ‘Pervy Sage’. At least that’s what Naruto and I call him. Speaking of Naruto, I’m supposed to go to the arcade with him tonight. We’ve been going there for a while now, other than Gaara I guess he’s my best mate. I’m close to Tenten and Sakura too but you know, I just prefer guy friends. I’ve told him almost everything about myself. He’s just easy to talk to. Too bad he has a big mouth.

Once school had finished I decided to give Gaara a hug goodbye.

I don't know why but I just wanted to hug him. Gaara went bright red which made me giggle. Not a good look for a kill but damn he is cute. I left to find Naruto so we could walk to the arcade. Naruto and I walked a fair bit to get there. We bought some ramen first which I had to pay for because Naruto never brings money for food. Then we went to play some games. I beat him in DDR and I don't think any ever beats me at DDR. There was an arcade guitar hero there, which I also won. Oh and we played Mario kart three time. I won that as well. Naruto was getting a bit sulky. Once our little arcade moment was over I dragged Naruto down to the beach. I sat on the sand right in front of the water and Naruto sat next to me.

"Why did you decide to come out here?" he asked.

"I don't know really. Waves seem to speak to me, like I can see things clearer. I stare right out here like my life is in front of me and I decide to jump out, running full pelt. I want to take things head on like the waves. Then I realise what that could cause, running out head first. At least the waves know when to stop and calm themselves."

"That's a bit rough. What's this about Aoi?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Are you sure?"

"It's just, well someone has something on me, you know...black mail. It could injury me, or my friends or even someone I think I really like, they'll think of me differently if they find out, everyone will. I'm so insecure about it all but I don't know. I don't know how to control it.

"Tell them first. If they hear it from you it won't get distorted."

"Thanks Naruto."

I don't know when I should tell him about everything, I don't even know if I should but if I was going to it would have to be soon. Then I wouldn't have to owe Sasuke a favour. Naruto and I talked and we decided that we should set up a huge beach party. We also talked about the Akatsuki set list, like what we thought they were going to play at their gig next week. Oh we couldn't wait. There was even going to be an after party. Not that I wanted to go to anymore parties but I guess it's all apart oh high school.

I walked Naruto back to his house so he could get his car. He was going to drive to the mansion and stay the night. Not only was Naruto one of my best mates but he was also Sasuke's best friend. Probably the only person Sasuke would actually confide in. Though Naruto thought of him as a rival in everything. I was glad that he was staying over because that meant that I would have to worry about Sasuke. I'm still sleeping in Itachi's room. I told Naruto I would be there later and walked around to Gaara's house. I have no idea why I keep going this. I keep doing things for no reason; I just wanted to be around him.

I knocked on the door. No answer. I knocked again. No answer.

There was a noise. Something smashed. I knocked again worried this time. I wonder what happened. I peered in through the window and jerked back. I saw a mirror fall down the stairs and shatter. Another mirror came after it. Several mirrors and other pieces of furniture were thrown down the stairs. I heard a grunt. It was one from Gaara. What was he doing? I knocked again yelping Gaara's name. Hoping he would open the door. The door burst open and Gaara had pushed me back. He was being so rough. He told me to leave. There was a look in his eyes, a demonic look as he yelled at me to leave. I couldn't help but just stare at his eyes. He slammed the door shut. I was on the ground. It took me a while to notice. He pushed me that hard and I didn't even notice. Was he okay? What was going on? I looked through the window again. I saw Gaara pick up a chair and smash it to the ground. I jumped as he did. He saw me, he saw me jump, and he saw me peeking at him. He yelled and through something at the window. I frowned. I didn't even notice what was going on. My hand reached my cheek. I felt the need to scream but I couldn't. It didn't even register that a shard of glass had cut my cheek open. I could feel the warm blood flowing from my cheek. Shit. I climbed through the window. It probably wasn't the smartest idea but I had to see if he was okay. My hand clutched my cheek.

"Gaara?!" I could feel the tears start to swell in my eyes.

"LEAVE!!" he replied. I had no idea where he was. I was frightened. I was so scared I didn't know what to do. All I wanted to do was to help him. I wanted to fight the urges to scream and hide in a corner I wanted to find him and help him through this. The door opened and I turned quickly. Temari looked around in shock. She dropped the bags of food she had. She had seen the window and now she saw me. She gushed towards me and took me into the kitchen to fix up my wound. Once she had cleaned it up she put a Band-Aid on it. The cut would heal in a few days. I could see that Temari was frightened; Temari knew she should stay away but Gaara had grown to be different and Temari knew to react differently. She yelled at Gaara as she went up the stairs. He didn't hear her. He was too busy throwing things in his room. Temari closed the door quickly and locked it. She ran back down the stairs and towards me. She grabbed my hand and pulled me outside. She asked me where I would feel safe. The only place I feel safe is here, but I sense that that isn't an option.

