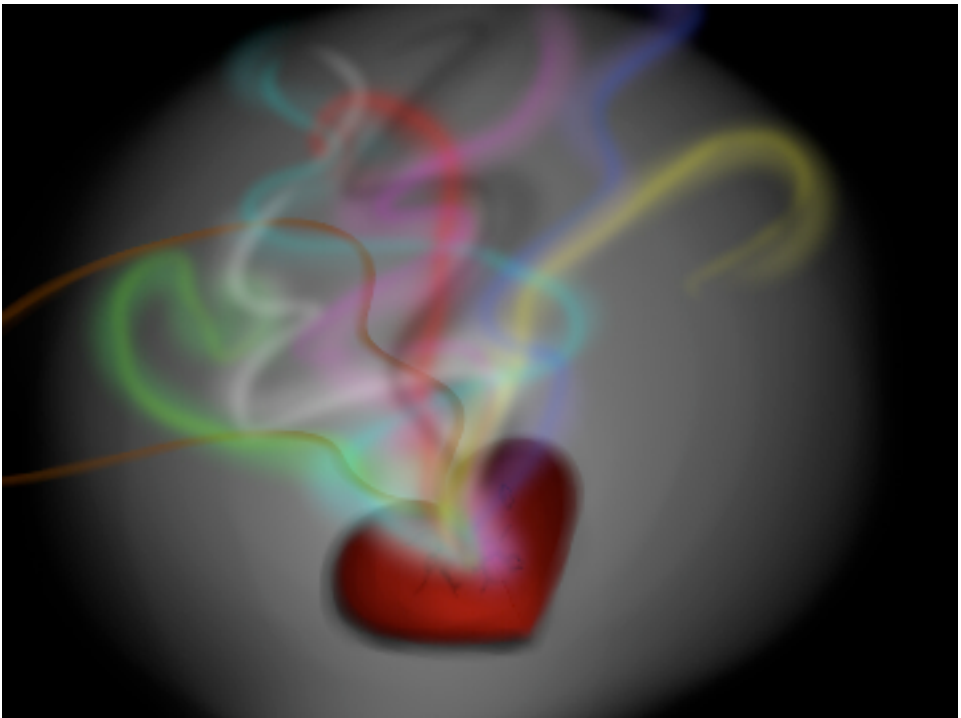


Fanatical Publishing's

Weekly Review

Issue #55



25 March, 2013

AND NOW, a word from the publisher:

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

If you are not subscribed, but you want to be, there's nothing easier: Just e-mail me at fanaticalweekly@gmail.com with 'subscribing' in the subject line.

If you missed an issue, they're free to download here:
https://www.box.com/files/o/f/594601922/Fanatical_Publishing's_WEEKLY_REVIEW

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!

Cover art is 'Escape' by xShenLong of <http://xshenlong.deviantart.com>

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Poetry

AND NOW, another word from the publisher:

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

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

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

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

"I agree with you Lurk," Abraham said.

"You do?"

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

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

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

Lurk turned away and saw Heather standing in the doorway.

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

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

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

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

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

Check it out!

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

THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FIFTY SHADES OF GREY: A RANT

by Michelle Ryan

of bear1667@gmail.com

I'm Michelle Ryan and I'm a psychology student. I've been writing for fun for about 5 years now. My work ranges from well-thought-out rants to poetry to prose to general fiction. I've been writing a lot more since I've gone to college, probably because of the improbable increase in my free time, privacy, and computer access. In addition to my sporadic short works, I have been working on a novel for a few years. I hope to publish it one day, but seeing as I'm doing it for fun, it might be a while.

I aim for humor, honesty, and insight in my writing, and I hope that's what you find when you read it.

My other interests include people-watching, intelligent conversation, dance, and reading.

You can find more of my work at <http://bear0702.deviantart.com/>.

Disclaimer

I will be explaining my opinion for entertainment and discussion purposes. Disagree if you want. Also, I'll be talking explicitly about an explicit book. *epic TV announcer voice* Reader discretion is advised.

Introduction

Now, I'd like to rant about a phenomenon that's kind of lost most of its verve at the moment but is still decently relevant: Fifty Shades of Grey. In case you've been living under a rock, 50 Shades is an erotic fan-fiction based on the Twilight series. It includes elements of BDSM, a continuum of sexual preferences that include bondage, dominance/submissiveness, and sadomasochism. It's also the fastest selling paperback ever. Yup, the fastest selling paperback book is Twilight porn. And I'm going to rant about why it's destructive. But before we begin I'll give the reader's digest version of how I came upon this nonsense.

I read all of the Twilight books a few years ago, and now realize that they are shit in terms of literature. So when I heard that 50 Shades was Twilight porn and wildly popular, I had to check it out for myself. I checked it out from my local library after placing a hold. I was literally

number 960-ish on the waiting list. Wtf. So I checked it out and started from page one. I didn't even get to page 10 before I realized that I'd already read 4 books worth of Bella Swan whining, and I didn't want to do it again. So I flipped to page 100, and lo and behold, it's the first sex scene in the book. I read it and could only really form one thought in the form of a wildly popular "Top Comment" on Youtube videos: I can't fap to this. Erotic fiction is meant to be arousing and all I could think about was everything that was wrong with it. I skipped around to a few more sex scenes and it only got more troubling as I went. I abandoned trying to read it and didn't come upon it again until I found a Youtuber named Emma Blackery reading the book in full and making fun of it in her videos. I watched most of the videos (and in effect read most of the book) until she was forced to stop making/delete the videos because of copyright laws.

So without further ado, here we go.

Source Material

This book is literally Twilight fanfiction. If you google a few things, you can find the original. It's basically the same thing as any other fanfic: poorly written, clichéd, and what it lacks in quality it makes up for in sexually explicit content. The published version is not much better.

My problems with the Twilight novels are an entirely separate rant, but the relevant ones to this discussion are: Bella (Anastasia) and Edward (Christian)'s relationship is unhealthy, and they're both idiots.

Anastasia Steele is literally Bella Swan if she had any career aspirations. (Seriously, before she met Edward she had no goals in life, and afterword her only dream was to become a vampire and fuck him for all eternity.) This means that she is the queen of all Mary Sues. She is clumsy but has no obvious flaws except for being a moron, and everybody fucking loves her. It angers me. My bitterness aside, Anastasia/Bella/Mary Sue is a horrible role model for young women.

In the case of 50 Shades, it has made BDSM about as mainstream as possible, and therefore people are being more open and curious about it. And foolish people will try to use this book as a how-to guide for a BDSM relationship. I'm no expert in BDSM, but the dynamics between Ana and Christian are extremely troubling. When Ana and Christian decide to begin a sexual relationship, Christian establishes himself as the Dominant to her Submissive and offers her a contract explaining how it would work under his terms. The contract basically states that Christian can essentially control Ana's life. If she agrees to the contract, she will have to do what he says, when he says it (even outside of the bedroom), and Christian gets to dictate what she wears, when and how often he sees her, her exercise routine, what she eats,

etc. I'm not in the business of degrading other people's sexual preferences, but that's a little crazy.

Now, it wouldn't be crazy at all if Ana were willing to do it. If she happily agreed and was enthusiastic about having this kind of relationship, then fine. But she's not. She debates it for ages and doesn't sign the contract. But still, they basically operate under its rules and have sex several times before Ana even seriously considers the contract. Which brings me to my main point: she's an idiot. That is no way to cultivate a relationship. He offered, basically, a take it or leave it proposal and she did neither. And it basically torments her for the entire book. To me, a BDSM relationship is something that if you don't immediately say "yes" to, the answer is "no". So while this book continues to sell, aspiring Submissives everywhere are looking to her for guidance and getting the wrong idea.

Christian is also literally Edward Cullen. He's dark, mysterious, aloof, and just plain stalkery. He is controlling in every way possible. When he decides to offer Ana the contract, he basically shows her around his Sex Cave (complete with red leather furniture, various belts, whips, and other toys) only to learn that she is Pure As the Driven Snow and has never had any kind of post first-base sexual experience. His remedy is to have sex with her. (Facepalm.) You can't offer an intense and not-for-everyone sexual relationship to a virgin, dumbass. She clearly had no idea what she was getting herself into, and Christian basically took advantage of that because he wanted The V. He should have just quit while he was ahead and found someone else. And then there would be no 50 Shades and wouldn't that be an awful tragedy.

So when these two idiots come together, they create the second least romantic and second most troubling relationship I've ever read about. Bella and Edward's relationship (the first for both) meets 15 of the criteria set by the National Domestic Violence Hotline for an abusive relationship. Bear in mind you only need one for it to be considered abusive. Christian and Ana are slightly better, they only meet 7. SEVEN. Their BDSM relationship does not play out as two consenting adults exploring their sexuality. That would be okay. What makes it meet those seven criteria is the fact that Ana is intimidated and unsure of it the whole time. And Christian does nothing but continue to coerce her. Hence, their Bella and Edward dynamic is disturbing and not at all fun to read about.

Assuming a Perfect World

If you've ever taken a physics class, then you're probably familiar with the Perfect World in which most basic physics problems take place. There is no friction, air resistance, or any other factor affecting the

system unless you're told otherwise. It's kind of ridiculous if you think about it in the real world.

The same goes for Ana and Christian's bedroom life. Since they are Mary Sue and Gary Stu extraordinaire, they are the ideal sexual partners. Now I understand that it's a work of fiction, and in books and movies convenient things happen for the sake of the plot. But their sexual experiences are so unrealistic that I can't possibly ignore it.

Firstly, and most importantly, Anastasia is a virgin when she meets Christian. (Remember, Pure As the Driven Snow.) So when she decides to have sex for the first time, you would think she'd be nervous, or at least aware of her inexperience. That's not the case. She gets so horny and caught in the moment that she doesn't even care. Well, fine. I can look past that.

But then comes the complete and utter nonsense. Ana has at least two (I could be forgetting some, and I don't want to read it again) orgasms in her first real sexual encounter. Logically, I find that unlikely. Because she's PATDS, she has never masturbated and has never had one before in her life. The odds of Christian figuring out what she likes when she doesn't even know it, and playing to that enough that she climaxes at least twice is kind of ridiculous.

These two orgasms happen in two different ways. The first came from only breast fondling. Unlikely, but possible. The second came from vaginal penetration with no direct clitoral stimulation. Again, unlikely, but possible.

She also experiences very little pain and absolutely no bleeding upon penetration. That'd be expected if she masturbates, but remember, PATDS. So the odds of that are also unlikely.

Now take all of those unlikely things and put them together in your mind. She's a fucking statistical anomaly. I won't bore you with the estimated percentages, but trust me, the odds are extremely low that she has the "natural ability", so to speak, to do all of those things.

The lack of realism in her first time is, to me, at least, extremely distracting. I know most of the audience of this book is middle aged housewives, but there are plenty of young people who read it as well. And it's honestly setting a bad example in more ways than one.