WEEK OF LOVE CHAPTER IV: STARRY NIGHT

Katara434
of waterbendingrules@hotmail.com

The next night, after the party, Aang sat outside in the courtyard, watching the millions of stars twinkle in the indigo sky. The plants have shriveled up for the season, waiting for the warm weather to come back so they could claim their places again. He was feeling calm, content. He never realized how lucky he was to have friends like the ones he has now. They treated him like an equal.

Unlike his old friends from the temple, who had kept him out of playing games with them after they found out about him being the Avatar, the friends he has now had shown him he was still a kid, a person; they didn't treat him like the most powerful Bender in the world. Instead, they treated him like a human being. Aang has found his true friends. In their own ways, everyone in the group had grown up in some ways. They had fought a war that should not have happened. But despite that, there was still some kid buried underneath the tough exterior, which was proven by how the group acted last night.

Contemplating the last few weeks, he had never really understood calm until he came here. The meetings and snide remarks had made him angry. He couldn't stand it when people made fun of Katara. It wasn't fair; she has done nothing but help people. She was the one who brought Azula down and saved Zuko's life. The world was at peace she believed it would happen.

He heard quiet footsteps behind him and turned to see that said girl walking towards him. She was looking radiant, the moon's glow covering her like a second skin. No matter how many times he sees her, Aang will never get tired of looking at her. Katara was the missing piece of his life, and he wasn't going to let her go for anything. Katara sat down and placed her head on Aang's shoulder without saying a word. He wrapped his arm around her waist, and they watched the stars together. They didn't say anything; just content in each other's presence.

Then Katara said, "The stars are beautiful tonight."

Aang gazed at her and said, "I can think of something else more beautiful."

Katara blushed and nudged his shoulder. "Stop being so romantic," she said, slightly embarrassed but pleased.

Aang shrugged, unashamed. "I was only stating a fact," he said simply; then took her hand and squeezed it. Katara sighed and laid her head back down. The stars seemed to be shining brighter than normal, almost as if they could sense the couple watching them.

Aang asked, "Have you ever wondered what those stars could mean?"

Katara furrowed her brow, thoughtful. Then she took a breath and said, "My mom used to tell me when I was little that stars could be anything we want. They could be dreams, wishes being granted, or wishes about to be granted. She used to tell me they could be anything as long you believe it."

He nodded, considering her words. Sometimes he did wonder if the stars were wishes. Looking up, Aang started believing they did grant them. He has been blessed by all the good things that had happened to him.

He said, "I believe they grant wishes; even wishes that we didn't realize we were making." He looked up at the sky. He could see different constellations drawing the sky, each one telling a different story from the past. "All my life, I never got to know my real parents; Gyatso was the one who was like a father to me. He taught me everything I know, and I love him, because I know he is always with me. But it's not the same as having parents. Sometimes I would wonder who they were, if they had thought about me. When I ran away, it was then that, somehow, I knew I would never meet them when I turned thirteen. We only get to meet our birth parents when we reach that age. I was never sure why, but it always left a hollow feeling in me. I thought I was never going to have a family." He swallowed hard and turned his head to the ground. "But then you and Sokka found me. I had found friends that touched that empty space in my heart. When you told me you guys were my family now at this very temple, something in me filled my heart." He looked at her, tears glistening in the silver depths. "That was when I found what was looking for all along. I don't think I've ever been so lucky in my life." He hugged her tightly to him and drew a shaky breath. "You guys are the stars. Each one of you gives me a reason to fight. I love all of you, and I hope you guys keep thinking of me as family."

Katara was crying as well, the water leaving trails down their faces. The moonlight reflected in the glistening moisture and their eyes as they looked at each other before kissing with all the love in the universe. After an eternity, they pulled away and pressed their foreheads together.

Then Katara murmured, "You are family, Aang. You have been the moment you brought fun to us. You brought us together in the first place, even from the moment you asked, *"Will you go penguin sledding with me?"* They both laughed softly, remembering that day that seemed so long ago. So much had happened since then. They didn't know what would happen, but despite the bad luck they had before, neither of them would turn back time to fix their mistakes. It was some of those mistakes that brought Aang and his friends together. Katara finished with, "You made us a family from the very start of this journey. And we are going to stay by you until the very end."

Aang pulled her closer and kissed her forehead tenderly. "That means everything to me; you all do. Thank you."

Katara nodded and they cuddled under the stars, which winked at them from the far distance. Then a shooting star shot across the sky and she said, "Make a wish, Aang."

Aang smiled. "I don't have to." He looked at her, his eyes shining with love. "My wish already came true." Katara looked at him with the same love before kissing him again. Then they looked at the stars once more. Maybe the stars really do make wishes and dreams come true, as long as that person wishing and dreaming believes it to be.

A TRICKSTER'S OLD FRIEND

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 weeks had passed since Gabe had disappeared with Drade but now the boys found themselves possibly faced with the trickster. In their pursuit to stop the apocalypse from happening Dean and Sam had befriended the former angel Castiel finally making him see the truth behind everything that was happening but whether he believes any different about Drade is still questionable but for now they would take what they could get. Now in this small town where a woman claims her husband was killed by the incredible hulk they search the house only to find candy wrappers everywhere.

“Just desserts, sweet tooth, screwing with people before you kill them! We’re dealing with the trickster aren’t we?” Dean finally concluded excitedly

“Sure looks that way,” Sam agreed

“Excellent I’ve been wanting to gank that mother since mystery spot” Dean spouted happily

“Are you sure?” Sam asked

“Of course I’m sure” Dean said matter of factually looking confused at Sam

“I mean are you certain you want to kill him?” Sam asked again

“What’s this about? If you don’t want to kill him then what?” Dean finally asked right out

“I don’t know...maybe talk” Sam suggested gently

“Talk to him? A cruel, arrogant, bloodthirsty monster and you want to

be Face book friends with him? Nice Sammy really nice” Dean mocked as he folded his arms in disbelief

“Look I’m just saying he’s one of the most powerful monsters we’ve ever seen plus Drade’s been friends with him forever” Sam pointed out pushing his point forward

“Maybe but have you seen the people she hangs out with” Dean stated validly

“True but maybe we should try if nothing else maybe we can figure out where she even is” Sam pointed out again referring to the fact they hadn’t seen Drade since she had disappeared with the trickster over 2 months ago.

“Fine but if he does anything shifty we kill him!” Dean states firmly with Sam nodding in agreement

A couple of days went by while the brothers waited for any other signs of the trickster when a strange call came over the police radio stating a very odd murder had occurred, instantly the boys thought it was the trickster so they took off immediately to the warehouse. From the second they walked through the warehouse door they new they’d been made considering instead of their hunter gear now they were wearing doctor getups. Sam was confused but Dean instantly figured out where they had ended up, inside a TV series called Dr. Sexy MD. For a few moments the boys wandered around the TV land set trying to figure things out when Dean’s eyes became wide and nervous.

“What?” Sam asked trying desperately to get Dean’s attention

“It’s him,” Dean said shakily

“WHO?” Sam insisted firmly

“It’s him, it’s Dr. Sexy” Dean stated looking at a fairly attractive young doctor coming at them with long brown hair, a scruffy beard and stern walk

“Doctor” the man greeted once reaching them bowing his head slightly

“Doctor” Dean reciprocated while Sam just nodded before being elbowed in the ribs

“Doctor” Sam finally said with an annoyed quality to his voice

“Do you want to give me one good reason why you refused to do the experimental face transplant on Ms. Beal?” Dr. Sexy insisted

“One reason” Dean cooed a little which was disturbing to Sam who simply rolled his eyes

“Yes” Dr. sexy answered

“Sure...Um...huh?” Dean smiled before looking to the floor to see tennis shoes instead of the traditional cowboy boots that marked Dr. Sexy’ style on the show finally opening his eyes too whom he was really talking to.

“Your not Dr. Sexy!” Dean stated shoving the man into the wall behind him forearm pressed against his throat

“Your crazy!” Dr. Sexy said in a over dramatic voice

“Oh really? Because I swore that the thing that makes Dr. Sexy, sexy is the fact that he wears cowboy boots not tennis shoes!” Dean stated heavily

“Yeah but your not a fan!” Sam mocked from behind Dean who paused before giving in

“It’s a guilty pleasure” Dean stated over his shoulder to Sam

“Call security!” Dr. Sexy told a nurse

“Yeah go ahead pal I know what you are,” Dean stated staring intensely at Dr. Sexy before a smirk crossed his face and everything froze around them. Dean and Sam looked around before looking back at the man who changed suddenly into Gabe!

“You guys are getting better!” Gabe proclaimed with delight

“Get us the hell out of here!” Dean said sternly

“Or you’ll what?” Gabe questioned grabbing Dean’s arm with one hand gripping it so tight he could feel the bone shifting under Gabe’s hand before he pulled it away from his neck. Dean quickly questioned the strength behind such a grip more to who or what could have one so strong.