Oh, Yeah, It's an Erotic "Novel"

Even if you take the content at face value, the writing in this "book" is absolutely fucking awful. This sorry excuse for a published piece of literature is indeed glorified fanfiction in this sense. That might even be insulting to fanfiction, because I've read plenty of fanfics that are ten times better than this.

Because it's an erotic novel, there's a lot of sex. Obviously. And

there are only so many ways you can describe the same thing. Body parts only have so many names. But even with that in mind, E.L. James has managed to make reading about sex boring. Now that takes serious skill.

The metaphors are atrocious. Anastasia refers to Christian's dick as her "very own Christian Grey flavored popsicle". His smile "lit up to full HD IMAX" as her "inner goddess [did] the merengue with some salsa moves". I wish I were making these things up.

Not only is the sex repetitive, but the rest of the book is as well. Take a shot every time Christian murmurs, gives her an unreadable expression, gazes intently, or mutters. You will be hammered in five pages. She uses the same words over and fucking over again (and, these are the same words also used to describe Edward in Twilight). So the whole book is basically one big shitty déjà vu. Anastasia also thinks "Oh, my" about fifty times per sex scene. We get it, she's experiencing pleasure. Now please, find a different way to say it, or don't say it at all.

And the icing on the cake is that these books (oh yes, there are three of them), are about 500 pages each. Of the same stuff. Over and over. You couldn't pay me to read all of them. (Well, maybe you could. College student on a budget here.)

Conclusion

I'm all for the widespread reading of erotic fiction, because I find it ridiculous that sex is so taboo and yet it's everywhere. It's two thousand and fucking thirteen people, the human race hasn't lasted this long by magic. It's about damn time people started being real about sexuality. So I'm glad that this book has sparked something of a phenomenon in that it's now okay for a seventy-plus year old woman to read it as she waits in the gynecologist's office (true story; she was sitting right next to me).

But the purpose of this rant was to point out that you have to take these things at face value. 50 Shades and Twilight are annoying and poorly written and despised by as many people as they are loved by, but they have one more thing in common: they're fictional. So don't believe everything that you read. Enjoy them for what they are, but don't expect real life to be like them. Oh, and read better books. For the love of Beyoncé, read books that make you think (in a good way).

FIN

IDEAS

by Solilska
of <http://solilska.deviantart.com>

As my fifth written piece I decided to try and talk about ideas:

Ideas are of course a subjective matter but some ideas are blatantly wrong and ignorant to any person with individual thoughts and compassion.

For example if someone believes the idea of a certain religion imposing its law on all of Earth's life then obviously this is a corrupt and dominating idea which should never be imposed, but if someone had the idea to rid the world of religion as a whole, I believe that to be a harmful idea also. We should naturally progress and continue education so that the people who are intelligent and free thinking will choose to turn away from these inept ideas. If you force anyone to do something, even if it is for their own good, they will resent you.

Men and women are never the enemies, I have never fought against mankind or even been interested in mankind. It's mankind's ideas that interest me. I've only ever debated against the ideas and ideals that people cherish the most. It's not genocide of any thoughts, ideas, changes, love, hate and fears these people have that we deem unfit for us. If an idea weakens you, you should destroy it. Ideas fit for all mankind we will never find. We must individually strive towards our own ideas and thus gain our own ideals, but be wary of ignorance within ideas and deal with them accordingly. Showing them for what they are and proving we don't need them nor should we. Let nothing stand in our personal progress' way.

--A ~ SONG ~ FROM ~ A ~ MUSIC ~ BOX--

by usagi-hikari9
of <http://usagi-hikari9.deviantart.com>

One turn, two, then three. When she heard the fourth click, she let go of the little key in her hand. As the music swelled from the box in her hand, her mind drifted back to when she saw the stars in the night sky and the clouds during the day. Eleanor looked to where the window was, her music box now on the window sill. With a hand delicately resting on the stained glass, it was cool to the touch from the snow she knew was drifting down slowly. -Silent and colorless. Just like me.-

As the music slowly went silent, she picked it back up in her hand. When it stopped, Eleanor rewound it again. Same notes as always, yet still so beautiful. Her mind wandered and she saw herself at the piano with her knight standing against the wall behind her with a hint of a smile on his peaceful face. It was his favorite song. And she learned it just so she could make sure that every time he came back home, he would feel relaxed again. The music stopped and she fell back into the real world. Back to where her knight has not returned. Back to where she could no longer see his face when he returned. Back to where she could no longer play the song for him, even if she could see.

The piano was gone. The room where she played for him was gone. The courtyard where she first met him while trying to escape was gone. And her dress she was going to wear when he was to become the Champion Knight was gone. All in flames the day she ran to live. She had no time to save anything but the music box that was at her side on that early autumn day, the only reminder of the song that filled the house that had stood for generations. It was a rebellion of the other nobles, who had grown jealous of her family's growth in wealth. Hired mercenaries slaughtered every servant, every worker, and every noble, regardless of age.

Hiding along with her maidservant, her toddler son, and the lady invited to stay as a guest. As the smoke started to suffocate them, several mercenaries rushed into the room. The guest had tried to make a mad dash for the door. The crimson blossomed on the white gown like roses. While preoccupied with the lady guest, Eleanor grabbed her maidservant and ran out into the hallway. Across the

room, through the charred hallway, and dashing across the shortcuts known only by her. Suddenly the maid tripped, her son tumbling across the ground as Eleanor stared back in fear. The mercenaries had followed and their sights on the fallen maidservant. The maidservant looked at her son and back up at the lady with a pleading look set in her eyes. Eleanor grabbed the child and ran on, not looking back to see what transpired for the young maid. Now running with an oddly silent toddler, she could finally see the last escape route not cut off by the flames. Turning the last corner, a burst of flames made her stumble backwards and trip over herself when fleeing the larger flames behind her. The reason she had escaped from any deadly fate or mortal injury was the knight that was at her side every waking moment. He scooped her up from the ground where the embers had found those once deep green eyes and ran with the toddler outside to the cloaking darkness. He had brought her to this church, one that served her family for years before the house was built. The toddler had gone to the orphanage, she to the head priest.

She shook her head to empty her mind of that painful day. -No use dwelling on that day a year and a half ago.- Even though she tried as hard as she could, Eleanor could still remember when she woke up in a bed, and panicking when she couldn't see any light. Her knight had been next to her and had placed her delicate hands on his face so she knew it was him. When she had asked him what happened, she knew his face had fallen.

Her eyes were not damaged in the fire. She should be able to see. Eleanor had heard the priest talking with her knight in the hallway the day after the fire. Those burns on her body will not scar though the burns on her face, however, might steal some of her youthful beauty; Including her green eyes. Eleanor felt anger inside her mind and stumbled out from her room. Her knight was there. The priest was silent. She grabbed her knight's hand and placed her mouth on the palm of her hand. -I am not vain! Please be honest my dear sir.- Her pleas echoed still in her mind back in the present. -Do tell me. How does my face fair? I feel my hair yet, my face. It feels changed.- At that moment, her knight teared his hand away from hers. He had never shied away from her. Never turned away from her words, so silent and soft. Tears came to her eyes for the last time as she rushed back into her room and stumbled back to the bed.

The knight had left her in the same church a week later. Only a hand placed gently on her head and a faint kiss on her hair. Not a word, nor thought. No letter from him and no tears from her. Eleanor was trapped in a god-forsaken world without her best friend. He had left

to go back to the battle field where he believed he belonged. A year had passed and the only word that had come from him was in the form of four words written on a piece of paper.

Again, Eleanor tried to clear her head of the past. This time she was able to stay in the present moment on a cold winters evening. She placed the music box key back on her necklace as she felt night approaching by the cooling air. She had spent the day in her chair waiting for him as she always did. What else was there to do? A bed, a table, a desk, a bookcase, and three chairs. The bookcase had only three useless books and a small statuette of the local deity. The table across the way from her held food, though she barely ate. The two other chairs stayed in their spots across the table. The last bit of space held her desk. Nothing else, nothing less. Stone walls like a prison creeping in. Not even the everlasting darkness could hold the secret back. Her only guest was the toddler she had saved, filling the room with some sound. Only once a week was she able to hear something other than cold wind, echoes from the past life, her own voice screaming inside her, and the footsteps from the hall from the monks.

Eleanor stood up to walk over to her desk and reached out for a small cloth bag. Inside was what he saved for her. Along with the letter, he had sent a remnant of what had survived from the room when the flames had swept through it. Reaching her hand in the bag she first pulled out a white chess piece from her set that was in the shape of a horse. She knew it was white as that was the only side she ever played, since she was the White Lady. And in the bag was also an ivory key from her much loved piano that she played so diligently. And the letter, carefully folded around the key, with four words written out with a piece of charcoal. Two small mementos, three with the music box, and four including her necklace.

A set of chess pieces charred to no remains. A lady with no house left to lead. An ebony piano destroyed to the point of nothing being left but ashes. A knight with only a fragmented land left to protect. A forgotten and hidden church serving no family any longer. The only followers left were a young knight, an even younger toddler, and a disabled girl.

A swift knock sounded on her door as she quickly placed her treasures back on her desk.

"My Lady, it's from the knight!" The priest from those days long gone rushed to her. "It's another letter! Would you like to know what it says?" When she nodded, he continued. "'To my White Lady.' It

comes with a gift."

Dismayed the letter said the same thing it did last time, she reached her hand out for the gift. The priest had rushed back out the second he had pressed the letter and the gift in her hand. She opened the cloth bag and out fell a carved figure. She felt it careful before realizing it was in the shape of a phoenix, the old symbol for her house and lineage. She set the carved figure on the desk. -What does it mean? He did love riddles. I hated solving them.- Eleanor had just set the bag down and heard the sound of metal hitting wood. She picked the bag up again and reached into it a second time. When she pulled her hand back out, a small gold ring was in her hand. -Wait. How can I tell it's gold?- Blinking once slowly, she saw her hand holding the ring, and the stone floor beyond it. Hearing movement next to her, but the door not being opened since the priest came, she suspected they had come with him.

Turning to face the sound, Eleanor saw a man in full armor on one knee and his head bowed.

As his head lifted, a familiar smile on his face. "Good Evening, my White Lady. Did you know that there are several medicines, associated with a Phoenix, that, after being forged in gold, have healing abilities for those who wish to no longer see?"

Tears came to Eleanor's eyes once again and streamed down her face as she held the ring in her hand and ran to her knight.

"Didn't I promise I would come back? And I promise I will get you back your title."

Eleanor took her knight's hand and held it to her lips. -I do not care about my land or title. Just a place I can call home with a piano.- Lifting the hand away from her mouth, she smiled. "My sweet Sir Tristan, the music box will play again as loud and strong as before."

--The ~ End--

WITHIN REACH

NaturalDreamer18
of <http://naturaldreamer18.deviantart.com>

Hello there.

You may not know who I am or what I am, but I know who you are. A person, or perhaps an animal, with a dream. A goal that you thrive to accomplish to the best of your ability. Something that you and your family will be proud of. It is something that you dream of night after night. Everyone has those dreams. No matter how young or old they are. It is a never ending thought that runs across your mind.

But what *is* your dream?

To become a doctor? A veterinarian? A soldier? An author? So many possibilities. It is endless. Yet, it is that one question that stands as an obstacle. As a child, it was easy at the beginning when we didn't know any better at the time. We observed our environment with innocent eyes and looked up to our parents (or another relative) then answer that one question every adult asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Our answer would be immediately and with a lot of excitement as if we would make it happen. It was really easy in the beginning. When years went by and as we grew older, the same question appeared from every direction. Instead of answering right away, like we did as a child, we hesitate and doubt starts to grow in our minds. Maybe your dream changed. Why did it change? Did you lose hope or did you lose interest in your other dream? What made you lose interest or hope? A lot of questions, but you will somehow answer them in time or right away if you know the answers.

Here's another question. Do you *still* have that dream today?

It may or may not be the same dream you had when you were a child, but you have that dream nonetheless. Your thoughts tend to wonder from your active dream to the previous goal that you conjured when you were a child. Why do you continue to think of such a thing? The answer is simple. It is part of your childhood memories. One that you shared with either a family member, a friend, family pet or anyone else that you deemed worthy of your trust. It will never be forgotten as long as you live.

Now, about that question...

Let's take a moment and sit very still (or if you're standing for some odd reason, please sit somewhere comfortably). Think of the time where you feel content, at peace and comfortable. In your parents arms, in your warm bed, hanging out with your friends or lazily sitting on a couch. Anything that you can think of. Hang onto that thought and let your body relax. Take a couple of deep, quiet breaths if you have to. Just... Relax and loosen up. Don't think of anything else, but that moment. Slowly, raise your hand and place it on a nearby wall. What do you feel? A smooth or rough surface? Is it warm or cold? Describe the senses to yourself while I explain the reason to this gesture.

A wall is a symbol of an obstacle that stands in your way of your dream. No matter how rough or smooth it is, it is there to distract you. To dampen your spirit. Increase the stress on your mind and body. That one wall and many more is there to throw you off the path. That is when the hope starts to falter and the fire in your heart starts to disappear.

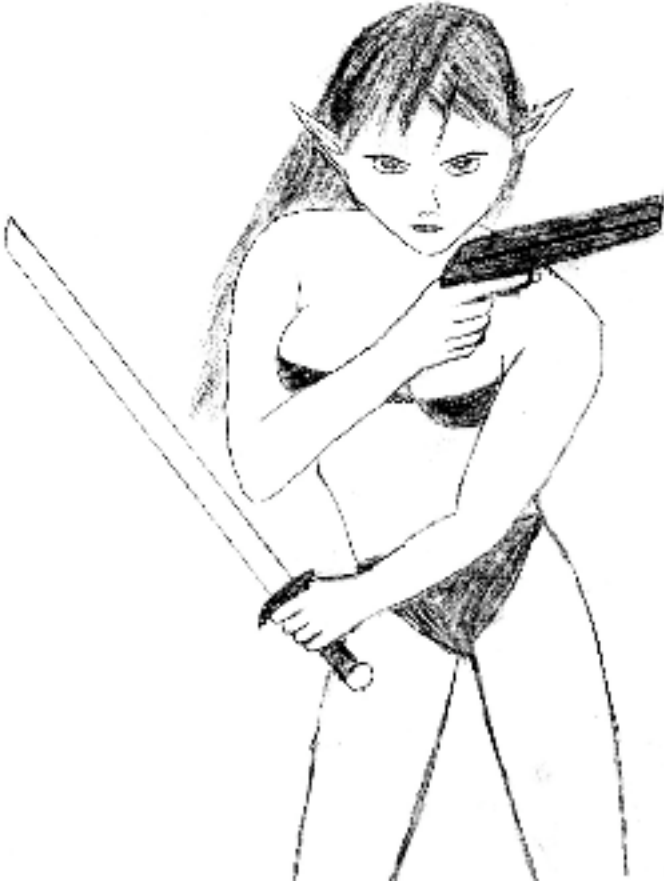
Do not be alarmed for there are ways of going around or above those obstacles. Just this one word will help you course on through without holding back. Support. Teachers, friends, and family are there to help guide you to your future. To teach you what you need to know. To give you a little push when you need to go forward. Grab your hand and raise you up from the ground. Comfort you when you need it most. They are right behind you to support you all the way.

You can't accomplish everything alone after all.

By now, I am sure you're wondering why I am telling you all of this and who I really am. To put it simply, you need a reminder. I'm pretty sure you knew all of this since the beginning, but it won't hurt to remind you every once in a while. You're never alone. You have me after all.

Your conscience.

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>

ME2 HELLDIVER SAGA CHAPTER 22: BELLY OF THE BEAST

Veyron722skyhook
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Once again, things had been rather quiet. No Collector attacks, no calls from the Arkane Council, nothing. Austin was beginning to wonder now if they'd ever get another shot at the Collectors. Had they given up? No, impossible. It was just a matter of time.

The Helldiver major was currently looking through the galaxy map randomly trying to think of somewhere the Normandy could stop off and resupply for a while. Before Austin could contemplate further though, Kelly spoke up.

"Major, the Arkane Council wish to speak to you in the debriefing room." she said.

"Good. About time we got a new update on the situation." said the Helldiver as he made his way to the debriefing room.

As usual, the table in the middle of the room slid down into the floor and the familiar holographic grid enveloped him. The Arkane Council once again stood before him.

"Major, it would seem we've had a stroke of luck. We've intercepted a distress call from a Turian patrol. It seems they stumbled on to a Collector ship beyond the Korlus system." said Spartan.

"The Turians unfortunately were wiped out, but not before they crippled the Collector vessel. We need you and your squad to board that ship and get some hard data on the Collectors. Find us a way to get to their home world." said Tarnack.

"If they had a patrol out there, why aren't the Turians sending a recon team in?" Austin asked.

"They already have. But you're close enough that you can be in and out before they learn the truth. They might not take kindly to us investigating first. It's better that we handle this under the radar." Spartan replied.

"Got it. Send us the coordinates, and we'll take care of It." said Austin.

"Already sent. Once you're aboard the ship, establish an uplink with EDI. She'll mine their data for information regarding the Omega 4 relay." said Tarnack.

"Good luck, Major." said Spartan as the holograms vanished and everything returned to normal again.

"Coordinates punched in. Let's go find us a Collector ship." came

Joker's voice.

Sure enough, the massive Collector was there, floating in space. There were also the few bits of debris of a few Turian ships. No chance of their being survivors.

"We have a visual on the Collector ship, Major." said Joker.

"Very low emission. Passive infrared temperatures suggest most systems are offline. Thrusters are cold." said EDI as her avatar mimicked a person using their omni tool. She often seemed to use these sorts of gestures to indicate that she was doing something.

"That thing's massive. How the hell did the Turians take it out?" said Joker, mesmerized by the Collector ship's massive size.

"Ladar scans do not detect any hull breaches on the side facing us. I detect no mass effect field distortions. It appears the drive core is offline." said EDI.

"Rendezvous in 30 seconds, Major. Good luck." said Joker.

Austin gave Joker a reassuring pat on the shoulder as he made for the cargo bay.

Austin felt it best to stick with a fairly small squad for this mission, rather than taking everyone. He ultimately ended up going with Liara, Tali and Griffin. Overall, that had the best outcomes, heavy and explosives, biotics and tech. they'd hopefully be able to handle anything they encountered.

"Can we expect hostiles?" Griffin asked as he strapped several of his explosives onto his belt.

"Most likely. This time though, we have the element of surprise. If we're lucky, we might not even have to fire a single shot." said Austin.

The Hellhound touched down gently and everyone disembarked. Naturally, the Collectors didn't breathe oxygen, so their ships weren't equipped with life support systems. Not that this troubled the team though. Helldiver suits were designed to survive and function in vacuums and Tali's enviro suit also kept her safe from that sort of thing.

"I've never seen a ship design like this before." said Griffin.

"Looks like a giant insect hive." said Tali.

"Penetrating scans have detected an access node to uplink with Collector databanks." came EDI's voice. "Shepard. I have compared the ship's EM signature to known Collector profiles. It is the vessel you encountered on Horizon."

"Hmm, guess the defence towers softened it for the Turians." said Austin.

"That probably means the missing colonists are aboard. If they're still alive." said Liara.

The ship was indeed very haunting as they slowly made their way through. It was very dark as well. So dark in fact they'd resorted to using their flashlight attachments. A few minutes later, they saw some

of pods they'd seen on Horizon. One in particular looked as though it had recently been opened.

"These are the same containers the Collectors used on Horizon. Only these are empty." said Griffin.

"Must've been horrible. Completely at the mercy of the Collectors and trapped inside a confined space unable to move." said Liara.

"I can definitely sympathise. I know that experience all too well." said Austin, remembering how he'd been trapped inside his suit for two years while he'd been dead.

"I'm sorry, my love. I didn't mean to bring back bad memories." Liara apologised.

"It's alright. I wasn't even conscious for most of that time." said Austin as he put his arm reassuringly on Liara's shoulder. The Asari's mood brightened a bit.

As they proceed further through the ship, things got all the more creepy. To make matters worse, they were starting to see the faintest signs that there'd been a struggle and they could even see dry patches of blood on the floor. Then they found the source. Lying in front of them was a large pile of dead bodies, some were mostly intact, others where in very bad shape. Some even had their limbs missing.

"Goddess, it can't be." said Liara.

"Why would they just leave a pile of bodies lying around?" Tali asked.

"Test subjects. What else?" Griffin answered.

"There are worse things than death, like being a test subject for these creatures." said Austin, trying to make light of the situation.

"I appreciate you trying to make us all feel better, Austin. But I'm afraid it won't really help." said Liara.

"This galaxy never gets any brighter, does it?" said Griffin.

After several more long minutes, they finally found something different and of interest. There was some sort of terminal on a nearby wall. Next to it was an open pod of some kind which contained a dead Collector.

"A Collector? These things experiment on one of their own?" said Griffin, rather surprised that the Collectors would do that sort of thing.

"EDI, I'm uploading the data from this terminal. See if you can figure out what they were up to." said Austin.

"Data received. Analysing." said EDI. There was short pause while she analysed the data before she spoke again. "The Collectors were running baseline genetic comparisons between their species and humanity."

"Are they looking for similarities?" Austin asked as EDI's avatar appeared out of his omni tool.

"I have no hypothesis on their motivations. All I have are the

preliminary results. They reveal something remarkable. A quad-strand genetic structure, identical to traces collected from ancient ruins. Only one race is known to have this structure: the Protheans." said the AI.

Austin stood back slightly in surprise as EDI said this.

"What?! That can't be true. Send the data to Liara." he said.

EDI did so and Liara analysed the data herself. Within seconds, she shared Austin's shock.

"Goddess! She's right. The Collectors are Protheans." she said.