“Can’t help but notice, no wooden stakes big guy” Gabe chuckled to himself

“You did this?” Sam asked gesturing to the scenery around them

“You like it? My own sets, My own actors, call it my own little idiot box” Gabe chimed tapping on pieces of the room and moving around the room almost like he was skipping in delight to his own master piece.

“Why?” Sam finally asked

“Why not? Look I heard you two yahoo’s were in town how could I resist” Gabe chimed again excitement filling his words

“Well please we just want to talk” Sam insisted trying not to indicate that they wanted a fight

“Hmm...Let me guess you 2 mutton heads broke the world and you want me to sweep up your mess” Gabe guessed his face smug as always

“We could really use your help, please,” Sam pleaded

“Also where did you stash Drade when you disappeared?” Dean asked a little fewer patients

“First off Drade is fine I simply took her somewhere she could recover easier,” Gabe snarled shooting a glare that traveled right through Dean

“And I’ll tell you what survive the next 24 hours then we’ll talk” Gabe suggested the damn smugness crossing his face

“Survive what?” Dean asked a little more hesitantly this time

“The gaaamme!” Gabe practically sang out as if it was supposed to be obvious

“What game?” Dean asked

“Your in it” Gabe answered simply

“How do we play?” Dean asked again

“Your playing it” Gabe said simply again his lips quirking into a motion that said there you go

“What are the rules?” Dean asked finally getting aggravated but before Gabe gave them an answer he raised his eyebrows twice in succession then disappeared

Frustrated the boys wandered until finally figuring out during a very crappy game show called Nutcracker that the trickster wanted them to play their roles in each show as they were supposed to. The first little while was okay but soon Dean and Sam were tired of being cast as the lead roles in everything plus now they had something else on their minds. During the game show Cas had shown up looking for them but before he could get them out of this fictional little world he had disappeared apparently at the will of the trickster. Now Sam and Dean found themselves on a comedy show called supernatural as they try to figure out just how long they’d have to dance to this when Cas finally reappears beaten and bloody.

“Cas you okay?” Dean states as Cas stands in front of them panting heavily

“I don’t have much time but listen I got out” Cas tells them hastily

“Got out from where?” Dean asks again

“Look something isn’t right! This thing is far stronger then it should be!” Cas states taking a stance as if to brace for something they can’t see coming

“What thing? The trickster” Dean states quickly

“If it even is a trickster!” Cas tells them as they look at him with confused faces

“What do you mean?” Sam asks before Cas is suddenly tossed to the wall behind him

“HEEEYYOOO!” Gabe announces as he comes through the door in front of the boys in his usual quirky way before turning to see Cas

“Hey Castiel” Gabe greets as Cas looks at him a comical large piece of ducked tape across his mouth. Before Gabe flicks his wrist causing Cas to vanish again

“Where did you send him?” Dean asks hastily

“Relax! He’ll live...maaayybe” Gabe jested

“Okay enough with the monkey dance! We GET IT!” Dean insisted angrily

“Oh yeah! Get what? Hot shot!” Gabe questioned unbelieving

“Playing our rolls! That’s your game right?” Dean stated gesturing his frustration

“That’s half the game,” Gabe told them

“What’s the other half?” Sam asked

“Play your rolls...out there” Gabe said wiggling his fingers to the side while leaning slightly over

“What do you mean?” Dean asked again

“You KNOW! Sam staring as Lucifer, Dean staring as Michael! Your celebrity death match Play your roles” Gabe explained gesturing to both of them with his hands

“You want us to say yes to those Sons-of-bitches?” Sam questioned with a frown

“HELL’S YEAH! LET’S LIGHT THIS CANDLE!” Gabe spouted enthusiastically

“WE DO THAT THE WORLD WILL END!” Sam protested

“Yeah? And whose fault is that? Hmm...who popped Lucifer out of the box?” Gabe taunted raising his eyebrows and tilting his head in a mocking fashion. Sam simply hung his head before looking away knowing it was his entire fault.

“Heaven or hell, which side you on?” Dean asked Gabe after a long couple of minutes staring at him

“Huh...I’m not on either side...Believe me!” Gabe insisted but Dean didn’t believe him

‘Oh really? Because your grabbing ankle from Michael or Lucifer which

one is it?” Dean pushed again

“Huh ha! You listen to me you arrogant dick! I don’t work for either of those SOBS!” Gabe spat as he moved right into Dean’s face but Dean being the stubborn ass he was just had to continue talking.