"My god. So the Protheans didn't vanish. They're just working for the Reapers now." said Austin as he looked at the Collector inside the pod. He could barely begin to imagine what sort of pain and torture it had gone through to end up as it was.

"No. These are no longer Protheans, Austin. Their genes show distinct signs of genetic rewrite. The Reapers have repurposed them, changed them to suit their needs." said Liara.

"You think somebody would've picked up on this." said Austin. He was especially surprised that Liara hadn't known about this. She was an expert on the Protheans after all.

"No one has ever had the opportunity to study a Collector in this much detail. Even I would never have even thought of this. All my knowledge of them, and still I always manage to find something new about them, from you." Liara said, smiling at her bond mate under her helmet as she said the last bit.

"There's a time and a place, you two." said Griffin.

"So the Reapers didn't wipe out the Protheans. They turned them into monsters and enslaved them. Still, they're working for our enemy now. And we have to stop them." said Austin.

"We are not going to suffer the same fate as the Protheans. We'll kill every single one of them before they get the chance!" said Griffin, confidently as he banged his fist into his other palm.

"That's the spirit. Now let's find what we need before more Collectors come to salvage this vessel. Move out." said Austin.

The team made their way further through the ship. As they did, more and more pods began to come into their field of view.

"Holy... more pods." said Griffin.

"There must be hundreds of them. How many do you think are full?" Tali asked.

"Too many." said Austin coldly as he scanned one of them with his helmet's computer.

"Anything?" Liara asked.

"No. There are no signs of life at all. The victims inside must've died when the ship lost power." said Austin regrettably.

Joker then spoke over the radio.

"Major. You gotta hear this. On a hunch, I asked EDI to run an

analysis on this ship." he said.

"I compared the EM profile against data recorded by the original Normandy two years again and also with the data recorded by your suit. They are an exact match." said EDI.

Everyone froze when they heard this. The exact same ship?

"The same ship dogging me for two years? This is way beyond coincidence. I've got a bad feeling about this." said Austin.

"Something doesn't add up, Major. Watch your back." said Joker.

The team took it even more slowly and made sure they scanned the hallways properly with their lights. The darkness was the perfect weapon for the Collectors to attack them. A bright light then illuminated the area and they found themselves inside a massive room. It was clearly the inner cylinder of the ship, and it was simply massive. This alone could hose an entire army of Collectors, or hundreds of thousands of innocent colonists.

"Keehlah!" said Tali.

"They could take every human in the Terminus systems alone and they'd still have pods left over." said Griffin, almost speechless at the sight.

"They're going to attack earth!" said Liara.

"Not on my watch!" said Austin.

"There. A control panel. That' should be what we're looking for." said Tali as she indicated to a nearby control panel.

"Strange though. No bodies, Collector or Turian. Careful, Shepard. Something's horribly wrong here." said Griffin suspiciously as he took safety off on his minigun. A voice in his head kept telling the demolition expert that something wasn't right about this.

"EDI? I'm setting up bridge between you and the Collector ship. See if you can get anything useful from the data banks." said Austin as he activated his omni tool and set up the connection.

"Data-mine in progress, Shepard." said EDI.

Joker watched as three holographic screens appeared in front of him. They went through millions of lines of code within seconds. Suddenly, they all stopped and flashed some sort of warning sign, as though a virus had just infected them.

Joker then heard an unwelcome sound. He looked at where EDI's avatar should have been only to find it replaced by the Collector general. It was only present for a moment before it quickly vanished and everything went dark.

"Uh... that can't be good."

The ground seemed to shake slightly as several panels seemed to pop up inside some kind of cylinders on the walls.

"What just happened? Give a status report, now!" Austin said into his comlink.

"Major power surge. Everything went dark, but we're back up

now." Joker replied.

"I managed to divert the majority of the overload to non-critical systems. Shepard, it was not a malfunction..." said EDI.

"THIS WAS A TRAP!" Harbinger's voice boomed throughout the ship.

The whole floor then shook again and seemed to start rotating and slowly lifted into the air. The control panel had very cleverly been on the platform, right where they were vulnerable.

"We need a little help here, EDI..." said Austin as he and the other struggled to keep their balance.

"I am having trouble maintaining connection. There's someone else in the system." said EDI.

The platform then stopped spinning abruptly causing everyone to briefly lose their balance and stumble. Liara even fell right over and Austin fell on top of her. Despite the circumstances though, the couple didn't seem to mind.

"Why do you always seem to end up on top?" Liara smiled under her helmet.

"A lower centre of gravity?" Austin smiled as he helped his lover up.

EDI then once again appeared out of the control panel. She knelt down and activated omni tool, as though she was trying to send a message while under enemy fire.

"Connection re-established. I need to finish the download before I can override any systems." she said.

"Then you better get a done fast, EDI. We've got company." said Austin as he noticed two more platforms heading their way; both of them had Collectors on them.

Everyone immediately unholstered their weapons again and went into cover. The two platforms quickly joined onto their one and the Collectors started firing.

"Go get 'em Chiktikka! Good girl!" said Tali as she activated her omni tool and a pink combat drone appeared.

Despite this occupying some of the Collectors, most of them still concentrated on where the team was.

"Well, out of the frying pan and into the fire." Austin sighed.

"Think I could take about 50 of them. How about you?" Griffin asked.

"How about you save your jokes until we get out of this, Griffin?" Austin replied.

"No argument there, sir." Said Griffin.

The demolition expert hopped out of cover and began firing. His gun ripped through several of the Collectors before he had to go back into cover again.

Gunfire was all over the place and pretty soon it turned into a mini war zone. Explosions, shrapnel flying all over the place and plenty of

Collector blood stains.

"I'm out! Throw me a mag!" Liara shouted as her Avenger clicked.

"Here! Make it count!" Austin yelled over the loud explosions as he took a magazine clip from his combat belt and threw it to Liara.

The Collectors didn't last long, but another wave quickly replaced the one they had just killed.

"Eighty-four percent." Said EDI.

"EDI! Get us out of here!" Austin yelled.

"I am simultaneously fighting Collector firewalls in over 8,000 nodes. I am tasked to capacity." Said EDI.

"Whatever you say." Liara sighed as she armed her shoulder cannon.

"Watch it! They've brought out the big guns!" said Griffin who also activated his dual shoulder cannons.

The next platform this time had several Collectors and a Scion. At first, that didn't look like a problem. But then one of the Collectors started to glow.

"I will show you true power!"

"Watch it! Harbinger's back!" Austin yelled as the Collector fell back down, now once again covered in orange cracks and with glowing eyes.

"Go for the optics, Chiktikka. Go for the optics!" said Tali.

The little combat drone hovered around the scion who tried to swipe at it, but to no avail. Harbinger threw several dark biotic attacks at the team. Liara blocked some of them with a barrier, but a few did make Austin and Griffin stagger back.

"We could use some heavy artillery here, Griffin! Anything new you wanna try out?" Austin shouted as he ducked back into cover to avoid the oncoming gunfire.

"I've got something, but it's mad!" Griffin replied.

"Anything's better than this!" said Liara who ducked just in time to avoid one of Harbinger's warp attacks.

"Fire in the hole!" Griffin yelled as he threw a surprisingly large cylinder object at the four Collectors.

The insect humanoids briefly looked at the device puzzlingly as it landed at their feet. It then suddenly opened and seemed to explode with some kind of liquid which sprayed over the floor and even splatted onto the Collectors. One even slipped and fell over.

"You cannot beat us!" Harbinger continued, completely unfazed by the fact the Collector he was possessing was now covered in this substance.

"Was that supposed to happen?" Austin asked, ducking back slightly as a shot impacted on the side of the bit of wall he was taking cover behind.

"Wait a second!" Griffin said. He looked as though he was waiting

for something else to happen.

Sure enough, it did. The device then exploded in a rather large fire ball, causing the fluid it had dispersed to ignite. The three normal Collectors seemed to screech in pain as they caught fire and the one that had fallen on the fire desperately tried to put out the flames by rolling. It was panicking so much though that it simply rolled in more of the flames. Harbinger even exploded since he'd been covered in most of the substance.

"Releasing control!"

The Scion meanwhile was still swiping desperately at Tali's combat drone, Chiktikka who was still hovering around the Husk's face and shocking its eyes. The Scion couldn't use its arm cannon since Chiktikka was too close. Plus, the Scion had extremely stiff joints, despite its huge muscular form.

Tali saw an opening and aimed her shotgun. The Scion fell as Tali shot out its knee and it lost its balance. As the Husk tried to get up, it saw Tali standing over it, shot gun aimed right at its head.

"Bosh'tet."

Tali fired and the Scion's face was blown to pieces.

Everyone took a moment to get their breath back. That had been a tough fight

"Everyone alright?" Austin asked.

Everyone gave a silent nod.

"Shepard, you must manually re-establish my link to the command console." said EDI.

Austin nodded to Tali who walked up to the control panel and reactivated the link. EDI's avatar, which had been crouched down on top of the panel this whole time, stood back up and turned to face everyone.

"I have regained control of the platform, Shepard." she said.

"Good work, EDI. I knew you wouldn't let us down." Austin smiled.

"I always work at optimal capacity." EDI seemed to smile back.

"Did we get what we needed?" Liara asked.

The platform they were stood on once again moved. This time though, it was intentional. EDI was in control now.

"I found data that could help us successfully navigate the Omega 4 relay. I have also found the Turian distress call that served as the lure for this trap. The Collectors were the source, but it is unusual." said EDI.

"I don't see why. It seems logical to me that the Collectors would've sent the original message as bait." said Griffin.

"Turian emergency channels have secondary encryption. It is present but corrupted in the message." said EDI.

"Are you sure? The Arkane Council would definitely have noticed

that if it was. And I refuse to believe that they'd just send us into a trap unknowingly if they did." Austin asked.

"Your beliefs are correct, Shepard. The Arkane Council did not know about the corruption either because it was fixed in the message they received." EDI explained.

"I fear I'm beginning to see where this is going. We're not the only ones that received the message, are we? Someone else intercepted it, and changed the encryption." Said Liara.

"Correct, and I have found out who: The Illusive Man himself." Said EDI.

"That son of a bitch!" said Austin angrily.

"Only a matter of time before Cerberus tried another hit on us, but I never would've expected this. They're not as stupid as we might think." Said Griffin.

"Uh... Major. We've got another problem. The Collector ship is powering up. You need to get out before their weapons come online. I'm not losing another Normandy." Said Joker.

As the pilot spoke, the large tunnel they'd been in earlier started was filled with some sort of wind. Obviously that was first sign of the ship powering back up.

"I do not have full control of their systems. I will do what I can. Sending coordinates for dropship extraction." Said EDI.

"Come on. Let's move!" said Austin.

This time, they didn't bother trying to take it slow. The Collectors knew they were here now, and they were coming for them.

Pretty soon, the team were once again in another large room of the ship. There were more platforms in the way of where they needed to go.

"I am opening a door on the far side of the room." said EDI.

Sure enough, the door on the far side of the room opened.

"Careful, this is a good place for an ambush." Austin advised.

They made their way gently across the platforms. Within seconds however, they was another sudden lurch. This time though, the platform they were on stood still. Instead, the platforms that had been joined to the one they were on detached and started hovering. This was a problem since there was a massive drop between the platform and the door. Not even the Helldivers would be able to jump that far, let alone Tali.

The hovering platforms then started to circle around the main platform, which also started very slowly spinning in the other direction.

"This ain't good." Griffin growled as he readied his mingun.

"Let us see how you deal with these odds, Shepard. Release the Captains!" Harbinger's voice echoed throughout the ship.

Five of the outlining platforms suddenly opened one dispensed a

crouched Collector. But these weren't ordinary Collectors, they looked different. Unlike the usual Collectors, these ones had a lighter skin colour, a more muscular build and larger heads with oriented horns on them. These, Captains as Harbinger seemed to call them also had two extra eyes compared to normal Collectors and each one of them had a special weapon on their back.

Two of the Collector Captains had Collector assault rifles, one had a sniper, and another had what looked like a pistol. This particular Captain also appeared to have a very small swarm of seekers flying around it. The final one had the usual Collector particle beam and was being controlled by Harbinger.

The team stood their ground as the Captains all stood up and glared at their targets.

"Made some upgrades have you? Still won't save you." said Griffin as he fired several shot at one of the Captains.

To everyone's utter astonishment though, the Captain leapt high into the air, avoiding Griffin's fire and then landed on their platform. The Captain charged at Griffin and grabbed his mingun. The two opponents started wrestling with one another trying to shake their grip. Austin and the others would've helped him, but the other Captains then opened fire. They took cover inside the inner part of their platform, behind some of walls it had.

Austin took this time to scan one of the Captains. To his surprise, he could clearly see signs of advanced speed implants, reinforce metal on the exo skeletons, harder skin tissue and armour, and even other bits of technology which clearly looked like copies or knock offs of Helldiver technology.

"Helldiver Collector hybrids. They've learned." said Austin. He then turned to the other who kept their heads down to avoid all the constant gun fire and pieces of platform flying all over the place. "Be careful, they've copied some of our tech!" he said.

Liara threw up a few biotic barriers to try and deflect some of the Collector fire. Tali once again activated Chiktikka and fired three shots from her shotgun. Griffin meanwhile eventually managed to kick the Collector Captain he was wrestling with away. As he swung at the Captain with the blade end of his gun however, the Captain suddenly flew over him and back onto one of the rotating platforms. Even these Collectors had wings.

Griffin quickly decided to abandon this fight and headed back to his teammates.

"They seem to have advanced combat training too. Hand to hand included." he said.

"We can still..." Austin said, but he was interrupted by a sudden groan of pain.

Everyone looked to see Tali staggering back and clutching her

stomach. The Collectors had shot her.

"TALI!" Austin yelled as he ran over to the Quarian.

"Nnnngh! I'm alright, Austin! But they punctured my suit. Think I took one in the hip," Tali groaned. She did indeed sound alright, just slightly injured as though someone had simply punched or kicked her. She'd live. At worst she'd probably just get a bit ill from this, but not die.

Still, she wasn't in any shape to fight any more. Austin put her net to Griffin while she started applying some medi gel to her wounds and trying to patch her suit back up. Griffin went to return fire, but an order from Austin stopped him.

"Griffin, protect Tali! She can't fight with suit punctured!" he said.

Despite that Griffin preferred to attack rather than defend, he did as he was told and refrained from firing. Just as he was about to go back into cover however, he spotted another Collector Captain aiming at him, this time with a sniper rifle. Griffin went to fire, but wasn't fast enough and the Collector fired. The shot hit the demolition expert in the chest and he slumped onto the wall. The shot hadn't killed him, he was too tough for that. At worst, the bullet would simply be a flesh wound, Griffin's shields and armour had slowed the bullet down considerably, plus all Helldivers were given special injections which made them stronger, faster, more resistant to pain and more immune to diseases than their normal kind. So although Griffin was down but not out, he was vulnerable.

"Griffin! Sniper!" Austin yelled.

Both he and Liara ducked to avoid the sniper next shot before Liara threw a warp at it. The Captain quickly sped to one side to avoid it and went back behind cover.

Another Captain then suddenly landed right in front of Griffin's currently unconscious body and pointed it's assault rifle at him. Austin was too preoccupied with Harbinger and the others at the moment, so Liara went for it. She ran and jumped over Griffin's body. As she did, she holstered her own rifle and kicked the Collector Captain's one out of its hands. The Captain looked only to then be kicked back by Liara.

The Asari had had over two years to learn a few new things. One of them, was advanced hand to hand. Plus, Xun and Zartrack had taught her a few things as well.

Liara turned back to see if Griffin was alright, but she failed to notice that her kicked hadn't kicked the Collector Captain as far back as she'd hoped. The Captain's left hand seemed to change into some sort of knife and it swung at Liara. The Asari just managed to hear her attacker in time though and she ducked her head under it. She then swung her left leg at the Collector as it missed its target and swung over her. Unfortunately, the Collector did the same and ducked

under Liara's leg.

The two opponents exchanged several elbow blocks and swings at one another. At the same time, Griffin had now regained consciousness. He groaned as he tried to get back up. The Collector Captain then deployed its wings and hovered up slightly very fast. At the same time, it kicked Liara, causing her to stagger back and almost fall off the edge. Just in time though, she regained her balance just as the Captain went to shoot Griffin in the head, pushing him down with its foot in the process. Liara noticed this just in time and did a running kick in the Collector. Unfortunately, the Collector had still been flying and it simply returned the attack with a violent push.

This time, it was enough to send Liara over the edge. Fortunately, the Asari just managed to grip the edge and held on. Unfortunately however, the Collector Captain she'd just been fighting once again aimed for Griffin's head. Just as it was about to pull the trigger however, Austin suddenly appeared from behind and charged the Collector. The insect was sent flying and its head banged into one of the other platforms that was floating around their one. Its neck snapped in the process and it plummeted into the abyss.

Liara then pulled herself up and then jumped at the hovering platform opposite her. Two of the other Collector Captains were waiting for her. The one that was flying fired on her, but she ducked behind cover. Rather shockingly, the other one ripped away a large section of the platform and threw it at Liara. The Asari rolled out of the way and the piece instead hit very close to where Austin and Griffin were. The two Helldivers only just dodged it.

"Whoa! Would you quit throwing shit?!" Austin shouted.

Austin then noticed the Collector Captain sniper again. He wasn't going to make the same mistake this time.

"Griffin, on your nine!" he yelled.

Griffin immediately looked to his left and threw one of his grenades at the platform the sniper was standing on. The platform exploded and was sent plummeting down to join the dead Collector Captain from earlier. The sniper however had somehow survived and had been sent flying by the explosion. It quickly regained control of its flight using its wings, but this short-lived right before it flew straight into Griffin's left gauntlet. The massive fist hit the Collector so hard, he snapped the Captain's spine. The sniper fell into the blackness to join its comrade and the destroyed platform.

Two down, three to go. Liara was now in a fist fight with other two captains and Harbinger had now hooped onto their platform brandishing what looked like some sort of organic blade in place of his right arm.

"You will know pain, Shepard." Said the Reaper as he raised the blade challengingly.

Austin didn't even hesitate as he drew Excalibur from his back. Griffin immediately knew that Austin had this one. He turned his attention to the platform Liara and the other two captains where on. He readied himself to jump once it had got close enough.

"Watch it... Watch it..." said Austin cautiously.

Griffin leapt onto to the platform, lunging at the other Collector Captain at the same time. The Collector unfortunately noticed this and flew out of the way just in time. Griffin still landed on the platform however, rolling back onto his feet as he did, and he immediately charged at his opponent. He gave a somewhat intimidating growl as he charged.

The Collector Captain brought it's fist up, stopping Griffin before he could punch back. In two swift moves, it then elbowed him in the stomach and then delivered a swift kick to his helmet. The demolition expert staggered back and soon ended up back to back with Liara.

Despite that the odds where now even, Griffin still felt as though they weren't quite right. The Collector Captain he was facing seemed somewhat more agile, while the one Liara was facing had a slightly heavier build. This quickly made Griffin remember a chess move that Helldivers could sometimes put to good use in situations like these. Castling!

"Switch!"

"Got it!"

Both Helldiver immediately switched positions and where now battling the other opponent. Sure enough, Liara was able to keep up with the fast high kicking and sweeps of her Collector Captain while Griffin was quickly putting his boxing exercises to good use with his Collector Captain. He didn't have all those muscles and his massive build for nothing.

Both Austin and Harbinger charged at one another, sword's raised. Austin ducked under Harbinger's first swing before the Collector whirled around and swung at him again. This time though, the Helldiver blocked it. It was odd actually, Austin wouldn't have figured he'd be fencing with a Collector, let alone a Collector being controlled by a Reaper.

Still, he hadn't used Excalibur in a while, he was at least glad to someone duelling with him.

"Liara, catch!" Griffin yelled as he tossed his mingun to Liara who caught it and immediately used it to counter or block several shots from her Collector Captain's pistol. She then whirled around another shot and then used the blade end to stab the Captain in the abdomen. As the Collector struggled to push the blade out however, it

threw it's pistol to the other Captain that Griffin was fighting.

The Collector caught it and delivered several fast punches to Griffin, knocking him back. Griffin simply growled at this and swung his gauntleted left hand at his opponent. The Collector Captain blocked the Helldiver's attack with its palm. The Collector's other hand, which had the pistol in it, then thrust into Griffin's chin and fired. The bullet didn't go through due to Griffin's shields and hardened armour, but it still disoriented him.

The Collector Captain used this opening and threw Griffin to the ground. It pinned the demolition expert to the ground as he tried to get up and then fired several more shots, this time at Griffin's neck. The demolition expert seemed to stop trying to resist.

"No!" Liara yelled as she charged the captain and knocked it back. Taking the advantage while the Collector was down, Liara swung the blade end of Griffin's minigun at it. Just in time though, the Collector Captain rolled to the side as the blade became imbedded in the ground instead. The Collector captain delivered a swift kick to Liara's stomach and she staggered back.

As the Captain went to attack the Asari though, Liara was faster and attacked first. She punched and then kicked the Collector before it eventually managed to seize and opening and swung at her. Once again though, Liara backed away and the swing missed.

Liara then did something that she hadn't yet tried before. She activated her biotics and used them to speed herself up. She had been taught this by Alaara but hadn't tied it out herself, let alone in combat. But she didn't have much choice. These Collector Captains could compete with them on nearly every level.

Liara punched the Collector Captain several times with such speed that she became a blur. All the while, the Collector that Liara was fighting failed to notice Griffin slowly getting back up. Once again, despite being shot several times, he wasn't dead. In fact the bullets hadn't even impacted into his skin. His shields and armour had deflected them and Liara had managed to intervene just before his shields gave out.