“Yeah well your some body’s Bitch!” Dean spoke almost reluctantly and for good reason for as soon as he finished Gabe fisted his hands into Dean’s shirt spinning him towards the wall then pinning him which should have been physically impossible considering the size difference between them.

“Now you listen to me! Here’s what’s going to happen...your going to suck it up and play the rolls that destiny has chosen for you!” Gabe insisted using only one hand now to hold Dean in place.

“And if we don’t?” Sam asked hesitantly

“Then you’ll stay here in TV land...forever!” Gabe threatened glancing from Sam to Dean

“300 channels and nothings on!” Gabe stated with a sigh as he raised his fingers with a snap forcing them back into another TV show. This one was a rip off of the procedural cop shows all over TV now but in the crowd both boys thought they found the trickster hidden amongst the cops. After playing along for a little while they found an opportunity and stabbed the cop sucking on a lollipop only to hear laughter behind them.

“Ha ha! You got the wrong guy! IDIOT!” Gabe mocked

“Oh did we?” Dean mocked back as Sam stuck a second stake through Gabe

In an instant the scenery changed back to the warehouse, thinking it was over they went back to the motel but later Dean began to question where the trickster had hidden Cas asking Sam that very question only to receive no answer. Soon Dean found Sam he was his Impala! A knock off of night rider the TV show in sewed with Dean questioning along with Sam why the stake didn’t kill the trickster only to finally come to a revelation. Dean parked in a small campsite area pouring a circle of holy oil on the ground before finally calling out Gabe.

“Okay you SON-OF-A-BITCH! UNCLE!” Dean shouted into the air

“We’ll do it!” he shouted again after no response

“Should I honk?” Sam the Impala asked

“Wow! Sam look at the rims on you” Gabe stated with a whistle

“EAT ME!” Sam shot back not amused at being a car

“So boys ready to give up?” Gabe taunted

“Whoa, whoa, no body’s going anywhere until Sam has opposable thumbs” Dean insisted pointing at the impala

“Why? Satan’s going to ride his ass one way or another,” Gabe pointed out sarcastically

With a glare from Dean though Gabe did oblige with a snap of his fingers turning Sam back to normal.

“There! Happy?” Gabe said smugly

“One more thing, why didn’t the stake kill you?” Dean inquired

“I am the trickster!” Gabe stated proudly

“Or maybe your not” Dean said as the sudden sound of a lighter being flicked was heard before he could even react Sam tossed the lighter to the ground igniting the ring of holy fire.

“Maybe you’ve always been an angel!” Dean stated bluntly

“A WHAT? Did somebody slip a Mickey in your power shake kid!” Gabe asked trying to sound surprised but with an obvious crack in his voice

“Well then you just hop on out of the holy fire and we’ll call it our mistake” Dean chimed for the first time knowing he was right

“Huh ha” Gabe laughed before finally realizing he was caught as he clapped his hands together the scene returned to the real warehouse this time.

“Well played boys, well played. Where’d you get the holy oil?” Gabe asked after congratulating the brothers

“You might say we pulled it out of Sam’s ass” Dean smirked as Sam gave him an uncomfortable look

“Where did I screw up?” Gabe inquired

“You didn’t but no one gets a jump on Cas the way you did” Sam explained

“But mostly it’s the way you talked about Armageddon” Dean extended

“Meaning?” Gabe asked curiously

“Well call it personal experience but no one gets that upset unless their talking about family” Dean explained

“So which one are you? Grumpy, sneezey or douchey?” Sam asked annoyed now

“Gabriel, okay...they call me Gabriel” Gabe finally told them in a low clearly annoyed voice

“Gabriel! The arch angel?” Sam stated a little stunned that they had been going toe to toe with the Gabriel.

“And does Drade know your little secret?” Dean asked

“Yes she does, why do you think she calls me Gabe?” Gabriel pointed out

“True then why’d you ditch out of heaven?” Sam asked

“Because I was tired of watching my Brothers kill each other!” Gabe stated angrily

“What?” Sam asked a little confused

“I loved my family and all they could focus on was killing each other! I COULDN’T BEAR IT! So I left then I found her a women who understood me and didn’t judge me for what I was or why I left” Gabe explained his voice going from harsh to soft as he talked about Drade

“You met Drade and...” Dean pushed further for the truth

“I liked her as a friend okay! Drade always laughed at the jokes I

pulled and I liked making her laugh, she was my commanding officer in the wars so making her laugh made me happy considering how serious we always had to be” Gabe explained further

“That’s another thing if you hated the fighting upstairs then why join the army down here?” Dean questioned confused

“Because I didn’t want to kill my own family but some random humans I didn’t care about them plus Heelloo...Arch angel here boys kind of built for killing” Gabe stated sarcastically shrugging his shoulders with his hands face up.