The Demolition expert picked up his mingun and loaded a new set of round into it. These Collector Captain's where about to find out what happened when he got pissed off. Right as he pulled the trigger though, a small shot to his shoulder from a Collector Captain. The charge shot from his mingun hit the platform instead of the Collectors. The explosion sent both him and Liara flying back onto the platform that Austin and Harbinger where currently duelling on while the platform they'd just been on was half destroyed and was sent plummeting, taking the two Collector Captain's with it. Liara and Griffin slowly sat up as they watched the platform disappear into the abyss. It was only then however that they became aware of the sword

fight still going on behind them. Liara wanted to help her bond mate, but at the same time she didn't want to get in the way.

Austin and Harbinger clashed blades back and forth across the platform. Austin was starting to regret that he'd been enjoying the prospect of sword fighting again. Harbinger was not what could be called a worthy opponent. He never seemed to tire and he also seemed to try and punch Austin more than trying to strike at him. Austin reckoned he'd have a dent in his helmet at this rate.

Eventually, the Helldiver decided he'd had enough of this. Harbinger managed to get another punch at him, but that was the last time. Austin ducked under another one of Harbinger's swings and then he performed a mover very similar to how he'd killed the Terror Geth 3 years ago.

His left arm and hand became completely armoured and he now had what Helldivers often called "Fist of steel." He immediately thrust forward and smashed Harbinger's face in.

The Collector staggered, blinded slightly at having lost nearly one side of its face. The Captain swung frantically at Austin before attempting a blind lunge at him. The Helldiver however simply blocked it, his sword ending up in the gap between Harbinger's pincer like sword arm. Austin didn't waste this opportunity while he had Harbinger's arm locked like this. He activated his left omni tool.

Harbinger only regained his sights for a moment before Austin brought the orange blade down and severed his blade arm completely.

"Kill one, and a thousand more shall replace it!" said the Collector just as Austin plunged the blade into Harbinger's face hard and then severed his neck with Excalibur. The decapitated body fell to floor, completely lifeless.

"Griffin, are you alright?" Austin asked urgently as he saw Griffin struggling to get up without wincing in pain from some of his wounds. He didn't look too bad, but there was some signs of blood.

Don't worry, Shepard. You're not getting rid of me that easily. I'll be fine. Just need a bit of medical care."

Then we'd better get back to the ship. Tali's not to good herself." Said Liara.

Austin helped the Quarian up and they made for the door. Just before they could head through though, it closed.

"EDI? We've got a problem here." said Austin. He banged on the door several times, but it wouldn't open.

"A temporary setback on Firewall 3217. Rerouting commands through Firewall 7164." said EDI.

"Just get another door open!" Griffin ordered.

"I have successfully opened a door on the opposite wall. I will keep it open as long as I can." said EDI.

Sure enough, a door on the far side of the room opened. The team

didn't even hesitate to head through it.

"Down there. That's where we came in." said Tali as she saw the room where they'd seen the Collector body earlier and where they'd learned the Collector's origins.

"Better to go the short way. Jump!" said Austin. He then turned to Tali. She wouldn't be able to do a jump that high, especially in the state she was currently in. "Sorry about this, Tali."

Austin scooped Tali up in his arms and jumped. Liara quickly followed. The landings were hard, but left no damage. Helldiver armour was designed for this sort of thing anyway.

Griffin quickly followed and jumped. As he landed however, he fell to his knees clutching his bullet wound in pain. Liara quickly ran to help him up.

"I'm alright. Just stings." Griffin groaned.

"Uh, Major? Hate to rush you, but those weapons are about to come online. Might wanna double-time it. You know, so we can leave before the blow the Normandy in half." Austin heard Joker say.

The Major quickly put Tali back down on her feet and they continued their journey back to the Hellhound.

"We're out of time, Major! We have to go." Said Joker.

"You heard the man – into the Hellhound! Move!" Austin yelled, providing cover fire as the other got into the dropship.

"Strap in people – gonna make them work for it this time."

The dropship locked into place in the hanger. Liara rushed Tali and Griffin to the med bay while Austin ran back up to the bridge. He could already see the beam of the Collector Ship's main cannon as the Normandy spun and dodged to avoid it. Joker really had his work cut out for him.

"We can't dodge this guy forever, EDI. Get us the hell out of here!" said the pilot.

"Specify a destination, Mr Moreau." Said EDI.

"Anywhere that's not here!" Joker yelled as the ship gave violent lurch.

"Very well. Engaging mass effect core." Said EDI.

The ship immediately accelerated to mass relay speeds and they soon lost sight of Collector Ship behind them. They were in the clear.

"Call coming in from the Arkane Council, Major. Figure they're just as pissed at the Illusive Man as you are." said Joker.

Austin once again walked into the comm room and the council appeared before him. They didn't look happy.

"Major, we heard about what happened. It would never have occurred to us that someone had fixed the encryption. We've notified the Turians that the message is fake. They should stay clear. We can only tell you that we're sorry the lives of your squad were risked." said

Spartan.

"It's not your fault, councillors. It's Cerberus you should be angry with." Austin replied.

"It would seem that they're not going to leave you alone. We'll have to do something about that." said one of the Arkanes.

"We'll put a plan into motion to try and keep Cerberus occupied. This'll remain secret though. We're not taking any chances unless Cerberus has spies in our ranks." said Tarnack.

"Good. And I know now to be a lot more careful. With the Collectors and with Cerberus." said Austin.

"Maybe, but things are about to get a lot tougher. EDI confirmed our suspicions. Both the Reapers and the Collector ships use an advanced identify Friend/Foe system that the relays recognize." Tarnack replied.

"All we need to do is get our hands on one of those IFFs." said Spartan.

"If only I'd been told that sooner. I was just on the Collector Ship." Austin sighed.

"As we said though, Major. EDI just confirmed it. Besides, even with your squad's skill, you wouldn't have had enough time to extract it. But not to worry, there are other options." said another Arkane.

"I'm listening."

"An Alliance science team recently determined that the "Great Rift" on the planet Klendagon is actually an impact crater from a mass accelerator weapon." Spartan explained.

"A very old mass accelerator at that. Cerberus unfortunately acted before we did and they sent a team to find either the weapon or its target. Our spies tell us they found both." said Tarnack.

"The weapon was defunct, but it helped Cerberus and us plot the flight path of the intended target – a 37 million year old derelict Reaper. Cerberus found it damaged and trapped in the gravity of a brown dwarf." said Spartan.

"I saw first-hand what Sovereign did to the Citadel fleet. Hard to imagine anything could stop something that powerful." said Austin.

"This vessel is a relic from a battle waged while mammals took their first steps on Earth. There's no trace of the species that took the shot. Perhaps it was their one moment of defiance before they were wiped out." said an unknown councillor.

"I take it there's a catch though? Even a dead Reaper can still cause trouble." Austin asked.

"Unfortunately, yes. Cerberus lost contact with their team shortly after they boarded and we lost contact with our spy a few days later. His last entry only mentioned something about Indoctrination. I fear we will have to accept the worse. It's a shame; he was one of our best." said Tarnack regrettably.

"If the Reaper's IFF can help Shepard stop the Collectors, his sacrifice will not have been in vain." said another councillor.

"Have Cerberus done anything about their missing Science team?" Austin asked.

"They sent an initial reconnaissance, but it revealed no clues. They committed more resources either; they say it's too risky. Though to be fair, the same goes for us. But this time, we need that IFF. This may be the only chance we have left." Spartan replied.

"I agree. Though if it's this dangerous, I'd feel it best to wait until we're ready. Some of the crew are still distracted, not focused on the mission." said Austin.

"Do what you have to do, Shepard. Just keep this mind. We'll forward the coordinates to Mr Moreau for when the time is right. Good luck, Shepard. And don't worry, from now on, we'll deal with Cerberus." said Tarnack.

"Also, in the meantime, we'd recommend you still keep an eye on Jacob Taylor and Miranda Lawson. They may be on our side now, but we still don't trust them completely." said Spartan.

"Nor do I, Councillors. Nor do I." said Austin as the call ended.

"So the Illusive man tried to sell us out. Was wondering when he would." said Jacob.

Austin had gathered him, Miranda, Mordin, Dell, Sill and Alaara in the comm room. Jacob's reaction to the Illusive Man trying to get them killed had been better than Austin had thought. Miranda hadn't really said anything on the subject. Austin did have to admit that her attitude had improved a bit recently. Perhaps now she was starting to see that Cerberus wasn't what she had thought it was and that the Helldiver's weren't the enemy.

"Lied to you. Used you. Unacceptable." said Mordin, agreeing with Jacob's statement.

"What do you expect? Are far as he's concerned, Jacob and I are the enemy now." said Miranda.

"He should be looking at the bigger picture. He says Cerberus looks out for humanity, yet he tries to stop us from helping. Just shows that he's wrong." said Alaara.

"Exactly. And if he tries to put my squad or any of this team in harm's way again, losing two of his best operatives will be the second worst thing that happens to him in his life!" said Austin. He then turned back to EDI's avatar that was currently stood on the table.

"EDI, are you sure this IFF is going to work?" he asked.

"My analysis is correct, Shepard. I have also determined the approximate location of the Collector home world based on navigational data from their vessel." said EDI.

A huge map of the galaxy then appeared in front of her and it zoomed in on the centre. EDI's avatar pointed right at the galactic

core. Everyone fell into a surprised and somewhat confused silence.

"That can't be right." said Miranda.

"EDI's never wrong, Lawson. You should know, you built her. The Collector home world is somewhere inside the galactic core." said Austin.

"But it can't be. The core is just black holes and exploding suns. There are no habitable planets there." said Jacob.

"Could be an artificial construction. Space station protected by powerful mass effect fields and radiation shields." Mordin suggested.

"Is that even possible?" asked Sill.

"Even the Collectors don't have that kind of technology." said Miranda as she shook her head. Austin on the other hand knew better.

"Sovereign did. And besides, you're forgetting that the Collectors are just servants of our real enemy. We've all seen what the Reapers are capable of. They built the mass relays, the Citadel, the Keepers and have wiped out countless other races before us. Who's to say that they can't build a space station surrounded by black holes?" he said.

"Well, just about every law of physics would say that." said Dell.

Everyone looked at the Arkane engineer for a moment. Dell quickly finished his sentence as they did. "But since when do the Reapers play by the rules?"

"It certainly now makes sense why no one's ever returned from a trip through the Omega 4 mass relay." said Alaara.

"Miss T'onrak is correct. The logical conclusion is that a small safe zone exists on the far side of the relay. A region where ships can survive. Standard relay transit protocols would not allow safe transport. Drift of several thousand kilometres is common, and would be fatal in the galactic core. The Reaper IFF must trigger the relay to us more advanced, encrypted protocols." said EDI.

"So what's the plan, Major? We going to get that IFF?" Alaara asked.

"Not yet. Just because we can follow the Collectors through the Relay doesn't mean we can take them out. I don't want to go after them until I know we're ready." said Austin.

"Sooner or later we need that IFF. I say, why wait?" said Jacob.

"Your opinion is noted, Taylor. But you're not the one in charge here, Shepard is." said Alaara defensively.

"For once, Alaara, we agree. It's a derelict Reaper. Suppose the Collectors are waiting for us? We may want to still keep building up this team before we take that kind of risk." said Miranda.

"I didn't think you cared about that." said Alaara, rather surprised by Miranda saying something like that.

"Don't presume to know me all the time, T'onrak. I may not act it, but I want the Collectors stopped as much as you." said Miranda.

Alaara didn't say anything, but simply gave Miranda and acknowledging nod.

"That's why you're all here. We all need to be strong and focused for this mission. Besides, Tali and Griffin need some time to recover from their injuries." said Austin.

"It's your decision, Major. Whatever you decide we're with you." said Jacob as he saluted.

"Everyone get some rest. We could all use some. Dismissed."

"You had me so worried when you were trapped on the Collector ship. Thank goodness for EDI." said Kelly.

"That sounds like more than just professional concern, Kelly." said Austin. He hoped this wasn't going to start ending up like that dream he'd had.

"You're more than just my commanding officer, you're my friend. EDI brought you back to us. If she had a body, I'd give her a big hug." Kelly smiled.

Austin relaxed. There was nothing wrong with Kelly being a friend. Plus, as Austin recalled, Kelly seemed to be spending a lot of time talking with Jack. It did certainly give him the feeling that something was going on between the two.

"Fair to say that so would I. We might not have made it out alive without her." he said.

"The Arkane Council made sure EDI was installed for this mission. Now I see why." said Kelly. "Anyway, is there anything you need?"

"Anything I need to know? I imagine some of the crew might be on edge after all this." Austin asked.

"At the moment, the crew seems fine. You do however have a new message at your private terminal. It arrived from a Helldiver scouting team while you were on the Collector ship." Kelly replied.

"Thanks, Kelly. Can I quickly ask you something personal though?" Austin replied.

"About you or me?" Kelly asked.

"You. I've recently noticed you've been spending quite a lot of your free time with Jack. Is there anything going on there?" Austin asked. He did his best to ask politely. He wasn't intruding, he was just curious.

"I... I'll admit I care about her. She's been through so much in her life. Despite her attitude sometimes, she'd confided in me a lot. I don't know if she feels the same way about me, but we are at least friends." said Kelly.

"I see. Well, thank you for telling me. I do hope that there is something going on between you two. Personally, I think Jack needs someone, considering all that she's been through. Someone like you." said Austin.

"Thank you, Shepard. It means a lot to me to hear you say that."

Kelly smiled. "If you'll excuse me, I should get back to work. But thank you for the talk. It's always nice chatting with you."

"You too, Kelly." Austin smiled as the Yeoman went back to work.

The Major then went to his private terminal and accessed the message that Kelly had told him about. Turned out he had more than one. Mostly, they were just a few bits of junk mail that had somehow ended up here. Austin simply deleted them. He then found what he was looking for. Surprisingly, it was a message from Arnold. It said:

Shepard

Xun told me how I'd be able to get in touch with you. I hope things are well with you and that your mission is progressing well too.

I can only say thank you again for saving me and my squad on Omega. The Arkanes have now got us doing scouting mission most of the time. Some of Omega squad want to see some action again, but they don't complain.

Recently we found something I thought you might be interested in. The Arkane Council also felt you should have a look.

We recently found some Intel on a Cerberus base that said that the MSV Rosalie, a survey ship with Cerberus connections, has gone missing. The survey team was field-testing a new prototype: the Hammerhead planet-side exploration rover. In addition, scientists Dr Manuel Cayce and Dr Robert O'Loy were aboard the MSV Rosalie and were conducting research for them.

There was even a very small bit of data that made reference that they'd found some Prothean ruins. Given that you have Liara with you, and that you've now discovered the Collectors where once Protheans, I felt this might be of some help to you. I don't know how exactly, but I'm sure you'll find some use.

Good luck out there, old friend.

Give the Collectors hell for us!

Captain Arnold Winchester, Omega Squad.

Austin finished reading and gave a small smile.

"Good old Arnold." he thought to himself.

BROKEN WINGS CHAPTER 9

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

A week has passed since Gaara's outburst on the town. Aoi stayed closer to him now; even though he had hurt her she knew she had to keep an eye on him. When she was in a class without him she found herself doodling pictures of him all over her work. She hoped that nobody would notice and it took her a while to realise that she was doing it. Naruto picked up on it several times which made Aoi blush madly. Tonight was the night of Akatsuki's concert. Everyone was getting ready now. Most people were excited for the after party; to hang out with the guys but Aoi just wanted to go to the concert.

"Hey, Aoi, you ready?" Itachi asked coming in.

"Uh yeah, pretty much," Aoi smiled at him and looked down at her dress.

"Remember, you're my date for the pictures okay. When we walk into the concert area from the limo you link arms with me. After the concert everyone gets changed back stage and we go to the after party. You link arms with me as we enter the place, alright?"

"Yeah, I got it."

Aoi hated the fact that she would have to explain all of this to Gaara. Aoi would've much preferred just entering with Gaara. She called up Gaara to explain the whole situation and he said he would go along with it. Aoi was unsure about his words though. Everyone else was going too so it would be a big group anyway. Including the band members.

They all walked out to the stretch limo. Itachi and Aoi sat in the back; Sasuke sat on the side and ignored them. They drove around to pick up the girls. They set near Sasuke. He put his arm around Sakura proving things had gotten better. Hinata kind of sat on the other side of Sakura. Ino sat on the other side of Sasuke. They picked up Naruto and Kiba next. Kiba sat directly in front of Ino and they chatted, getting kind of friendly even though Ino never admitted that she liked Kiba that way. Naruto sat next to Hinata which made her face go bright red. He talked to Sasuke for a bit before smiling at Hinata and trying to make a move. Then they picked up Gaara, Temari and Shikamaru. Kankuro had told them that he would come later. Gaara

made his way over to Aoi and sat next to her. She smiled and they chatted quietly. Temari and Shikamaru sat near Kiba. Kiba was nudging Shikamaru and he rolled his eyes. All of the band members were squabbling and Tobi was playing with Itachi's hair.

They finally reached the venue. Aoi smiled at Gaara sadly before moving away. She left with Itachi first. They linked arms as they smiled. Itachi waved to some of the fans. She was right by his side the whole time, holding her act. Gaara exited the limo along with Kiba, Shikamaru and Temari behind him. Aoi was dragged with Itachi while he was signing some autographs. Then he kissed her on the cheek. Gaara flared slightly even though he knew it was all an act. He still hated it. He would never admit it, he didn't even know he hated it but still. Everyone else left the limo and then the other band members appeared. They signed some photos. As soon as they all reached the back stage area Itachi and Aoi unlinked arms. He thanked her before ruffling her hair like she was a little sister. Everyone else soon appeared backstage. Aoi smiled at Gaara and walked over to him. He started to feel slightly better. They moved to where the crowd was, her blue hair stood out so Gaara was able to find her easily. The others joined them at the front of the crowd. The lights started to flash. Aoi jumped up and down excited. Akatsuki was staring to before.

Gaara and Aoi fist pumped and jumped along with everyone else. After about five songs Aoi was getting a little tired. She usually drank at things like this or had lots of energy drinks but she had decided against it so she wasn't as hyperactive as usual. She stopped bouncing and leaned against Gaara. He had gotten used to her doing that so he put his arm around her to stop her from falling completely. She turned slightly so she could see his face. She smiled up at him even though he was just watching the band. She had to admit, she honestly did like him. Even if she couldn't figure that out before. As the crowds jumped up and down she stayed in his arms looking at his face. His beautiful face. She wanted nothing more than him and it took her a while to realise it. That's why she felt the why she did. It was because she liked him. He gave her a look that said 'what?' and she just giggled. They jumped up and down for the next song. She didn't keep her eyes off him as they did. Everyone jumped and screamed. She finally stopped bouncing. He frowned once he realised and look at her. Then her lips touched his. It was a moment. A moment she wished could last forever. It felt like everything had stopped around her, around him. Her lips pressed against his and he kissed her back slightly. She didn't know how he felt about it but he kissed her back a little so that's got to be a good sign. It didn't even matter to her because it just felt right, like their lips were supposed to connect. As soon as they parted she continued jumping. He looked at her for a while before jumping up and down with her. It was something that was spare of the

moment.

After the set was finished they all went backstage. The girls in one room and the guys were in another to get changed. Aoi changed into a nice purple dress that reached her knees, with a form of ruffles. The dress was sleeveless though. She chucked her other clothes in a bag where all the other girls but their stuff. She looked in the mirror. Her blue hair was straightened and she re-applied her make up.

She walked out of the room with the other girls and they sat in the limo, the guys were already there. She blushed slightly when she saw Gaara. They went through the same procedure. Itachi and Aoi leaving the limo first. Aoi laughed a little noticing the fan girls being denied entry. Once they were inside the after part she left Itachi's side. No one was taking pictures now so that didn't matter. She saw Gaara leaning against the wall. She walked over to him. He saw the shoes she was wearing but didn't look up. She shook her head. His hands were in his pockets but that didn't stop her from taking his hand. She pulled him outside, to the back of the party.

"I just...I'm sorry about you know...the concert," she muttered looking away. He smiled slightly, he couldn't help it. She went from utter confidence to a shy girl in seconds.

"It's okay," he lifted her chin up so her eyes reached his, "I didn't mind."

"Then you won't mind this," her confidence came back and she pressed her lips against his again. He kissed her back. His lips pushing against hers, deepening what was happening. She was on her tippy toes considering her height. Aoi took his hands and wrapped them around her waist. She then snaked her hands up around his neck. She smiled slightly and they parted. Her nose still touched his. Her body was pressed lightly against his. This time Gaara kissed her. Their lips kept pushing against each other. It was almost like Gaara enjoyed this. He had never felt like this before. When he had these feelings for her he never acted upon it, why would he? He just left it ignored it but this time he just couldn't. The feelings were beyond strong. It was like he could care for something. Like he actually had a purpose. His lips pushed against hers harder as he moved his hands. He lifted her up and her legs wrapped around his waist in a fluid motion. They were far too involved with each other to care about the party at this moment. He moved her up against the wall so she had support. Her legs held around him. Her lips pushed back against his harder this time, wanting him. They parted for a second. She wanted to kiss him again but Gaara looked down before just staring at her. He put her back down and she stared at him. He continued to look down at the ground.

"Gaara?" Aoi moved his chin so he was looking right at her. After a moment he moved his head away

“Sorry,” he muttered before walking back inside. Aoi fell down to the ground and leant against the wall. She could’ve of sworn that he wanted that too. She didn’t know what to do now. Did she want too much? She sighed as she hugged her legs. She heard footsteps and saw that Itachi had walked out. He frowned for a moment and sat down next to her. He smiled and shook his head. He placed an arm around her and pulled her close so that she was leaning on him.