“Drade was the same way wasn’t she?” Sam probed deeper

“Yeah she was a soldier abandoned, alone, with no purpose and no home. So fighting next to her kind of made me feel a little more secure” Gabe admitted looking away ever so slightly but this slight action caught Dean’s attention then he noticed the even more subtle shuffle of Gabe’s feet while he talked about Drade making him come to his second revelation of the day.

“You said you understood Drade and that you enjoyed making her laugh. What about just seeing her smile or say your name?” Dean pressed gently his voice in a tone that said he was testing the waters of something.

“What? Well yeah I guess I liked seeing her smile too and she always says my name” Gabe answered a very confused look crossing his face

“But do you like it when she says your name?” Dean pressed again

“Yeah I guess” Gabe stated still very confused as to where this questioning was headed

“You guys have slept together too...right?” Dean continued

“Well hell yeah we did it often in the core and when she found me we’ve done IT lots since then too” Gabe answered this time rolling his eyes before shooting Dean a glance that said of course we have.

“Is it really only friendship?” Dean finally asked bluntly so much so in fact that it kind of hit Gabe out of the blue making him take a minute to absorb the question.

“I...um...uh” Gabe stuttered for the first time ever he was speechless

“I knew it! You LOVE HER!” Dean concluded getting Gabe’s attention immediately with the sudden benediction but he couldn’t even argue with it because it was true.

“Okay fine you got me! Again! I have always loved her since I first met her as my commanding officer but like I was going to spring that on her” Gabe stated clearly annoyed even further now that Dean had managed to catch him twice today

“So now what? We stare at each other for the rest of eternity?” Gabe asked trying to change the subject

“Well first your going to bring Cas back from where ever it is you stashed him!” Dean insisted

“Oh am I?” Gabe asked sarcastically

“Yeah you are! Or we are going to dunk you in some holy oil and deep fry ourselves an arch angel!” Dean threatened Gabe looked at his expression knowing he wasn’t jacking around this time he snapped his fingers bring Cas to stand behind the brothers.

“Cas! You okay?” Dean asked looking over at him

“I’m fine” Cas breathed out

“Hello Gabriel” Cas greeted his brother

“Hey Bro!” Gabriel greeted back his usual smug smile across his face

“How are you enjoying falling?” Gabriel asked cockily

“Hey you left heaven too” Cas pointed out

“Yeah but I didn’t fall for two mutton head humans” Gabriel snarled

“No only for a red headed women” Cas shot back finally shutting Gabriel up before looking to Dean who gave him a look of approval.

“That was low! So I love her what do you want from me a millennia or two alone you tend to want a little company” Gabe pouted

Suddenly there was the gentle clicking of heels across the warehouse floor making everyone turn their hearts skipping beats but none more

then Gabe's because he realized what had just been said out loud was heard by the one person he didn't want to hear it.

"Oh dear Gabe your in quite the pinch this time. Aren't you?" The sultry voice of Drade rang out through the warehouse

"Drade...I...Uh" Gabe tried to form a sentence but the sheepish look upon his face told everyone he wasn't going to be able to.

"Quiet now, before you hurt yourself, hello boys" Drade said to Gabe before turning to Dean, Sam and Cas

Drade walked slowly towards them with a slight limp on her left side still not fully healed from the tussle her and Cas had gotten into. As she got closer they could clearly see the wounds on her body still hadn't healed yet either causing Cas to look away a little ashamed as to his actions that had caused them.

"You see this is why I told you to play nice," Drade said sarcastically shaking her head with smirk across her face

"Well boys now you know everything and before you say anything I already knew Gabe liked me so don't even think about using that against him" Drade told them shocking everyone including Gabe

"Okay well I guess we're done here" Dean stated as everyone turned to follow him out of the warehouse

"Okay! Hey guys, come on! You just going to leave me here forever!" Gabe wondered as they continued out with Drade staying beside the holy fire surrounding Gabe

"No! Because we don't screw with people that way you do!" Dean snapped turning to face Gabriel once more

"And for the record this isn't about some prize fight between your brothers! This is about YOU being to scared to stand up to your family!" Dean shouted again sending a look of shock and almost embarrassment across Gabe's face because he new he was right. As Gabe looked away from Dean's gaze, Dean pulled the fire alarm setting off the sprinklers dousing the holy fire setting Gabe free before he turned to leave. Cas turned briefly to look at Gabe who now was trying desperately to suppress the tears running down his face. Drade let a wary smile cross her face as she walked over to Gabe till she stood in front of him so close she felt his warm breath against her.