“It’s okay,” he told her. He had no idea what had happened, and he didn’t need to know, he just had to be there for her. She would tell him what’s up when she needed to, if she needed too. He knew her well.

“I, I don’t know what to do Itachi. I just, I don’t think he likes me,” she finally admitted to Itachi. It was something that she wouldn’t admit to anyone. But Itachi was anyone.

“Of course he does silly. Why wouldn’t he?” he kissed her forehead lightly, “Come on, do you want to go now?”

“Yeah.”

WEEK OF LOVE CHAPTER 7: WHISPER

Katara434
of waterbendingrules@hotmail.com

Four years had passed since Aang and Katara got married. They had a three year and three month old daughter who gets spoiled with love and affection from her parents. She has shown signs of being a Waterbender, which was wonderful news for the couple. Even though Aang was a little disappointed about the Bending gene, he still loved her with all his heart. When he first held his tiny daughter in his arms, a little whisper said in his mind, *'I'm a father.'* It was then that he promised he would be the best dad any child could ask for. When he had asked his wife, "What should we name her?", Katara had looked at him with tired loving eyes and said one word.

"Kya."

Aang had kissed her forehead and passed the baby into her mother's arms. "Kya it is," he had said; then looked at the sleeping bundle, her breath like a whisper. "Welcome to the world, Kya."

Since then, they had been getting used to parenthood. It wasn't easy, but in the end, the hardships of parenting was worthwhile because of how their daughter was being prepared for her future. Kya has already started talking like a dictionary despite her age; she can tell when something needed to be done around the house; and her Waterbending was getting better the more she practiced. She looked exactly like her mother, but she had her father's big heart, especially for animals. The first time she saw Appa and Momo, Kya was ecstatic. Her parents had told her they were going for a ride. Kya was already in the saddle before her parents could finish. Momo had been playing with Kya's hair as they flew over the Southern Air Temple. Kya had been born in Ba Sing Se; but when they were able to, she flew home.

The flight was earlier in the day. The sun had long since past the horizon, the moon taking its place in the sky. Aang and Katara were watching as Kya slept in her bed. She had shown so much enthusiasm during the flight, the couple knew she would fall asleep faster. When they were sure she would stay asleep, the married couple went their own room next door and lied down. Aang had taken off his shirt and shoes some time ago. Katara was in a blue silk gown.

Aang let out a deep sigh as he closed his eyes. "This was one long day," he said quietly, almost a whisper.

Katara chuckled, a breathy laugh that hardly echoed. "A three year old can do that."

Aang smiled as he looked at her. "And how would you know, Mrs. Avatar?" he joked.

Katara shook her head. "I've helped deliver some of the babies back home," she whispered.

Raising himself on one elbow, the young Avatar gazed at his wife. "I seem to remember you helping deliver a certain Hope into the world."

Katara smiled at the memory. "I remember. She was so adorable when she was born. She must around eight years old by now. Remember when Sokka started panicking when Ying said the baby was coming?"

Aang chuckled. "Yeah, I remember." His smile faded. "I also remember when I wouldn't let anyone in after Appa was taken. Not my best memory."

Katara touched his cheek and rubbed her thumb against it, looking into his troubled gaze. "It's all in the past, Aang. There's nothing we can do to change it. It's like you said that day in the Jasmine Dragon: *It's all in the past now. All we have to do now is look to the future.*"

He smiled again, remembering that day he had proposed to her. He grabbed her hand and pressed it to his cheek. "I see you remembered."

Katara touched the necklace he had made for her. Every time he saw it he was filled with pride. In his opinion, the necklace suited her. "I could never forget that. It was one of the best nights of my life."

He leaned over her, his body a protective shield over her own. "I meant all that I told you that day: without you by side, I would've been lost. I wouldn't have a family. Now that I have you forever, I'm not letting you or Kya go, even when I'm gone from this world. I love both of you too much to ever forget what you mean to me."

Katara bit her bottom lip, wondering if this would be a good time to tell him. She took a deep breath and decided to go for it. "Well, you might want to reconsider that."

He furrowed his brow in confusion. "What do you mean?" he asked.

She grabbed his hand and brought it to her stomach. "Aang, there will be four us soon. I'm pregnant."

At first, Aang's face only showed shock; then it melted into a smile as he rubbed his hand on Katara's abdomen. "Are you sure?" he whispered.

Katara nodded. "Remember all those mornings I was sick?" He nodded and she continued. "Well, I had the idea for a while. So while you went to the market, Kya and I went to the doctor. It was confirmed. So, yes, Aang; you're going to be a dad again."

Aang looked at her stomach again before looking back at her. "How long?" he breathed.

"A few weeks," she answered softly.

He bent his face down and kissed her stomach softly before bringing it up close to her face. "In that case, I love all three of you."

Even to the end of time, I'll still love you."

She touched his cheek again. "And we will always love you," she whispered. "Nothing is ever going to change that."

He turned his head and kissed her palm. "Thank you, Katara," he whispered back. "You just made another of my wishes come true."

Katara laughed softly. "I'm only returning the favor." Then they kissed deeply, feeling their hearts ready to burst with love. They fell asleep that night, wrapped in each other's arms, dreaming sweet dreams about a very near future.

The End

POETRY

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John Mahler's Quotes of the Day

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

LOVE AND HATE

Malachi Morris
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I live my life based of two things,
nothing more nothing less,
I with only two emotions,
Only two known notions,
They flow together greater then the ocean,
Sometimes one is felt greater then the other,
Theres no need for any other,
So i take no heed why bother,
sometimes having them both at once can be a smother,
I have only these because their all i have to relate,
those two emotions are love and hate.

PLAYING HOUSE

Jessica Carron
of iamjes1013@siu.edu

Let's play pretend like little girls with pretty plastic dolls
Ever smiling
Moving with the whim of imagination

Barbie and ken
We lay down and dream
Content to wait on the rising sun of a child's smile

Awaken

Clickity clack
My heels slap
the manufactured floor
Eggs, she says, for you and him
I hope they don't burn

At perfect tables that are never our own
sit and dine and chat away
He's a gentleman so dishes are on him

That's what grown ups do

Teeth don't move, but now he asks to settle down
Fake embraces on solid couches
Warmth
Movies play and days fades
It's just how it should be

But the puppet master grows bored

Undo the embrace
Remove the lid
Pack it all away

We won't remember today tomorrow
Why should we?

Were just dolls after all
Playing house

DECEIT AND PASSION

Benedict Watt
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Hi, I'm Benedict Watt. I'm a 15 year old who loves doing lots of things, such as making digital art, Listening to music, and writing poetry.

You can see all of my work on my deviantART profile, bioderp.deviantart.com. Consider taking a look and seeing what else i've written or created.

The Day seems to be lit by a deceiving sun,
As it makes you believe it will share its heat with you,
When, in fact, it's heat is blown away by the remaining wings of winter,
It tells us that it's deceit rings true.

You can simply see how the truth of your common day
Has been hidden by the shadows, where the sun dares not shine.
It stops us from telling lies and truth apart.
It stops us from determining what is yours and what is mine.

Look at what this has caused.
It has made me think I own this part of it all. All of what is owned by another.
I don't know how I could have believed for one second that this was anyone's but yours.
I only know that this is yours, and I must leave these words. They shan't be uttered.

Here you go. Take it and leave. At least enjoy this part you own.
You never know when someone else will take possession of this piece.
Enjoy this in whatever way you want or can.
Just remember you cannot control it's release.

INSIDE OUT

Kela Lewis-Morin
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Do you love my insides?
You know the parts you can't see.

The parts that constructively divide,
All the places where you can't be.

Do you love my internals?
You know all my unexploited crevices.

All the words I leave out of my journal.
The soft tissue areas that offer no benefits.

Do you love my fleshy, raw fillings?
You know the boring and bloody parts.

The features that are not made for kissing.
The invisible strokes that add to this body of art.

You see it's my exterior that attracts you
But it's my interior that made this possible.

So when my insecurities inadvertently attack you,
Don't be so swift to class me as distrusting and illogical.

I need to know and to understand.

That you truly love me for who I am.

Even the parts of me you cannot see

Because those are the places where I want you to be.

ADDICTED TO YOU

Caitlin McGee
of cmmcgee_writer92@yahoo.com

I'm learning quickly
That it's nearly impossible
To live without you.
It's almost as if
You're some sort of drug;
Too long without you
And I start to slip
Into withdrawal.
And no matter how hard I try
I just can't quit you,
Because I'm too addicted to you.
When I wake up each morning
You're the first thing
That I reach for
Even when I know
That you're not there,
And when I don't feel you
I slip down
Into a hole
Until you arrive
To pick me back up.
At night I crave you,
Crave the taste of you,
The smell of you,
I crave the feel of you,
And I can't sleep
Until you've fed my hunger for you.
Baby, can't you see.
You're my drug
And I'm addicted to you.

FREEDOM TO FEEL

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

Why people should
Be tongue-tied while in pain?
Why feelings are
Something that should be tamed?

Isn't it "to feel"
Almost equals "to be"?
Shouldn't we let
Our basics be free?

HUSKY AND SMOKEY

by FeatherSpiral
of <http://featherspiral.deviantart.com>

My puppy Husky
And my cat Smokey
Are the most lovely
Friends to ever be.

When Smokey fell ill,
The vet said "He will
Have to stay, lie still,
Be treated, until
He's no longer ill
And you pay his bill."

The vet then asked me:
"Would you like, maybe,
To stay with Smokey,
Keep him company?"

But I didn't have much
Time to stay in touch,
So Husky kept watch
At the hospital;
A friend so loyal,
He's a role model.

Husky loves Smokey
Who loves back Husky;
They're the most lovely
Friends to ever be.

DYSPHORIA

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](https://www.deviantart.com/Cerberin-Crosses)

The silence hangs between us like a dusty shroud, stretched taut and ripped apart like spider webs.
It's mid-morning.
A terse goodbye to split the silence and then she's gone.
Night comes and I still can't remember where she went but her face is eating away at my mind
And I know it's time that something must be done.

My eyes close and the sound of an ancient door creaking open breaks the calm that had almost descended.
She stands there, face blank like a dead woman and there isn't anything left to say
And the tension spreads between us like a gunshot as the dust settles in the musty air.
It feels like a coffin closing
and she can't breathe,
and to be perfectly honest, neither can I,
But the lid has already been nailed shut
and they've tossed in the dirt
and I don't think either of us
is going anywhere
for a long time.

Your presence is Asphyxiation
and your voice is the grating of a thousand nails, and now is far too late to crawl your way inside the rotten wound that has grown in my chest.
But you never were that good at taking hints anyways,
So just lay still
and let the flies breeding inside your lungs

fill in the gaps for you
because the voices of Insects are so much easier to bear
than the false sermons of a Porcelain doll like yourself.