Gabe clenched his fists and closed his eyes tight trying to resist what Drade already new was releasing.

No words were said Drade simply placed a hand on the back of Gabe's head gently then pulled slowly till he leaned into her shoulder. The archangel had tried so hard to hold on but now finally in her arms he let it all go just let every little thing go with the tears that streamed from his eyes. Drade embraced him having known all along how he'd felt about her but she had been so consumed with selfish issues she hadn't paid him any mind but now here with him she was finally seeing him, feeling him, loving him. Cas let a small smile cross his lips realizing that his brother would finally find the warmth and love he needed that he had never gotten from they're other brothers or father before he turned back to leave.

After what seemed like ages of just standing there allowing Gabriel to pour his heart out to her the warehouse went silent. Drade made the first move her knee coming in between Gabriel's legs rubbing gently to his inner thigh snapping him back to reality as he glanced up from her shoulder an expression of want but also surprise shining through those honey brown eyes his lips slightly parted. With a smile across her face Drade placed her mouth over Gabriel's sliding her tongue in between his lips into his mouth to explore where she's never done before even when they had slept together previous she had never kissed him until now not like this. Gabe's mouth tasted of Sugar, chocolate mostly but with a hint of peppermint way in the back then he broke the kiss to speak.

"Are you sure you want me?" Gabriel asked

"Yes now I am sure," Drade said with conviction in her voice

"I love you" Drade said first her breath warm against Gabe's face

"And I love you" Gabriel said as he leaned into her kiss once more

POETRY

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John Mahler's Quotes of the Day

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/john-mahler/john-mahlers-quotes-of-the-day/ebook/product-20105057.html>

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!

DAYTIME NOIR

AgentB-7

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

The water in river is black
A resident 'hoods are dirty white
Faces are dark, looks are filled with a greed
Almost no cars in sight.

Air is heavy and wet,
Sky's covered with clouds, but daylight's still blinding.
Traces of drinking in brain.
In the corners of mind good thoughts are hiding.

Public transit is moving me through,
But it can't take me from that bright darkness so far.
So I locked in and free in the Moscow city
In that daytime winter noir.

WOLVES

Solilska

<http://solilska.deviantart.com>

Sick of the pack, The wolves,
Running and seeking while staying together,
Singularity Is none existent to you,
Strength in numbers, weakness In singles.

Throw your morals at my face,
When you're the one who forgot them,
I never swore loyalty to you,
And you have never shown me such a thing,
And yet I'm meant to be,
When I left you didn't even notice,
If I did stay would you know?

You can scream betrayal from your tower,
You can tell a story of my deeds,
Words are words and actions are real,
Saying something doesn't make It so.

With my actions I only grow,
With your words you'll have nothing to show,
When they forget their love for you,
You'll realize It was only pity.

HEARTBROKEN

Alizée Butel
of butellilio5@gmail.com

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

Heartbroken

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...

FRI-END-SHIP

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

When I talk, you don't listen.

You're just waiting for your turn to speak.

You view every conversation as a competition.

All I can see is the unstoppable movement of your cheeks.

The flow of communication is always re directed back to you.

Almost as if everyone must hear what you have to say.

I'm not denying that half of what you say could actually be true.

But how can so much happen to a person in just one mere day.

What makes it worse is that your stories get recycled and repeated.

I zone in and out of your speeches and know exactly what happens next.

My place in the conversation is to respond and nod when needed.

If you can't tell me in person, you incessantly try to call me or even text.

I can feel my tolerance and patience gradually wearing thin.

I am not even sure how much longer I can hold it in.

I want to tell you the truth but I don't know how to phrase it.

Because I know once it is delivered, it is impossible to erase it.

So I have no choice but to continue to nod and pretend

And delete the message that I know I can never send.

Because I don't want our friendship to ever have an end.

AN ODE TO OSIRIS

Cory Rodriguez
of ezekiel.azrael@gmail.com

And the Nile runs red.

Within a tree, grown `round,
For Byblos palace it was found.
Lover lost, departed be.
A hidden body within the Byblos tree.

Isis and Nephtys scoured the ground,
Finding pieces of me in town after town,
Held in holy places, for all to see.
Pieces of me, within the Byblos tree.

With Anubis` aid, I wad remade,
And through final piece, I found release,
With lovers grace, and lovers embrace-
Peace at last! Toward heaven I race!
Made with her, i give to you,
My son Horus, born anew!

Made by her, the final piece,
Through Phallus of gold, i found release.
Now can be found under mother, Nut, and Hollywood cross.
In the city of angels, city of lost.

HYMNS FOR THE DESPERATE IDEALIST

Makenzi Marshall
of monsieur-nick@hotmail.com

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

Picture this:

Porch lights send violent rays of glass cutting through the darkness.
It's cold. Winter. Ground covered in a thin ray of ice.
Smoke roils past your chapped lips, and you cough, choking up the
shards
of broken needles and kerosene
drenched wet by the oil
burning
in your dying lungs
And It's been so long,
but
in this lifetime days can feel like years
and you can't help but to
Remember
That he's the reason you started smoking anyways.

You glance downward, feeling the blue of your eyes begin to run over,
leaking out past desperate eyes
and lids held closed by Moirae's thread.
This time, it feels like the stitches
Might finally be healing
And the skin growing raw over her eyes looks a lot like
Home-sweet fucking home
because this is how
it's meant
to be,

isn't it?

This is the stuff that dreams are made of.

Glancing up, you feel something wet,
and you taste the rain on your face
and it seems like the sky is answering you
But

such -r-o-m-a-n-t-i-c- pathetic daydreams
are meant only for the minds of Idealists
and Fools;

For what use

could a corpse

have for a heart

when theirs has already stopped its beating?

And what use can still exist for the words of the Damned
on this day,

when the dead have lost their

Voices.

You can still remember, can't you? It used to mean that angels were crying.

As you open your mouth to speak,

or maybe to sing,

or maybe even to scream,

You hear something shriek through the silence of the dead suburbs,
startling a flock of crows into flight,

Cracking the ice frosted across grimy windows

and shaking apart the fragile hold on your numb mind

as subtle as a shotgun blast to the fucking face

And you know

that this

might really be the end.

Amazing, how easy the sound of a ringing phone can tear a girl apart.

You glance inside, staring through the open front door with the look
of a deer caught in the headlights of a truck.

Not, not a truck.

A fucking Semi.

You blink, taking in a shuddering breath, then exhale,

Hoping against hope,

Praying against God,

That this wasn't the call to say that he wasn't coming back,

The final confirmation that he wasn't coming home to you

And all you'd be left with was a box full of Ashes

And a mind full of

useless

fucking
memories.
Of a time when things might have once been
Alright.
A time when the only voices she heard were her own.

As you glance down at the ashy remains of a Marlboro,
clutched in white-knuckled hands
rubbed raw with cold,
You could almost swear that the hellish noise gets
Louder.
Like its mocking you. Taunting you.
Hating you.
After all, you're the fool who's crying over a phone, right?

As a late-night car drives by, kicking up slush onto the barren streaks
of sidewalk,
You close your eyes and reach into the pocket of the worn terrycloth
robe
you've draped across these bones-of-a-living-corpse,
and you're not sure what it is that you find
but it felt a lot
like cold steel, or quite possibly a
Way Out.
*You'll find that one can never quite tell the two things apart in this day and
age.*

Your eyes glaze over, and the silent weight of the Gun in your hands
feels a lot like Armageddon and you almost expect
to see the horsemen of War and a lake of fire
Burning
in the distance.
And for a second, you can almost peer through the mask you've built
out of
Whiskey and Thorazine
and the Judgment you see there
is fucking beautiful
because these days, Perfection sounds a lot like Persecution and there
is not a thing alive that does not merit death,
Is that not what they'd have you believe?
Isn't it what you want to believe?
*Darling, everyone else knows living's only easy once you're already dead. Don't
you?*

The phone screams again, and your eyes shut with the sound of a

casket being closed
And it feels like her hand
moves all on its own
as the roar of a gunshot tears through the air
like paper.
The steel is like ice on her skin and the chill night air dances with
smoke and the brilliant after-image of a bullet
shot straight through the heart.
The gun slips from numb fingers, and this feels too much like you're
pouring dirt into an open grave to bear any real comfort.
You fall to the ground amid the shattered ruins of your mistaken
symbolism like an atom bomb
and the impact tears a hole right through your gut
Because now
you're left with nothing
but an empty gun and a hollow in your Heart
carved out of the pieces from a shattered telephone.
And you feel like god has
Really
Fucked you over this time.
And whose fault is that but of the Sheep who trusted its own creation?

The wail of a passing siren breaks through the confines of this house-
turned-morgue,
bringing with it a rare moment of lucidity and the taste of molten
metal eating away at your mouth like the fires of a charnel house.
Now, lurking just beneath the Wake of the storm,
you can feel the stifling reminder
that those Dreams you once begged to chase
were the aspirations of Corpses
And this reality
holds nothing but You
And the Bullets
You choose to hide behind.